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Chapter 19

POETRY OF THE FOURTEENTH CENTURY

The fourteenth century marks the end of alien rule under the Mongol Yüan dynasty and the reinstatement of Chinese rule under the Ming dynasty. In terms of poetry, it is very much a period of transition. Three closely related tendencies are noteworthy. First, the proliferation of poetry writing, especially among urban nonofficials, which was already in evidence in the Southern Sung and early Yüan, becomes more pronounced during the period. Second, the development of the idea of the *wen-jen* as an "independent artist," free of political responsibility, devoted to literature and art, and often unfettered by societal convention, comes to the fore. Third, the use of poetic models of the past, which was to become so much a defining feature (indeed, obsession) of poetry later in the Ming, and throughout the Ch'ing dynasty as well, is established in this period.

As viewed by later ages, the poetry of the fourteenth century was something very much "in between," as shown by the contrasting, contradictory labels applied to it. The century's poetry was said to retrieve the best features of T'ang poetry, or to be an extension of Sung poetry; to be the poetry of an alien dynasty, or to prove how Chinese culture could survive and flourish under non-Chinese rule; to be a key to the "truth" of the heart of earlier Chinese poetry, or part of the confining baggage of later "antiquarian" archaists. The poetry of the period was to become far more important for the polemical uses to which it could be put than for any value it might have in its own right. A cursory awareness of these competing interpretations is helpful for understanding developments in

Chinese poetry of the remaining five centuries of the imperial period, until 1911. In all these senses, the poetry of the fourteenth century represents an in-between stage.

The Yüan dynasty of the Mongols is more famous for the development of drama (chapter 41) and of *ch'ü* popular song (chapter 17) than it is for *shih* (standard, traditional) poetry, the subject of this chapter. During most of the twentieth century, the comparatively new genres of the Yüan period, drama and *ch'ü* song, were accorded far more attention than was traditional poetry. This new interest was prompted in part by the literary revolution, the post-1918 cultural and political movement that promoted the use of vernacular Chinese as a written language in place of the classical language, which, although far removed from the spoken language, was still considered the only serious medium of written expression. (It is as if as late as 1900 Latin had still been considered the only serious written medium in Italy, and a movement to promote "Italian" as the written language emerged only in recent times.) In reaction to the neglect that drama and *ch'ü* song were earlier accorded (having been tainted by their "low" vernacular language and "low" social origins), the undeniable literary importance and value of these genres were discovered and touted. As a consequence, the study and appreciation of traditional poetry of the fourteenth and later centuries have been slighted. Although an understanding of the developments in the newer genres is important, and in the vernacular short story and novel as well, one should keep in mind that classical Chinese poetry and classical Chinese prose were nearly always considered more important and more central by writers of the time when they were written, even by vernacular-language writers. (This is true for the entire Yüan-Ming-Ch'ing period.) Although the argument has been made that the newer genres reflect the changed social realities of the period, the counterargument has also been made that traditional poetry does so even more. In either case, much of the poetry is of high quality. Very little of it has been studied in detail.

TOWNSMAN POETRY

Chinese poetry had long been monopolized by officials: would-be, current, and former officials. The development of poetry among nonofficials, specifically those living in the urban centers that were burgeoning so remarkably in the Sung, is a distinguishing feature of the latter part of the dynasty. The suspension of the examination system under the Mongols (notwithstanding its reinstatement in 1315), while cutting off that route to an official career as a bureaucrat, accentuated the tendency (already operative) for poetry to be written by a broad stratum of what might be called "townsman": namely, commoners (those "dressed in white"), such as shopkeepers, merchants, and landlords. The un-

happy circumstances that China for the first time was completely under an alien regime also fueled the *wen-jen* ideal of the “independent artist,” gave crucial impetus to the development of vernacular song (*ch’ü*), and spurred interest in drama, a genre that had already been developing under the previous dynasty.

Two groups of poets of the first half of the thirteenth century, the Four Lings of Yung-chia (Yung-chia ssu Ling) and the Chiang-hu, or River and Lakes school poets, had all been ordinary nonofficials. (They were minor poets who imitated the minor verse of the late T’ang that was descriptive of everyday life.) Poetry-writing societies proliferated in the thirteenth century, especially in South China. (It is as if the Lions Clubs and Kiwanis Clubs of countless American communities had been organized for the purpose of writing poetry, while serving as a mechanism of social intercourse for such “townsmen.”) The compilation of four important poetry-writing manuals—“how-to” books—between 1240 and 1300 reflects the proliferation of poetry-writing among a broader social stratum. The full flowering of poetry-writing societies took place in the first half of the fourteenth century. By midcentury, the number of societies was enormous, as attested to by references in the prose writings of the senior figure of many poetry-writing societies, Yang Wei-chen.

THE WEN-JEN IDEAL

An eccentric figure, Yang Wei-chen illustrates how the burgeoning of poetry-writing among nonofficials was intertwined with the development of the *wen-jen* ideal, which was to prove central to the later history of the arts in China.

In the Northern Sung, the ideal of the tripartite unity of literature, philosophy, and political affairs reached its zenith in figures like Ou-yang Hsiu, Wang An-shih, and Su Shih, who were outstanding in all three areas. The ideal continued into the Southern Sung; “commoner”-poets such as those of the Chiang-hu school were an exception. Under Mongol rule, the concept was undermined; earlier tendencies away from such unity intensified, and many Chinese retreated into their respective worlds. Yang Wei-chen and others, like the famous painter Ni Tsan, had no ties to philosophy or statecraft. Instead, they made their lives as artists supreme, divorced from politics and manifesting varying degrees of eccentricity or deviation from accepted norms. Society of the time accorded them respect. And their elevation of literature or art, which was new to Chinese society (where, if anything, literature had been viewed as *less important* than statecraft and philosophy), became a pattern. The *wen-jen* ideal also carried the expectation of simultaneous proficiency, at least to some degree, in poetry-writing, painting, and calligraphy. (The literary dimension of this ideal has generally not received the attention it deserves in later Chinese art history.)

YANG WEI-CHEN

Yang Wei-chen (1296–1370) is the most prominent “townsman poet” of the age. His character as a poet of the ordinary citizen is partly reflected in poems he presented to such diverse individuals as a fortuneteller, a physiognomist, the blacksmith who cast his beloved iron flute, a writing brush craftsman, a physician, and a cauterizer. It is also seen in prose pieces that he gave to a female storyteller, a puppeteer, and a comb-maker.

Dressed in unusual garb, his iron flute always to hand, Yang Wei-chen traveled back and forth throughout the lower Yangtze area, visiting the various poetry societies that he headed. His lifestyle of at least superficial eccentricity was consistent with the *wen-jen* ideal that was developing, one insistent on the special place of the artist and his work. Displaying skill in more than one art form, Yang wrote in a truly eccentric calligraphic style and showed immense interest in painting, writing many poems on paintings. Equally, his poetry went off in an unfettered direction—one rich in imagination and beautiful in language—being modeled on verse that had been largely ignored since Northern Sung times: *yüeh-fu* ballads of the Han and Six Dynasties, and the late T'ang poetry of Li Ho, Li Shang-yin, and Han Wo.

Yang Wei-chen's collection of more than four hundred *yüeh-fu* ballads appeared when he was fifty. With their imaginative evocations of mythic moments set in a narrative frame, many are intensely lyrical. But his boldest work appeared when he was past seventy. Many treat the theme of a young woman's sensuality. The following poem, the second in a series entitled “Hsü lien chi erh-shih yung” (Twenty Supplementary Toilette Box Songs), is called “Ch'eng p'ei” (Mating):

Eyebrow mounds dark, facing the spluttering lamp,
Her billowy half-bun spills over pillow's edge.
Arms and legs joined with another's, fetchingly about to sob,
She grasps the fine silk, nearly kneading it to pieces.

Such poems illustrate a lack of restraint that reflects how townsman poetry had grown from its origins, when it was confined to descriptions of the ordinary and everyday.

Yang Wei-chen wrote series of poems on history, women, immortals, filial piety, and other diverse topics. As a poet so indebted to ninth-century models that were considered decadent, Yang was himself criticized for being a “literary devil” (*wen-yao*) by his contemporary, Wang Wei (1323–1374). Nonetheless, he was very popular in his own time; in his work and in his persona he seems to have united a combination of traits that were greatly favored. Invited to serve the founding emperor of the new Ming dynasty, the poet at his audience

jocularly declined, reciting poetic lines of his own to the effect that he was an old lady who had already served one master. Treated with uncharacteristic indulgence by the cruel founder-emperor, Yang Wei-chen was allowed to return home in the white clothes of a nonofficial.

There are parallels in the life of Yang's friend, the immensely famous painter Ni Tsan (1301–1374): a consciously eccentric lifestyle, versatility in poetry and calligraphy as well as painting, and a poetry that (although more understated than Yang's) includes mildly erotic folksong themes.

LATE YÜAN POETRY BY OFFICIALS

In the first half of the fourteenth century, poetry in the Yüan capital of Peking was dominated by former southerners who came to serve in the Han-lin Academy and History Bureau. Notwithstanding Khubilai Khan's (Qubilai; 1215–1294; r. 1260–1294) extraordinary magnanimity, there had been initial reluctance to serve the Mongol regime, which was both new and alien. Chao Meng-fu (1254–1322), who in 1286 arrived in the capital to serve (a quarter-century after the founding of the dynasty in 1260), was considered a turncoat for working for the new regime, especially because he was a distant relative of the imperial Chao family of the Sung rulers. But as the situation of Mongol rule became normalized, such reluctance and the attendant stigma lessened.

Yüan Chüeh (1267–1327) arrived in Peking about fifteen years after Chao Meng-fu, at the turn of the fourteenth century. And Yü Chi (1272–1348), another transplanted southerner, was the most trusted Yüan government official for more than a quarter of a century, until 1329. What distinguishes both is the way they, like many Sung poets, treated previously unused subject matter from contemporary life in their verse, but in a style and diction that were more akin to those of High T'ang poetry.

For example, Yüan Chüeh wrote a marvelous series of old-style poems entitled "Chou chung tsa yung" (Shipboard Songs) describing his trip to Peking by boat. It tells of products and scenes he was seeing for the first time, such as the white reeds on the water's surface that served as the capital's fuel source. Similarly, Yü Chi could write of a visit to his hatmaker, who, like the fisherman or woodcutter of earlier poetry, is depicted as embodying Taoist ideals that put the author to shame. The subject matter in each case—the capital's fuel source, a master hatter—had been previously untreated. Thus, like *tsa-chü* drama earlier in the dynasty, the poems tell us something of the life of the age. But in terms of diction and style, they are different from the poetry of Yang Wei-chen. Using only models from earlier periods of T'ang poetry, these poet-officials in the north were more restrained and conservative than their contemporaries in the south, who wrote in the late T'ang style. In terms of the poetic models they emulated, Yüan Chüeh and Yü Chi had taken the next logical step.

LITERARY MODELS

Like Chinese painters who emulate the style of an earlier master and make it their own by melding themselves into it, eventually developing a related style (or aspect of style) of their own *from* or *out of* the earlier model, Chinese poets would train themselves by imitating earlier poetry. The literary models that were used by townsman-poets and poet-officials shifted over time from the rather stiff, rationalistic poetry of the Northern Sung to T'ang verse that dealt with minor descriptions of daily life. The use of models from the central core of T'ang poetry, that of the High T'ang (associated with Tu Fu, Li Po, and others), was the next step. It was taken by Yü Chi and other late Yüan Han-lin Academy poet-officials. Once they started the practice of using the "heart" of T'ang poetry as a model—a practice also followed in part by Kao Ch'i (1336–1374), a generation their junior—it intensified during the subsequent Ming dynasty.

An important development in literary criticism around the end of the century was to contribute to the practice. In 1393 Kao Ping completed his *T'ang-shih p'in-hui* (Graded Collocation of T'ang Poetry), a work that was to fix T'ang dynasty poetry in period categories that have been used to this day: Early, High, Middle, and Late. Poetry of the fourteenth century was mostly influenced by Late T'ang models, but by the century's end, interest had shifted to the Early and High T'ang periods (as well as earlier *yüeh-fu* ballads). This set the stage for the exclusive use of High T'ang models later in the Ming dynasty.

KAO CH'I

Kao Ch'i is considered the greatest poet not only of the fourteenth century but also of the entire Ming dynasty (1368–1644). This is ironic, because he lived only six years into the Ming period, being executed in his thirties on trumped-up charges brought by the dynasty's founder-emperor; his only extant portrait depicts him wearing the court robes of the new dynasty.

Born and raised in Soochow, Kao Ch'i had a circle of youthful friends called the "Ten Friends near the Northern City-wall" (Pei-kuo shih-yü) or "Ten Talented Ones" (Shih ts'ai-tzu). They included the future poet, painter, and official Hsü Pen; the monk Tao-yen, better known as the prominent official Yao Kuang-hsiao; and the writers Chang Yü and Yang Chi. Their mixed social origins are reflected in one of their number, Wang Hsing, whose father was a seller of Chinese medicines.

Kao Ch'i enjoyed early success as a poet. While young, he married into a prominent family. In his early twenties, he spent the better part of two years traveling in South China on vague business, presumably in search of a patron; it probably was part of maneuvering on his part to avoid too direct association

with the region's warlord. Many of his poems of this and other periods speak of an inexplicable melancholy.

Within two years of the fall of Soochow in 1367 to Chu Yüan-chang, the founder-emperor of the Ming, Kao Ch'i was summoned to the early Ming capital at Nanking. Already famous as a writer, he was appointed to the board of sixteen compilers of the *Yüan shih* (History of the Yüan Dynasty). Under the direction of Sung Lien (1310–1381), the work was completed by the end of 1369. A year later Kao Ch'i was granted permission to retire to his native Soochow, where he remained in semiretirement until 1374. Charged with treason for having praised acts of the local prefect that were deemed *lèse-majesté*, he was executed (sliced in half) along with the prefect and Kao's fellow Yüan-history compiler, Wang Wei.

As a poet, Kao Ch'i illustrates some of the tendencies noted for the century as a whole. For example, he took one step further the tendency of the townsman-poet Yang Wei-chen to give extraordinary flights of mental fancy to his poetry. This is evident in Kao's "signature poem" written when he was twenty-two, "Ch'ing-ch'iu-tzu ko" (Song of the Green Hill Master), wherein he refers to himself by the name of his in-laws' manor; "Green Hill" also had latent exotic associations. The poem opens with Kao referring to himself as "The Green Hill Master / Thin but clean"; the witty, self-deprecatory tone of the second line might be better rendered as "Skinny but squeaky clean" or "Threadbare but well laundered." Kao proceeds to speak of himself as someone from the heavens above who, like the poet Li Po, has been banished to this world. And in reference to his own writing, he says: "Among the Eight Extremes indistinct, his mental wits do roam, / And cause the formless to fashion sound." Kao Ch'i is said to mark the culmination of the preceding century and a half of townsman poetry. But whereas Yang Wei-chen and others dressed up their language with elements from Li Po and the Late T'ang poet Li Ho, Kao integrated these influences better, taking them to a new level. As one of his contemporaries (Wang Wei) wrote: "Kao Ch'i's poetry, in its superb abandon and poetic beauty, is like a hawk soaring through autumn skies. Performing a hundred twisting maneuvers, even if summoned, it will not descend."

Kao Ch'i was a master of many styles. And, by Ming times, there was a wide selection of poetic genres for him and others to emulate: *yüeh-fu* ballads, *sao*-style verse in the manner of *Ch'u tz'u* (Elegies of Ch'u), *shih* poetry of different periods, *tz'u* song-poetry, *ch'ü* arias, and so on, not to mention variations within these. There were, as well, many past poetic greats who could serve as models. What distinguished Kao Ch'i was his creative mastery of many such styles and models. It is one reason why—along with Yüan Hao-wen (1190–1257), Wang Shih-chen (1634–1711; to be distinguished from the sixteenth-century author with a similar name who lived from 1526 to 1590), and Yüan Mei (1716–1797)—he is counted among the giants of later, post-Sung Chinese poetry. (The circumstances of Kao's early death doubtless also contributed to his almost universally high reputation both as a person and as a poet.)

Kao Ch'i shares with the aforementioned greats a place in the history of literary theory. He argued that poetry must have *ko* (framework), *yi* (meaning), and *ch'ü* (atmosphere). These terms were to have their respective analogs in phrases made more famous by later critical theorists: *ko-tiao* (formal style) by Shen Te-ch'ien (1673–1769), *hsing-ling* (native sensibility) by Yüan Mei, and *shen-yün* (ineffable personal tone or flavor) by Wang Shih-chen.

Notwithstanding Kao Ch'i's protean mastery of a variety of styles, his own contemporaries discerned preferences that foreshadow those of later Ming archaists. One contemporary (Li Chih-kuang) spoke of how the poet surveyed the earlier tradition, from the Chien-an period (196–219) to the High T'ang, and ignored later T'ang and Sung poetry. Another contemporary, Chang Yü (1283–1356+), put a similar view into verse, in the first of a three-poem series entitled "Tiao Kao Ch'ing-ch'iu" (Lamenting Kao Ch'i):

His was the will of a lifetime, and to what end?
Deprived of salary, deprived of land—most tragic!
Yet he may rest on fame inextinguishable—
Ballads in the style of Han and poems à la High T'ang.

The old phraseology (*ku-wen-tz'u*) archaist movement, which developed during the middle years of the Ming and came to dominate the dynasty's poetry, initially focused on precisely these parts of the poetic tradition (see chapter 20). Hence, along with Yü Chi, Kao Ch'i is a forerunner of Ming archaism.

FIN DE SIÈCLE

Much of the direct, unadorned tone of the Ming dynasty was set by its founding emperor. Chu Yüan-chang was a man of plebeian origins who, upon ascending the throne, became increasingly paranoid. He was especially suspicious of generals and officials who served under him, as well as of those who were from areas like Soochow that had resisted his rule. He had thousands killed in a wave of purges. Kao Ch'i was simply one of the more prominent victims.

Chu Yüan-chang instituted a new examination system, an attenuated version of the old one, that he hoped would bring people of a lower social stratum to the fore. In his anti-intellectualism, in his desire to favor rural areas at the expense of towns and cities, and in his draconian social policies, he has been likened to Mao Tse-tung in the twentieth century.

Probably in part because of the very success of his policies (especially the decimation of the intelligentsia), by the end of the fourteenth century, when Chu Yüan-chang's rule ended (1398), cultural life was at a nadir. Scholars speak of the fifty-, seventy-, or one-hundred-year period that encompasses the first half of the fifteenth century as a cultural wasteland.

Kao Ch'i and his generation of early Ming poets were mostly killed or driven to suicide. Of the Four Outstanding Talents of Wu-chung, or Soochow (Wu-

chung ssu-chieh), Kao Ch'i was executed, Yang Chi (c. 1334–c. 1383) died doing hard labor, and Chang Yü drowned himself when recalled from exile; only Hsü Pen (1335–1380) died of natural causes. Except for Kao, all were notable as painters as well as poets. Although the poetry of the other three was not of the caliber of Kao Ch'i's, it remains remarkable for its serene tone, quite in contrast with the disquietude they must have felt.

The one additional poet of the period worthy of note is Liu Chi (1311–1375). Although he lived only seven years under the new dynasty, Liu had been in Chu Yüan-chang's service since 1359. He and Sung Lien (1310–1381), who also joined Chu Yüan-chang in 1359, were the only men of literary accomplishment to serve the new regime unscathed. (Even then, the early Ch'ing critic Ch'ien Ch'ien-yi discerns a "rueful and spent" air in Liu Chi's later poetry.) Sung Lien, though famous as a prose writer, has not been admired as a poet. Liu Chi was outstanding as both.

Liu Chi's poetry is the most contemplative of the period. Yet it is not "rationalistic" in the style of much philosophical poetry of the Sung. Rather, it is modeled on the more sober poetic series by Ch'en Tzu-ang and Li Po of the Early and High T'ang periods. Thus—it has been argued—the conscious use of models from the zenith of T'ang poetry was operative not only in early Ming poems full of feeling, such as those by Kao Ch'i, but also in poetry of the period more expressive of thought, such as that of Liu Chi.

In sum, poetry of the fourteenth century, although often "detailed" and "involved" in the manner of Late T'ang poetry, could sometimes be more free-wheeling, as when ballad themes were used. Some of the period's best poetry, in its sober and restrained style and diction, is more like that of the High T'ang; yet it has a freshness to it. By the middle of the Ming dynasty, T'ang poetic models had become not only orthodox but *de rigueur*. Regardless of what most later Ming poets thought they were producing when imitating High T'ang models, much of the best of their poetry is "generously open" (*hao-fang*) and "unadornedly 'real'" (*p'u-shih*). In this, it is heir to the early Ming.

Poetry of the fourteenth century has the verve of a literature in flux. Styles are used inventively, through the resuscitation of past models and attempts at their use. But unlike so much of later Ming poetry, fourteenth-century poetry has not become formulaic. It still has the air of possibility.

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