

## Introduction to the English Language Edition



American sinology is properly celebrated for both its richness and its vitality. Graced with its many studies of the highest quality, the American reader is doubtlessly in the best possible position to be familiar with the overall scope of Chinese poetry and with the works of individual poets. This study, which is semiotic in nature, attempts only to shed some light upon the formal structures of that poetry, in order to help the reader to grasp a few of its implicit aspects which have often been neglected.

On the occasion of the publication of this English language edition, I would like to propose several summary reflections to place Chinese poetic writing in the more all-embracing context of Chinese cosmology, reflections which may, I hope, contribute to the clarification of the fundamental approach which has guided our research.

The eminent role which poetry played in China is well known. This eminence is due not only to the important functions, both aesthetic and social, which poetry has always had, but also to a more essential phenomenon: the quasi-sacred veneration devoted to the ideographic writing itself in China. This writing was perceived not as an arbitrary invention of man, but as the result of supernatural revelation. Ancient myths report that on the day when Cang Jie (Ts'ang Chieh), inspired by divinatory figures, traced the first signs, Heaven and Earth trembled, and gods and demons wept. For, through the magical trickery of the written signs, man would henceforth share in the secrets of Creation. (Chinese thought is,

then, as much marked by the myth of Cang Jie, who steals the signs of written language, as is Western thought by the myth of Prometheus, who stole fire.) From this perspective, poetry, which transforms written signs into song (“a sung writing”), has as its highest function the rejoining of the human spirit to the original and vital forces of the Universe. Let us listen to Zhong Hong, of the sixth century, from the introduction to his *Shi Pin*: “The Breaths animate beings and things; these in their turn inspire man. Pushed by the impulsions and feelings which dwell within him, man expresses himself through dance and song. His song is a light which illuminates the Three Spirits (Man-Earth-Heaven) as well as the ten thousand creatures. Thus, it constitutes an offering to the spirits, and makes manifest the hidden mystery. For upsetting Heaven and Earth, for moving the Gods, nothing equals poetry.”

鍾嶸·詩品序：氣之動物，物之感人，故搖蕩性情，形諸舞詠。  
照燭三才，輝麗萬有；靈祇待之以致饗，幽微藉之以昭告。動  
天地，感鬼神，莫近乎詩。

We may understand, then, the link between poetry and cosmology. We will see that the Chinese poetic language, in its structure, embodies the very laws which rule cosmology as it was conceived of in Chinese thought.

This cosmology, contained in seeds in the *Yi Jing* (*I Ching*, or *Book of Changes*), was formulated in a schematic but decisive form by Lao-tzu (Lao Tzu), the founder of Taoism. In Chapter 42 of the *Dao-de-jing* (*Tao Te Ching*, or *Book of the Way and Its Virtue*), it is written:

The Tao of Origin gives birth to the One  
The One gives birth to the Two  
The Two gives birth to the Three  
The Three produces the Ten Thousand Things

The Ten Thousand Things take Yin upon their backs  
 And draw Yang unto their bosoms  
 Harmony is born in the Void, from the Median Breath

With great simplification we can make the following commentary: The Tao of Origin is conceived of as the Supreme Void (太虛) from which emanates the One, which is none other than the primordial Breath (元氣). This Breath engenders the Two, embodied as the two Vital Breaths, which are the *Yin* and the *Yang*. These two by their interaction engender and give life to the Ten Thousand Things. However, between the Two and the Ten Thousand Things are the Three. The Three are subject to two interpretations which are not divergent, but, rather, complementary.

According to the strictly Taoist tradition (*Huai-nan-zi*, Wang Bi, Fan Ying-yuan, Wei Yuan, Gao Heng, etc.), the Three would represent the combination of the Vital Breaths (*Yin-Yang*) with the *Zhong-qi*, “The Breath of the Median Void.” This Median Void (which comes from the Supreme Void, from which it derives its power) is necessary for the harmonious functioning of the *Yin* and the *Yang*. The Median Void is that which draws and guides the two Vital Breaths in the dynamic process of reciprocal becoming; without it the *Yin* and the *Yang* would remain static and amorphous. It is precisely this ternary relationship (Chinese thought is not dualistic but ternary: in any antinomic or complementary couple, the Median Void is the third term) which gives birth to and serves as model for the Ten Thousand Things. For the Median Void at the heart of the *Yin-Yang* couple resides as well at the heart of all things: inspiring them with Breath and Life, it maintains all things in their relation to the Supreme Void, thus allowing each to accede to becoming, to transformation, and to unity. Thus, Chinese thought is dominated by a crossing double movement, which can be represented by two axes: a vertical axis that symbol-

izes the interaction between the Void and the Full (the Full, which is all Creation, comes from the Void; but the Void continues to act in the Full), and a horizontal axis that represents the interaction within the Full of the *Yin* and the *Yang*, an interaction from which all things come (including, of course, Man, who is the microcosm *par excellence*).

It is precisely the place of Man which characterizes the second interpretation of the number Three. According to this second point of view, one which is inspired by a fundamentally Confucian point of view from the *Yi Jing*, the *Zhong-yong*, Xun-zi, and others (but nonetheless one also taken up by the Taoists), the Three, derived from the Two (*Yin-Yang*), designates Heaven (*Yang*), Earth (*Yin*), and Man (who possesses the virtues of Earth and Heaven in his spirit, and the Void in his heart). Here, then, it is the privileged relationship between the Three Entities Heaven-Earth-Man which serves as the model for the Ten Thousand Things. Here man is raised to an exceptional dignity, since he participates as the third party in the work of Creation. Nor is his role in any way passive: if Heaven and Earth are endowed with will and the power of action, Man, through his feelings and emotions, and in his rapport of transformation with the other two Entities, also contributes to the process of the becoming of the Universe, a process which tends ceaselessly toward the *shen*, the “Divine Essence,” of which the Supreme Void is the source, or the guardian.

Void-Full, *Yin-Yang*, and Heaven-Earth-Man thus constitute the three relational and hierarchical axes around which Chinese cosmology is organized. Poetic language, which proposes to explore the mystery of the Universe by means of the Universe by means of signs, has not neglected to structure itself, on its different levels, along these three axes. Accordingly, on the lexical level, analyzed in chapter 1, is displayed the subtle play between the empty (Void)

words and the full; on the syntactic level, treated in chapter 2, the dialectical interplay of *Yin* and *Yang* takes place, notably in the form of parallelism; and finally, on the symbolic level, which is the object of study in chapter 3, metaphorical images, through transfer of meaning and the implied circular movement between subject and object, fully exploit the ternary relationship Man-Earth-Heaven. It is evident that this poetic language, having taken to itself the basic dynamic of Chinese thought, thus represents the semiotic order *par excellence* and serves as a model for all the other signifying practices of the Chinese domain.

On the subject of this poetic language, which, as we have said, puts fully into play the relationship Man-Earth-Heaven, we may go on to specify: if the metaphorical expressions primarily develop the Man-Earth relationship, as attested by the traditional critical term *Qing-jing* (human feelings–natural wonders), there is, nonetheless, a third term, Heaven, which embodies a sort of language “Beyond language” toward which Chinese poetry has always tended. In other words, the privileged Man-Earth link is never allowed to become a closed circuit, it must end in something else, something *open*. Chinese rhetoricians have always sought to formulate this something else, this “Beyond language,” symbolized by the word Heaven. Si-kong Tu, of the Tang, declares that the ultimate goal of poetry is to attain “the Image beyond images, the Landscape beyond landscapes” (象外之象，景外之景). Yan You, of the Song, says, for his part, that, “Among the great poets of the Tang, the highest place is always given to the ineffable spirit. Like antelope horns which blend with tree branches in the forest, their verses devote little preoccupation to observation or analysis. They possess a radiant transparency which can never be discerned. Sound which vibrates in the air, color which shimmers like a mirage, the moon reflecting in the water, the face looking out of the mirror: such is

the appearance of their poetry, a poetry of limited words, yet of meaning always extending Beyond.”

盛唐諸人，唯在興趣，羚羊排角，無跡可求。透澈玲瓏，不可湊泊。如空中之音，相中之色，水中之月，鏡中之相，言有盡而意無窮。

Xie Zhen, of the Ming, reiterates that, “in all poetry the landscape is the intermediary, the feeling is the matrix. A poem is born of the combination of the two. But the art of poetry ought to aim at touching the Ten Thousand Things on the basis of few words; its supreme spirit is the Limitless, moved by the primordial Breath.”

景乃詩之媒，情乃詩之胚，合而為詩。以數言而統萬物，六氣渾成，其浩無涯矣。

This passage shows clearly the ardor with which Chinese poets worked to attain the realization of the infinite communion among things, and, through the realization of this communion, toward the attainment of the mystery of Origin. It is not in the least surprising, then, that the poetry of Du Fu (Tu Fu) should have been called “Heaven-sharpened sword” (巨刃磨天) or that of Li Bai (Li Po) a “song from beyond Heaven” (天外遺響).

Considering these conditions, it is not difficult to appreciate the nearly impossible task of one who attempts to transpose Tang poetry into any foreign language. Perhaps what success we have had in recovering the quality of certain of these poems in the French version comes from the fact that we have carried them with us for years. As to the present American versions, we can only congratulate ourselves on the beautiful work of Professor Jerome P. Seaton of the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

*François Cheng*

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*François Cheng*