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Source: *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies*, Vol. 58, No. 1 (Jun., 1998), pp. 147-182

Published by: Harvard-Yenching Institute

Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/2652648>

Accessed: 01-01-2020 05:18 UTC

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# Poetry and Transformation: Su Shih's Mirage

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SU Shih (1037–1101) was, in addition to being a poet, prose essayist, painter, calligrapher, statesman, and something of a cook, a great influence on the development of Chinese aesthetics and—through the introduction to Japan of his writings and writings featuring his ideas<sup>1</sup>—of aesthetic thinking in Japan as well. But, for all his widespread influence, the ideas themselves, especially as applied to poetry, are often notoriously vague. This is partly because what he has to say is by its nature ambiguous or difficult of expression, but partly too because of the way in which he chooses to say it. Su Shih is not always the most systematic of thinkers, nor would it have occurred to him that he needed to set down his thoughts on these subjects systematically. Nevertheless, we are sometimes helped in understanding him by the existence of a broader context, as in the case of those ideas that he took over more or less directly

The research for this paper was made possible in part by support from the Institute for Scholarship in the Liberal Arts, College of Arts and Letters, University of Notre Dame. An early draft was presented at the annual meeting of the Asian Studies on the Pacific Coast Conference, University of Alberta, Edmonton, June 20–22, 1996. I am grateful to Ronald C. Egan, Peter R. Moody, Jr., Stephen Owen, Stuart Sargent, and the anonymous reader for the *HJAS* for their insightful comments on later versions. This paper is for Stephen Owen, my teacher.

<sup>1</sup> A notable example among the latter would be *Shih-jen yü-hsieh* 詩人玉屑, a collection of “remarks on poetry” (*shih-hua* 詩話) compiled by Wei Ch’ing-chih 魏慶之 in the mid-thirteenth century.

from men who influenced him in his youth, his father Su Hsün 蘇洵 (1009-1066) and his mentor Ou-yang Hsiu (1007-1072). For instance, Su Shih's preface to the *Nan-hsing chi* 南行集, the first extant collection of his poems, together with poems by his father and his younger brother Su Ch'e 蘇轍 (1039-1112),<sup>2</sup> proceeds quite simply from premises originally laid out in Su Hsün's "Exposition on [giving] my cousin the style Wen-fu" 仲兄字文甫說;<sup>3</sup> and one of Su Shih's favorite and oft-repeated sentiments, that "only with extremity [in suffering] is true skill attained," comes straight out of Ou-yang Hsiu's preface to the collected poetry of Mei Yao-ch'en (1002-1062), Ou-yang Hsiu in turn having developed it from Han Yü's (768-824) evaluation of Meng Chiao (751-814).<sup>4</sup> Su Shih also makes trenchant comments about his tastes in painting and calligraphy, sometimes in the form of poems inscribed on the pieces themselves, sometimes in prose colophons. He may have been more keenly motivated to define new approaches to painting, which before his day had not been counted among the creative pursuits of the literati (*wen-jen* 文人), than he was interested in discussing how the same aesthetic principles worked with regard to the already established categories of poetry and prose. Many of his views were indeed instrumental in translating the visual arts from an artisan-dominated (*hua-kung* 畫工 or *hua-chiang* 畫匠) aesthetics to an aesthetics based on literati values.<sup>5</sup>

<sup>2</sup> *Su Shih wen-chi* 蘇軾文集, ed. K'ung Fan-li 孔凡禮 (Peking: Chung-hua shu-chü, 1986 [hereafter *SSWC*]), 10.323.

<sup>3</sup> *Chia-yu chi* 嘉祐集 (*SPPY* ed.), 14.6b-7b.

<sup>4</sup> Han Yü draws a direct connection between Meng Chiao's straitened circumstances and the development of genuine art in his poetry in "Preface [to a Poem] on Seeing Off Meng Tung-yeh" 送孟東野序, in Han Yü, *Han Ch'ang-li wen-chi chiao-chu* 韓昌黎文集校注, ed. Ma Ch'i ch'ang 馬其昶 [T'ung-po 通伯] (Hong Kong: Chung-hua shu-chü, 1972), 4.136-37. Ou-yang Hsiu uses the same motif in his "Preface to the Collected Poems of Mei Sheng-yü [Yao-ch'en]" 梅聖俞詩集序, in *Ou-yang Wen-chung kung chi* 歐陽文忠公集 (Shanghai: Shangwu yin-shu-kuan, Basic Sinological Series, 1933), 1:5.63-64. Su Shih's variations are mostly in poetic form, e.g., "The Monk Hui-ch'in Upon Leaving Monastic Office" 僧惠勤初罷僧職, in *Su Shih shih-chi* 蘇軾詩集, ed. Wang Wen-kao 王文誥 (Peking: Chung-hua shu-chü, 1982 [hereafter *SSSC*]) 12.576-77; "Matching the Rhymes of Chung-shu's 'West Lake in the Snow'" 次韻仲殊雪中西湖, *SSSC* 33.1750; "Matching the Rhymes of a Poem by Hsü Chung-chü" 次韻徐仲車, *SSSC* 35.1871; to name a few.

<sup>5</sup> For a discussion of Su Shih's contribution to the making of a *wen-jen* aesthetics in painting, see Susan Bush, *The Chinese Literati on Painting: Su Shih (1037-1101) to Tung Ch'i-ch'ang (1555-1636)* (Cambridge: Harvard-Yenching Institute, 1971).

Pronouncements like these—whether imported from poetic aesthetics to painting or, in several interesting cases, backwards from painting to poetry, help to clarify by mutual illumination what Su Shih means by the use of certain terms.<sup>6</sup> One example of this can be seen in his emphasis on the importance in painting and calligraphy of the use of *hsin* 新 (originality, novelty) and *hsin-i* 新意 (original concepts or the novel application of concepts). *Hsin*, where it describes a creative approach in the visual arts, is invariably a positive value,<sup>7</sup> in contrast to Su Shih's open ambivalence in his estimation of its place in poetry and prose. Thus, while in purely literary matters he is careful to differentiate between *hsin* and *wu-hsin* 務新—genuine originality and the mere affectation of it—and specifies the latter as one of the vices scrupulously to be avoided in poetic composition,<sup>8</sup> he makes bold, when speaking of painting and poetry together, to join them under one law, “Nature's art and fresh originality” (*t'ien-kung yü ch'ing-hsin* 天工與清新).<sup>9</sup> Like the Latin *novum*, *hsin* in traditional literary criticism often carries a pejorative connotation, one that was not transferred to its application in the visual arts. The relatively conservative position that Su Shih takes vis-à-vis this vexed term in his literary criticism may stem in part from a perceived need to show solidarity with the values espoused by the “ancient-style prose” (*ku-wen* 古文) movement<sup>10</sup> championed by Ou-yang Hsiu and of which he himself was a product. He could perhaps

<sup>6</sup> For an annotated modern anthology of Su Shih's writings on aesthetics, see Yen Chung-ch'i 嚴中其, ed., *Su Shih lun wen-i* 蘇軾論文藝 (Peking: Pei-ching ch'u-pan-she, 1985).

<sup>7</sup> *Ch'ing-hsin* 清新, the “fresh and new,” are named as desirable qualities in painting in two poems, “Inscribed on a Painting of Bamboo by Wen Yü-k'o [T'ung] in the Possession of Ch'ao Pu-chih, First of Three Poems” 書晁補之所藏文與可畫竹, *SSSC* 29.1522, and “Inscribed on a Painting of a Detached Sprig by Chief Secretary Wang of Yen-ling, First of Two Poems” 書鄒陵王主簿所畫折枝, *SSSC* 29.1525-26. In the prose colophon “Inscribed at the End of a Painting by Wu Tao-tzu” 書吳道子畫後, *SSWC* 70.2210-11, Su Shih praises the T'ang painter for “Putting forth new concepts (*hsin-i*) within the margins of rule, lodging marvelous design beyond the bounds of heroic abandon.” Ronald C. Egan discusses the implications of many of Su Shih's aesthetic statements in his *Word, Deed and Image in the Life of Su Shih* (Cambridge: Council on East Asian Studies, Harvard University, 1994), Chapter 9.

<sup>8</sup> “A predilection for the strange and contriving to be original (*wu-hsin*) are indeed defects in poetry,” he writes in “Written on Two Poems by Liu Tzu-hou [Tsong-yüan]” 題柳子厚詩二首, *SSWC* 67.2109.

<sup>9</sup> *SSSC* 29.1525-26.

<sup>10</sup> In opposition to “modern-style prose” (*shih-wen* 時文).

speak more freely in relation to painting and calligraphy.<sup>11</sup>

Occasionally, however, Su Shih does talk clearly and precisely about poetry and the nature of poetic composition, because in such instances he is not so much trying to articulate what poetry is as he is making a living demonstration of how poems work. I refer to poems like the ones exchanged with literary friends, such as the Ch'an (Zen) poet-monk Ts'an Liao 參寥 and, to a lesser extent, Su Shih's protégé Ch'in Kuan 秦觀 (1049-1100). The immediate subject of such poems is of course the particular occasion that prompted the composing of the poem, while the larger, proximate subject is the friendship between the two poets, which provides the overarching occasion for all the poems composed between them.<sup>12</sup> But finally the subject always comes round to the poetic act itself, and the poet's art that lies behind the individual act of composition. In a poem written in reply to one by Ch'in Kuan, Su Shih treats the question of how to be a good poet by demonstrating how a good poet would treat the topic in hand. Ch'in Kuan has paid homage in his poem to Lin Pu 林逋 (967-1028), the poet laureate of the flowering plum, by alluding to one of his descriptive couplets. The allusion is weak and rather obvious, so Su Shih in his response shows Ch'in Kuan how to make a better imitation of Lin Pu. The result is at once an excellent *jung-wu* 詠物 poem on the flowering plum, one of the favorite topics of Sung poetry, as well as a lesson to the younger Ch'in Kuan in writing such a poem.<sup>13</sup>

<sup>11</sup> *Hsin* may also be viewed differently in the traditions of poetry and painting simply because, in the visual arts, a preoccupation with "newness" could not lead to obscurity and incomprehensibility in the same way that it could—and had already done—in experiments with poetic language. (Private communication from Stuart Sargent.)

<sup>12</sup> Or rather, the friendship is both the occasion for exchanging poems and the outgrowth and product of the exchange itself.

<sup>13</sup> Lin Pu's couplet is justly the most famous verse description of plum blossoms in Chinese: "Sparse shadows straight and slant, over water clear and shallow, / A secret fragrance floats the moon at dusk" (疏影橫斜水清淺, 暗香浮動月黃昏). See *Lin Ho-ching hsien-sheng chi* 林和靖先生集 (SPTK ed.), 2.25b. Ch'in Kuan's somewhat wooden imitation, "Below sinking moon, Orion hanging low, a painted horn sounds its grief: / Her secret fragrance fails, makes me grow old" (月沒參橫畫角哀, 暗香消盡令人老), in "Harmonizing with the Rhymes of 'Remembering the Plum Blossoms at Chien-hsi' by Secretary Huang of the Board of Punishments" 和黃法曹憶建溪梅花, appears in his collected works *Huai-hai chi* 淮海集 (Wen-yuan-ko ssu-k'u ch'üan-shu edition; photortp., Taipei: Shang-wu yin-shu-kuan, 1983), 1115:4.4a-b. To this Su Shih replies: "On the river, a thousand trees—the spring almost obscured, / Beyond the bamboo hedge, one sprig—more lovely for growing

Su Shih's exchange with Ts'an Liao is considerably more extensive, as is appropriate to a long relationship and one that affected Su Shih much more deeply. A few of these poems deal directly with the art of poetry, most notably "Seeing Off Master Ts'an-liao" 送參寥師, which is the closest thing Su Shih ever wrote to a treatise on poetry.<sup>14</sup> Most of the poems to Ts'an Liao, however, touch on the subject more indirectly. Su Shih plays often on the contradiction implicit in the act of exchanging poetry with a Ch'an monk, a person who by the nature of his vocation should have abjured the use of all language, but most especially poetic language (for, being beautiful and patterned, it is "language arranged in a figured weave" (*ch'i-yü* 綺語) and as such one of the ten evils to be eschewed by the followers of Buddha).<sup>15</sup> In this way Su Shih engages the monk's—and the poet's—dilemma of having to rely on words to express what is essentially inexpressible in words, a problematic with a hallowed place in Ch'an (and Taoist) metaphysics that also exposes the paradox at the heart of poetry itself. These are all examples of what Su Shih thought about poetry and poetics, not expounded as abstract theory, but disclosed as intimately experienced truths in his work as a poet.

#### PHANTASMS OF THE DEEP

Su Shih's "Mirage on the Sea at Teng-chou" 登州海市 is a poem about poetry, that is, one in which the poet's ideas about poetry find

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aslant" (江頭千樹春欲闌，竹外一枝斜更好) in "Harmonizing with Ch'in T'ai-hsü's 'Plum Blossoms'" 和秦太虛梅花, *SSSC* 22.1184–85. Su Shih has chosen to echo a line from a different poem by Lin Pu: "Slanting under the eaves, one sprig bends low" (屋簷斜入一枝低). See *Lin Ho-ching hsien-sheng chi*, 2.10a.

<sup>14</sup> *SSSC* 17.905–907. Even so, this is not at all a straightforward exposition on the poetic art, but an *argumentum ad hominem* reminding Ts'an Liao of certain literary principles that Su Shih fears he may have forgotten. Of course Ts'an Liao would not have missed the tongue-in-cheek humor in this admonition to a Buddhist to cultivate the important qualities of "emptiness" (*k'ung* 空) and "stillness, quietude" (*ching* 靜).

<sup>15</sup> This is a theme that appears in the first poem Su Shih wrote to Ts'an Liao, "A Poem to Match the Rhymes of One Kindly Presented Me by the Monk [Tao] Ch'ien [i.e., Ts'an-liao]" 次韻僧潛見贈, *SSSC* 17.879–82: "Figured words linger, through many existences still not worn away, / Always you have a poet's meandering passions" (多生綺語磨不盡，尚有宛轉詩人情). It quickly becomes part of the idiom in which Su Shih habitually addresses his friend.

expression in the particular experience of writing a poem, without his having to address those ideas explicitly. In the following pages I present a close reading of this poem as a way of elucidating Su Shih's views on poetic creation, and then interpret these views in the context of his literary and aesthetic thought to show their influence on the formation of poetics in later periods.

Su Shih, in writing his poem on the mirage, seems to have been particularly fascinated with the dual nature of poetry—as living process and as text. In his identification of the poetic act with a process of magical conjuration, through which the poet approximates the power of divinity itself, Su Shih prefigures the cult of the ineffable in the Southern Sung. At the same time his keen awareness of his poem's existence as words, along with the prominent place he gives in it to a fragment by Han Yü, shows how important is the interplay of texts to Su Shih's approach to creativity. Here again, his concerns anticipate those of the thirteenth century, in that the Northern Sung preoccupation with words was to stimulate a violent reaction in the opposite direction in the literary tastes of its immediate posterity.

But the key to Su Shih's attitude to the poetic art—as well as to his sense of his place in the poetic tradition and the assessment of that place by later generations—lies in the evolution of the concept of “change” or “transformation” (*pien* 變) in the thought of Su Shih and those influenced by him. The second part of this paper studies Su Shih's use of Han Yü in “Mirage on the Sea” as an example of the later-born poet's attempt to “transform” the legacy of his predecessor. By examining his conflicted relation to Han Yü, I hope to make clear one important aspect of Su Shih's reading of—and response to—his literary past. In the final section I discuss readings of Su Shih and the reinterpretation of his “transformations” of the poetic tradition by his successors in the late Northern and the Southern Sung, in particular by the critic Yen Yü 嚴羽 (1180–1235), using my analysis of “Mirage on the Sea” to articulate the literary values that with Yen Yü came to dominate Chinese poetics until the mid-seventeenth century.

“Mirage on the Sea” was composed in 1085 when, after having spent five years rusticated in Huang-chou, Su Shih was briefly posted as military superintendent of Teng-chou following the death of

Shen-tsung (r. 1066–1085) and the reinstatement of the conservatives by the regency government of Che-tsung's grandmother (r. 1086–1093). Su Shih was at his new post for an unprecedentedly brief period of five days before being recalled to the central administration along with more important members of his faction, while the advocates of the New Laws took their turn being demoted to distant provincial posts.<sup>16</sup> Teng-chou, on the coast of what is now Shantung, was famous for its off-shore mirages. As Su Shih explains in the preface, "I had heard long ago about the mirages on the sea at Teng-chou. The local elders said that these would appear in the spring and summer, but so late in the year it was unlikely there would be another. I was to leave my office five days after arriving to take it up and, loath that I should not see one, I prayed at the temple of the sea-god, the King of Broadening Virtue. The next day a mirage appeared, so I wrote this poem."

Mirage on the Sea at Teng-chou<sup>17</sup>

To the east, clouds on the sea, void upon void, 1  
 With immortals seen and lost in the empty brightness.  
 Rocking to and fro, the floating world gives rise to the  
 myriad phenomena,  
 But surely there are no cowrie gates hiding palaces of  
 pearl? 4  
 In my heart I know all that appears is shadowy illusion,  
 Yet do I dare with ears and eyes to importune the power  
 of divine art:  
 "At year's end, when the water is cold and the doors of  
 heaven and earth are locked,  
 Rouse for me the sleeping beasts of the deep, whip up  
 your fishes and dragons!" 8  
 Storied towers on emerald mounds emerge in the frosty  
 dawn—  
 An extraordinary event to startle even old men of a  
 hundred.

<sup>16</sup> See Wang Wen-kao, ed., *Su Wen-chung kung shih pien-chu chi-ch'eng tsung-an* 蘇文忠公詩編注集成總案 (1819; photorpt., Ch'eng-tu: Pa-shu shu-she, 1985), 26.1a, 3a–4a.

<sup>17</sup> SSSC 26.1387–89.



In the world of men there are things to be taken by force,  
 But beyond the world is nothing: who then has done this  
     heroic deed? 12  
 Brash my request, yet I was not refused,  
 Certain then I am beset by men and not afflicted by heaven.  
 When the Prefect of Ch'ao-yang was returning from exile  
     in the south,  
 He was delighted to see Stone Granary piled against the  
     Lord of Fire, 16  
 And said to himself that being honest and upright had  
     moved the mountain spirit,  
 How was he to know that the Creator took pity on his  
     dotage?<sup>18</sup>  
 A smile to smooth the brow is not so easy to come by:  
 For you, rich enough reward from the divine. 20  
 Slanting rays in the distance, a single bird is lost,  
 Then only the azure sea polishing a mirror of green  
     bronze.  
 What use is this new poem with its brightly woven  
     words?  
 Let it too change and vanish on the easterly wind. 24

## 登州市

東方雲海空復空，群仙出沒空明中。蕩搖浮世生萬象，豈有貝闕藏珠宮？  
 心知所見皆幻影，敢以耳目煩神工。歲寒水冷天地閉，為我起蟄鞭魚龍：  
 重樓翠阜出霜曉，異事驚倒百歲翁。人間所得容力取，世外無物誰為雄？  
 率然有請不我拒，信我人厄非天窮。潮陽太守南遷歸，喜見石廩堆祝融。  
 自言正直動山鬼，豈知造物哀龍鍾？伸眉一笑豈易得？神之報汝亦已豐。  
 斜陽萬里孤鳥沒，但見碧海磨青銅。新詩綺語亦安用？相與變滅隨東風。

We can read this poem as a series of resonating gestures, of movement answering movement (*kan-ying* 感應). Su Shih prays to the sea-god, the god grants him a miraculous vision, and Su Shih in turn

<sup>18</sup> The "Prefect of Ch'ao-yang" is Han Yü. The vision alluded to here is recorded in Han Yü's "Visiting the Temple on Mount Heng and Spending the Night afterwards at a Buddhist Temple on the Peak: Inscribed on the Gate Tower" 謁衡嶽廟遂宿嶽寺題門樓. See Han Yü, *Han Ch'ang-li shih hsi-nien chi-shih* 韓昌黎詩繫年集釋, ed. Ch'ien Chung-lien 錢仲聯 (Shanghai: Ku-tien wen-hsüeh ch'u-pan-she, 1957), pp. 128-31. "Stone Granary" and "Lord of Fire" are the names of two of the peaks in the mountain range.

renders thanks with this poem. This is a decidedly conventional way of composing a poem, and Su Shih underscores his own simplicity by referring explicitly to the divine act as “reward, requital” (*pao*). At this level the subject of the poem—the poet’s response to an experience—is apparent enough.

But the poem exists at many levels, and one of the sources of its appeal is the way in which Su Shih invites us to try to separate out its constituent layers—disentangling, as it were, the skeins of his fabrication—each of them as airy and delicate as the vapors that make up the mirage itself. As an example of what the *Ts’ang-lang shih-hua* 滄浪詩話 was later to abominate as “making poetry out of discursive argument” (*i i-lun wei shih* 以議論為詩),<sup>19</sup> “Mirage on the Sea” may be interpreted as Su Shih’s playful contribution to Buddhist metaphysics. Just as the reality that underlies all phenomena is empty (*k’ung*) and all phenomena are therefore also empty and, being empty, illusory (*huan*), so the mirage—by definition a “shadowy illusion” (*huan-ying*)—rises out of the emptiness (*k’ung*) of the sea to the east only to resolve again into emptiness as it is blown away by the easterly wind. It is thus possible to read the body of the poem as an exegesis of the first line—“void upon void” (or “void returning to void”). At the same time Su Shih plays on the paradoxical relation between language and truth, on the contradiction inherent in using language—especially the “brightly woven words” (*ch’i-yü*) of poetry—to express what he knows cannot be expressed by means of language. According to Buddhist doctrine, *ch’i-yü* must be avoided by those who would seek enlightenment;<sup>20</sup> yet, in seeking enlightenment, one must first of all become aware of the true nature of reality—that all phenomena are empty—while to gain access to this truth one has only the medium of Su Shih’s empty words.

The poem reads beautifully as a palindromic conceit—emptiness individuating into mirage, mirage evaporating back into emptiness as an illustration of the ultimate vacuity of phenomena. But engaging as this conceit is, it is not the focus of Su Shih’s interest here. Su

<sup>19</sup> Yen Yü 嚴羽, *Ts’ang-lang shih-hua chiao-shih* 滄浪詩話校釋, ed. Kuo Shao-yü 郭紹虞 (Peking: Jen-min wen-hsüeh ch’u-pan-she, 1961), p. 24.

<sup>20</sup> See n. 15. *Ch’i* is a kind of figured weave; hence I have translated *ch’i-yü* as “brightly woven words.”

Shih has played this intellectual game before, and elsewhere he has done so with more energy and sophistication, as in some of the poems exchanged with Ts'an Liao and other poet-monks. Here he is content merely to point us to the irresolvable puzzle without addressing the question of its irresolvability. There is, however, something else in this poem that is problematical and that remains problematical even at the end.

The mirage shimmers between land and sea in the same way that truth hovers between what can be expressed in words and what lies beyond words. Perhaps trying to write a poem about mirages is analogous to writing a poem about poetry itself. That is, were one able properly to describe a mirage, one would also have defined what a poem is. Su Shih knows better than to try: as Cha Shen-hsing 查慎行 (1650–1767) notes, the poet wisely devotes one line in the entire poem to direct representation of the physical appearance of the mirage (“storied towers on emerald mounds”), the rest of the poem being taken up wholly with speculative discourse.<sup>21</sup> He has found the best way to describe the indescribable—by not trying to describe it at all. Thus a poem that can successfully convey what a mirage is like is one that is itself a close counterpart to mirage, and explicitly so. And if, through reading this poem, we come nearer to understanding the experience of mirage, then we shall at the same time have come nearer to understanding the nature of the poetic experience. This, then, is the poem’s final subject—what poems are like and what it is like to be a poet—and this is what seems to have engaged Su Shih in the crafting of this poem, the point of his genuine concern.

Su Shih begs the sea-god (*shen*) to make him a mirage. *Shen*, “divinity,” is the source of mirage, but it is also the source of poetry. A good poem is distinguished by being *shen*, that is, by partaking of the indefinable quality that makes a poem poetical. In having the visionary experience of mirage one bears witness to the workings of the divine; likewise does the poet enter into the divine (*ju-shen* 入神) through the experience of writing poetry, and a reader in reading

<sup>21</sup> *Ch'u-pai-an shih-p'ing* 初白庵詩評, ed. Chang Tsai-hua 張載華 (ca. 1717–ca. 1767), published under the title *Cha Ch'u-pai shih-erh chung shih-p'ing* 查初白十二種詩評 (Shanghai: Liu-i shu-chü, n.d.), 2.22b.

the poem reenters that moment in which mirage and poem magically come into being. In this way the poetic act mimics divine Creation, when the poet in the moment of creation assumes the power of the Creator (*tsao-wu*, the "Grand Artificer") himself.

Elaborating on the origins of the mirage, Su Shih asks what external cause could be working such wonders, if it is known that the human realm is made up only of things that admit of being "taken by force" (*jung li-ch'ü*), things produced by the exercise of human effort (lines 11, 12). The answer to this rhetorical question is, of course, "the power of divine art" (*shen-kung*) that he has himself invoked toward the beginning of the poem (line 6). As a manifestation of *shen* that has been stirred to action by an importunate human agent, the mirage mediates between the human world and the divine. By the same token, we may ask whether a poem belongs within the bounds of "the world of men" (*jen-chien*) or "beyond the world" (*shih-wai*)? That is, is the art of poetry the result of human effort (*jen-li*), or does it in some way approach the quality of a mirage-making *shen-kung*? Perhaps the answer lies somewhere in between. Poetry begins in the realm of the human, as the product of conscious craft, but great poetry passes beyond this to partake of a higher art, an art that has no artfulness but is continuous with the perfection of Nature itself. Elsewhere Su Shih descants on the relation between art and artifice in the visual arts and, while giving human skill its due, locates the ultimate source of *kung* always in the realm of the supramundane.<sup>22</sup>

<sup>22</sup> In the first of the two poems, "Inscribed on a Painting of a Detached Sprig by Secretary Wang of Yen-ling," Wang is superior to the two T'ang bird-and-flower painters, Pien Lien and Chao Ch'ang, because his is "Nature's art" (*t'ien-kung*); the second poem describes him as imbued with "Nature's skill" (*t'ien-ch'iao* 天巧) (SSSC 29.1525-26). Su Shih's prose colophon "Written at the End of a Landscape Scroll by Master Yen [Su] Owned by P'u Ch'uan-cheng [Tsong-meng]" 跋蒲傳正燕公山水 praises the artist as "completely [at one with] the perfection of Nature" (*hun-jan t'ien-ch'eng* 渾然天成), so much so that, "discarding the methodical discipline of the artisan (*hua-kung*), he has achieved the poet's pristine loveliness." (SSWC 70.2212) Several pieces on Su Shih's cousin Wen T'ung, famous for his paintings of bamboo, identify the source of Wen's greatness with his ability to immerse himself so completely in his subject that he becomes one with it ("Inscribed on a Painting by Wen Yü-k'o in the Possession of Ch'ao Pu-chih, First of Three Poems," SSSC 29.1522), thereby "merging with the workings of Nature" (*ho yü t'ien-tsao* 合于天造) ("An Account of the Paintings in the Ching-yin Monastery" 淨因院畫記, SSWC 11.367). In all of the above Su Shih draws a comparison, explicit or otherwise, between the art of mere artfulness and the higher art worked by Nature (*t'ien*).

According to the Great Preface of the *Book of Songs*, a poem—if it is the right kind of poem, one that comes from the poet’s heart and soul and speaks his true intent—is capable of “moving heaven and earth, stirring gods and spirits to action” (*tung t’ien-ti, kan kuei-shen* 動天地, 感鬼神).<sup>23</sup> Somewhat more modestly, Su Shih defines the process that calls the mirage into being—and this particular poem along with it—as “an extraordinary event to startle even old men of a hundred” (line 10). But then, as the mirage dissolves on the evening wind, the poet tries to wave away his poem with a careless gesture of disavowal. “What use is this new poem?” is clearly rhetorical and seems to expect as the immediate and obvious response, “None whatsoever.” From granting his poem the greatest importance, that of supplicating gods and astonishing men, Su Shih turns abruptly round to question whether his poem has any usefulness at all. For a poem is a piece of “patterned, ornamented writing” (*wen* 文) and there are those among Su Shih’s contemporaries who would dismiss *wen* on these grounds as something inferior, with no value inherent in itself, the expedient means to serve an end with which *wen* itself may have no intrinsic connection. Yet it is the very nature of the *wen* of this poem—this fabric woven out of useless words—that enables it to do what it does, to capture something of the insubstantial quality of mirage and of poetry, to take us into the ineffable realm where mirages and poems dwell. And it is these self-same useless words that have an unconquerable solidity and permanence when their magical counterpart fades away, precisely because, being words, they are not subject to the evanescence of mirage.

The mirage rises out of the void to the east and returns to the void on the east wind. Like Prospero, Su Shih steps outside his magic circle and points to the temporality of his own conjuring. Mirage fades, poem ends, and the charms of both are overthrown. The poem, like a mirage, is made up of a tissue of bodiless nothings, questions that are not really questions, with answers that are not really answers. Su Shih asks no fewer than five rhetorical questions in the course of the poem: “Surely there are no . . . ?” (*ch’i yu*); “Who has done this heroic deed [a divinity that we cannot know because we have not the power to imagine it]?” (*shei wei hsiung*); “How was

<sup>23</sup> *Mao shih chu-shu* 毛詩注疏 (SPPY ed.), 1.5a.

he to know [meaning that he could not have known]. . . ?” (*ch'i chih*); “Is it easy to come by [of course not]?” (*ch'i i te*); “What use is it [none at all]?” (*i an yung*). Stringing together an infinite regression of dependent statements, none of which can be traced back to any kind of solid ground, Su Shih undercuts everything, from the evidence of his “eyes and ears” to the very integrity of the encounter itself. As the wind lifts away the layered mists of the mirage, the reader peels back the manifold layers of the poem—and winds up with a handful of words.

The circularity of the process by which the mirage appears and disappears images the poetic process, yet fails to image the paradox of the poem's continued existence beyond the fading of mirage. The identity of mirage and poem breaks down. Unlike the mirage, Su Shih's “new poem” does not softly and suddenly vanish away. By saying that it should Su Shih calls attention to the fact that it does not. For a poem is not one thing but two: it is the poetic act, the process of magical transformation by means of which the poet (taking the reader with him) communicates with, arrives at *shen*; and it is the artifact of that moment, the “useless” words that remain even when the vision that inspired them has fled.<sup>24</sup> Poetry is both a living and a dead thing, both the shimmering resplendence and the shell that merely houses it. Yet the dead words of the poem—the part of poetry which is not magical, which does not “change” (*p'ien*)—are what gives us passage again and again into the realm of divine power. The experience of mirage cannot be conveyed in words, yet words are the only means the poet has to convey it. It is impossible that the poem continues to exist without the mirage, yet it does. It is impossible that the beauty of mirage should last forever—that impalpable *shen* can be caught and held in palpable form—but because poems can and do exist, Su Shih has made it possible.

<sup>24</sup> The gap between poetic act and artifact—between poetry and its underlying inspiration—is a lifelong preoccupation with Su Shih. “Write a poem post-haste before it runs away, / A pure scene, once lost, cannot be caught again!” 作詩火急追亡逋，清景一失後難摹， he exhorts himself in the closing couplet of “Visiting the Monks Hui-ch'in and Hui-ssu at Kushan on the Winter Solstice” 臘日遊孤山訪惠勤惠思二僧, *SSSC* 7.316-19; and, very late in life, he says at the end of “To the Rhymes of T'ao [Chien's] ‘Returning to the Farm to Dwell,’ First of Six Poems” 和陶歸園田居: “The spring river had some beautiful lines, / But, drunk, I dropped them in the dimness” 春江有佳句，我醉墮渺茫, *SSSC* 39.2103-04.

*Shen, kung, yung*: perhaps we can read “Mirage on the Sea” as a hypertext with embedded in it many texts on poetry and the poetic art. The words I have singled out in the preceding paragraphs all induct the reader into independent though related discourses in Su Shih’s aesthetic thinking, each of them touching on an issue that was the subject of lively discussion in literati circles from the eleventh century well into the Southern Sung. The balance between *t’ien* and *kung*—natural-born genius and good workmanship—as twin sources of beauty in art (which in the Sung still refers primarily to literature, although it was increasingly to embrace the arts of the brush as well) was a common topic of conversation in the literary salons of the period, as was the related topic of *ju-shen* as the *sine qua non* for discriminating between art and mere artfulness. Su Shih’s thoughts on these subjects are preserved in some of his poems and writings in such genres as prefaces to literary collections, formal and informal letters, as well as the anecdotal comments recorded in the “jottings” (*pi-chi* 筆記) and “remarks on poetry” (*shih-hua*) of admiring contemporaries. He was particularly influential in the establishment of the place in aesthetics of “entering into the spirit” (*ju-shen*) and “[capturing and] transmitting the spirit” (*ch’uan-shen* 傳神).<sup>25</sup> Similarly, by raising at the end the question of the usefulness (*yung*) of poetry, Su Shih summons up the ponderous shade of the *tao*-versus-*wen* debate—between the advocates of the primacy of *tao* (the Way) over *wen* and those who argued for the equal importance of the two—that dominated the Confucian reexamination of values in his day.<sup>26</sup> Two other words in the closing couplet—*hsin* (“new, original”) and *pien* (“change, transformation”)—open up further spheres of exploration in poetics, aesthetics, and literary history. About this, I will have more to say in the last section.

<sup>25</sup> True art in painting belongs to those who are able to pass beyond concern with mere formal verisimilitude and seek instead to achieve a dynamic suggestiveness fit to convey the inner qualities of the painted subject. See, for example, “Inscribed on a Painting of a Detached Sprig by Chief Secretary Wang of Yen-ling, First of Two Poems,” *SSSC* 29.1525–26. Huang Ming-fen 黃鳴奮 discusses amplifications of Su Shih’s views on this and other aesthetic questions by later theorists in *Lun Su Shih te wen-i hsin-li kuan* 論蘇軾的文藝心理觀 (Fu-chou: Hsia wen-i ch’u-pan-she, 1987).

<sup>26</sup> For a study of Su Shih’s views on this controversy, see Peter K. Bol, “*This Culture of Ours*”: *Intellectual Transitions in T’ang and Sung China* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1992), Chapter 8, esp. pp. 293–99.

## THE TROUBLE WITH HAN YÜ

“Mirage on the Sea” is about the relation between poet and world, and poet and poem; that is, it is on the one hand about how the poet relates to the “myriad phenomena” that stimulate him to create, and on the other about how he relates to the poem that results from the creative act. As process, the poem is the product of Su Shih’s experience. Su Shih conjures the poem just as, by his invocation of divine power, he conjures a mirage; in this aspect the poem stands as counterpart to mirage. But as text—as the words that remain, unchanged and undiminished, after the mirage has dissipated—the poem is a substitute for mirage; in this aspect it mediates between the poet and his experience. Thus a poem is the means by which the poet reads the world and interprets his experience of it. It is characteristic of Su Shih (and of Sung poets in general) that, in much of his poetry, reading the world involves reading other men’s poems—in the present instance, one particular poem by Han Yü, written when he was just leaving his post as Prefect of Ch’ao-yang and quoted in “Mirage on the Sea.” Indeed it would not be unfair to say that Su Shih relates to his experience of the mirage only with Han Yü’s help. The way in which he reads Han Yü’s reading of the world shapes and informs his own reading; so that Su Shih’s relation to Han Yü becomes an inseparable part of his relation to his own experience and the poem that springs from it. The poem on the mirage is therefore also about how Su Shih interacts with Han Yü, and how the text of his poem interacts with that of Han Yü’s.

Having given all of one line (line 9) to actual description, Su Shih spends most of the rest of the poem speculating on the meaning of his vision. Since his prayer was promptly answered, the powers that be must favor him after all, so the lets and hindrances in his life to date are man-made rather than heaven-sent (lines 13, 14). The jump in logic of this rather naive supposition depends on an implied narrative. At the time of composing “Mirage on the Sea,” Su Shih had recently been recalled to active service after a protracted exile in Huang-chou and was on the point of departing again to take up a much higher post in the cabinet of the new regime. Early on in the Huang-chou banishment, he had composed a series of “Eight



Poems on the Eastern Slope” 東坡八首, in the first of which he had cast himself in the persona of a “lonely wayfarer” who was “afflicted by heaven, with no escape” (*t’ien-ch’iung wu so t’ao* 天窮無所逃).<sup>27</sup> Now, basking in the glow of divine favor—in this context readily equated with the Imperial pardon that he has just received—Su Shih can only conclude that those troubles had been self-inflicted, the all too remediable result of his own human folly and not, as he had supposed, the irreversible blight of a fixed displeasure emanating from above. Personal history has thus been revised and put in comic perspective.<sup>28</sup>

Su Shih has been quick to understand his experience in a favorable light. Too quick: he stops himself. The overingenuousness of his own reaction has reminded him of another occasion on which someone else had an analogous experience and showed a similar naiveté in reading it. In a former reign, the poet Han Yü visited Mount Heng on his way back from banishment in the far south.<sup>29</sup> Finding the mountain blanketed by a heavy fog, Han Yü prayed to the tutelary deity and was presently rewarded with a vision of all the peaks ranged in silent symphony, which he recorded and interpreted in the poem “Visiting the Temple on Mount Heng and Spending the Night afterwards in a Buddhist Temple on the Peak: Inscribed on the Gate Tower.” Wrote Han Yü: “Deep in my heart I prayed silently, there seemed to be a response, / Was it not because my honesty and uprightness were able to communicate and move?” (潛心默禱若有應, 豈非正直能感通).<sup>30</sup> To communicate with gods and spirits and incite

<sup>27</sup> SSSC 21.1079. I have discussed this poem in “Poetry, Politics, Philosophy: Su Shih as the Man of the Eastern Slope,” *HJAS* 53.2 (1993): esp. p. 357.

<sup>28</sup> It is also possible to read *jen-o* as referring to the machinations of the enemy faction who had earlier brought about Su Shih’s downfall and who are now themselves fallen. Thus it was not that the Emperor was ever wroth with Su Shih, but that petty slanderers had managed for a time to come between Su Shih and the light of divine grace. This wonderful play of ambiguity—innocuous self-deprecation blending with sardonic accusation—is vintage Su Shih. It is also a particularly arch variation on his present theme of the heaven/man dichotomy. In politics, too, it would seem, human agencies vie with the divine for preeminence.

<sup>29</sup> Actually Han Yü had not yet been pardoned at the time he wrote this poem. Su Shih is notorious for his cavalier and eclectic reading of texts, and this is sometimes taken to be another example of his carelessness, although I suspect that he did in fact read this particular poem quite carefully and his misprision is deliberate, as I shall explain below.

<sup>30</sup> Adapted from Stephen Owen, *The Poetry of Han Yü and Meng Chiao* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1975), p. 97. Owen translates and discusses the poem at length on pp. 97–101. A new translation appears in Owen, *An Anthology of Chinese Literature: Beginnings to 1911* (New York: W. W. Norton and Company, 1996), pp. 485–86.

them to action (*kan-t'ung*) is the effect of a good poem: that is, it discloses the poet's authentic self, here embodied in Han Yü's "honesty and uprightness."

Han Yü seems confident that the favor the mountain god shows him is directly related to the sincerity of his wish. Su Shih thinks otherwise, and expresses his view in an interestingly disagreeable manner. First of all, he calls Han Yü, not by any of the abundant number of epithets with which posterity is accustomed to referring to literati (i.e., his style, sobriquet, place of birth or chosen retirement, the title of the highest post attained in his lifetime, or his posthumous title), but "the Prefect of Ch'ao-yang." This was the lowly office Han Yü was holding when he wrote the poem on Mount Heng; an appropriate name in context, but implying none of the affectionate respect that other names would have conveyed. Su Shih then quotes the relevant line from the original poem and quibbles with it relentlessly: Han Yü claimed such-and-such, but then Su Shih patronizingly asks, "How was he to know" (*ch'i chih*) otherwise? What Han Yü thought was a token of divine approbation for his moral character was merely the Creator's gesture of pity. "A smile to smooth the brow"—this much is all that Su Shih is willing to concede as the reason for the epiphany vouchsafed to Han Yü. What is more, Han Yü mistakenly believed that he had moved the "mountain spirit" in charge of Mount Heng, whereas Su Shih knows that the vision had originated at the top of the celestial hierarchy with the Creator himself. Having thus pulled rank on Han Yü, Su Shih finishes by being downright rude, addressing the older poet with a familiar form (*ju*) of the personal pronoun: what you got was "rich enough reward" for the likes of you, implying that Han Yü should know better than to expect more.

Han Yü chose to interpret what he saw in a certain way. Su Shih disagrees and proposes an alternative interpretation. But if Han Yü was wrong, then Su Shih could be wrong too. For if Su Shih can claim superiority for his interpretation over Han Yü's, another reader may likewise favor a third alternative: any interpretation may be equally close to—and therefore equally far from—the truth. In the end Han Yü's reading will not do, not because there is a better reading that he has not yet thought of but because it has not occurred to him that perhaps there is no way to make any reading at all. By appearing to question the older poet's authority, Su Shih has

undermined his own authority to pronounce on the meaning of his experience. A few lines above, before remembering Han Yü, Su Shih had been content to conclude that all was right with heaven and man on the strength of having seen a mirage. Now, in lessening Han Yü not to overindulge in self-congratulatory speculation, he implicates himself. The exaggerated familiarity of the pronoun *ju*, outwardly a gesture of condescension to Han Yü, is also directed inward, a caution against solipsism on his own part. It is very much in character that Su Shih should couch this reminder of the need for humility in himself in the form of an admonition to somebody else.<sup>31</sup>

Short as it is, the interpolated section on Su Shih's relation to Han Yü (lines 15-20)—or rather on the relation between his "new poem" and the text of Han Yü's poem on Mount Heng—stands out conspicuously, exerting a strange dominance over the rest of "Mirage at Sea." The passage has the appearance of an interpolation, something that interrupts the smooth flow of Su Shih's musing on mirage; in fact it is integral to the structure of the whole, the focal point giving unity to what would otherwise be a tissue of disjointed statements that, because they partake of the nature of mirage, baffle our attempts to resolve them into logical sequence. Here Su Shih shows the reasoning—or rather pseudo-logical reasoning—of the practiced rhetorician. He engages Han Yü in debate, shows the limitation of his opponent's viewpoint, and offers to substitute his own instead. But what Su Shih does in relation to Han Yü and what he says he is doing are two different things.

Lifting passages out of context and ascribing meaning to them (*tuan-chang ch'ü-i* 斷章取義) is a time-honored practice among Chinese readers, and Su Shih appears to have done precisely this, taking issue with Han Yü on the basis of a few disconnected lines. But the pose of a shameless contender is just that—a pose. The original poem by Han Yü, taken in its entirety, is infinitely more subtle and complex than Su Shih's quotation makes it out to be, and Su

<sup>31</sup> By introducing Han Yü's poem in the middle of his own, Su Shih also highlights the contrast between their two situations. Han Yü's poetic inspiration emanates from a mountain, solid and substantial though at first invisible, Su Shih's from a vision with no substance whatsoever behind it. Ronald Egan has pointed out to me that the mirage is a perfect emblem of the eerie unreality of Su Shih's real-life circumstances at this time—the official position to which he had barely been posted before being promptly called away and the return to favor that these appointments seemed to betoken but of which Su Shih was still uncertain.

Shih has read and understood the whole much more deeply than the rhetoric of the relationship is letting on. Indeed the new poem owes a great debt to the old one, a debt that Su Shih renders deliberately apparent but at the same time makes an elaborate show of failing to acknowledge.

“Visiting the Temple on Mount Heng” is written in the rhyme *tung* (“east”). Not only does “Mirage on the Sea” use the same rhyme-scheme, but it repeats seven of Han Yü’s rhyme words: *k’ung* 空 (line 1), *chung* 中 (line 2), *kung* 宮 (line 4), *hsiung* 雄 (line 12), *ch’iung* 窮 (line 14), *jung* 融 (line 16), and *feng* 風 (line 24); in other words, in a poem with thirteen rhymes, seven rhymes are identical to those of the original (eight, if we count *kung* 工 in line 6, which is used in a sense very similar to *kung* 功 in line 28 of Han Yü’s poem).<sup>32</sup> The older poem literally underlies the new one, embedded in palimpsest form in its prosodic sequences.

Furthermore, the Mount Heng poem is made up of a series of three movements and counter-movements, each one a revelation—or a yearning toward revelation—tempered by an act of interpretation, and this forms the basic blueprint for the composition of Su Shih’s poem. First there is Han Yü’s epiphany on the mountain: prayer followed by vision, which the poet reads as a perfect concert of resonances (*kan-t’ung*, as he calls it, or *kan-ying*) between his supplicating self and the power that answers him. Yet, even here, the certitude of the relation is presented rhetorically in the form of a question. “Was it not because . . . ?” (*ch’i fei*) reads as “It was none other than . . . ,” but phrased in this way, it already plants a tiny shadow of doubt that there may be a gap between what the poet experienced and what he thinks he experienced. Then, as Han Yü presents an offering in thanks at the temple of the mountain god, a bent-backed, bug-eyed temple guardian persuades him to take divination, which he then interprets for the poet as a sign of abundant blessings to come. Han Yü for his part shrugs off the flattering oracle, saying a hard life has schooled him not to expect good fortune, so that “Even if the god wants to bless me, it will hardly do any good” (line 28).<sup>33</sup> The grotesquerie of this second encounter, complete with Quasimodo-like augur and gaudy temple deities,

<sup>32</sup> Han Yü, *Han Ch’ang-li shih hsi-nien chi-shih*, p. 130.

<sup>33</sup> Owen, *The Poetry of Han Yü and Meng Chiao*, p. 98.

jars against the harmonious perfection of Han Yü's earlier experience, and in reinterpreting his relation with the divine, he reduces the all-powerful mountain god, in Stephen Owen's words, to the status of "a well-meaning but overly optimistic godling."<sup>34</sup> Finally, having stayed overnight at a Buddhist temple on the mountain, Han Yü wakes to see "a cold winter sun rising in the east" (line 32). The sun, which should be radiating the balm of Imperial pardon, instead looks down like a blind eye, uncomprehending and incomprehensible, bathing the poet in an alien light that gives neither warmth nor hope. Such a vision of blankness admits of no attempt at interpretation and the poet closes the poem in silent dismay. Beginning with a vision of majesty and munificence, in which the "honest and upright" minister in exile believes himself still able to "move and communicate with" divine power, the poem ends with a vision of an utterly opaque landscape. With each encounter the relation between what the poet experiences and the meaning he can put on it becomes more tenuous, until finally he does not even try to read meaning because he recognizes that no meaning is there to be read.<sup>35</sup> Han Yü has thus undercut in the latter half of his poem the epiphany he describes at the beginning. Reflecting on his vision on Mount Heng, he feels doubt rather than certainty, an absence rather than a confirmation of the connectedness between the world of man and what lies beyond it. It is the ambivalent tone in Han Yü's fluctuating presentiments that has touched an answering chord in Su Shih.<sup>36</sup>

<sup>34</sup> Ibid., p. 100.

<sup>35</sup> At the time of this poem Han Yü was not, as Su Shih appears to have understood it, returning from his southern exile, but being promoted to another, slightly less undesirable post while still under sentence of banishment. Though this would have been cause for hope, the pardon for which he clearly yearned would have been in the unknown future. Given this context, his reluctance to get his expectations up makes much better sense than if he had actually been recalled, as Su Shih had been when he wrote "Mirage on the Sea."

<sup>36</sup> I follow Owen in understanding the movements in "Visiting Mount Heng" as a series of ironic undercuttings. Others have taken Han Yü's interpretation of his vision differently. Early readers, such as Huang Chen 黃震 in the Southern Sung, tend to see the poet's assertion about his ability to "communicate and move" as sincere. The modern scholar Ch'eng Hsüeh-hsün 程學恂, on the other hand, believes that Han Yü's tone is tongue-in-cheek throughout. He reads the words "there *seemed to be* a response" (*jo yu-ying*) as meaning that the poet does not necessarily think there was any response at all. These commentaries are quoted in Han Yü, *Han Ch'ang-li shih hsi-nien chi-shih*, pp. 130-31.

Looking at what the poem on the mirage owes compositionally and in its conceptual framework to the Mount Heng poem, we can see that Su Shih has read Han Yü with deep appreciation and understanding. The new poem has fully assimilated the old one, reproducing in altered form its prosodic structure and the basic pattern of its movements, transmuting its harmonies and dissonances to make a magic all Su Shih's own. This is how a poet relates to his tradition, how poems can be created that are new yet continuous (*t'ung*) with poems of the past. At the same time this relationship of dependency—a living poet borrowing from a dead one—is presented rhetorically as a contentious relationship between two poets of equal status. It is a bizarre relation, for Su Shih on the one hand treats Han Yü almost as if he were a live interlocutor capable of answering back, and on the other objectifies Han Yü's words as dead text, correcting and rewriting them for him. I have already mentioned that Su Shih's adoption of an aggressive tone of voice has the effect of keeping Han Yü at arm's length and making him the target of unceremonious cavil. Taking a line from the Han Yü poem, Su Shih isolates it as a quotation, pointing to its presence as an alien text in his own poem. He has taken a bite, as it were, out of the older poem and, instead of digesting it into allusion, spits it out again whole: this is what Han Yü said, this is what I say, and here is the improved version of his poem. Literary cannibalism is here disguised as revisionism. In the context of Su Shih's musings, the question "Who has done this heroic deed?" (*shei wei hsiung*) in line 12 refers to the maker of mirage; but in the context of the struggle with Han Yü for sovereignty over his poem, the same words may have another reading. Taking *hsiung* in its primary meaning of "male" and its extended meanings "to dominate, to overawe," we may perhaps read a subliminal question into Su Shih's overt one: Which of us two poets is stronger; which of us will emerge triumphant?

The many and varied responses made by Su Shih throughout his life to Han Yü would furnish ample evidence for reconstructing one of the most intriguing literary relationships in the history of the Chinese poetic tradition. Hailed by Ou-yang Hsiu's generation as the premier prose writer of the T'ang and the progenitor of the Sung *ku-wen* revival, Han Yü holds an incontestable position as the model for Su Shih's endeavors as a Confucian literatus: but as a

poet—as the greatest T'ang poet after Li Po and Tu Fu and the nearest in time and literary preoccupations to Su Shih—Han Yü presents a different sort of challenge, both as a source of inspiration and as a spur to competition. The ambivalence in Su Shih's attitude to Han Yü the poet—a kind of pugilistic hero-worship uneasily compounded of irritation and admiration—is nowhere more apparent than in “Mirage on the Sea at Teng-chou.” Su Shih makes a point of welcoming Han Yü into his poem, it would seem, only that he might shove him out again. The external events that inspired the two poems are so dissimilar that no reader would have connected them without Su Shih's prompting; it is Su Shih who has invited the comparison, not between the events themselves but between the poetic responses to them—that is, between the different ways in which he and his predecessor approach life and art.

Su Shih's peculiar combativeness toward Han Yü becomes more understandable when placed in the context of his interactions with other poets, in particular living contemporaries. Su Shih was a prominent member—and, after the death of Ou-yang Hsiu, a leading one—in a literary circle that at one time or another embraced some of the most illustrious men of the age. Circles of this type in the Sung were drawn largely along political lines. Men who owed their start in bureaucratic life (and hence their allegiance) to the same patrons, mentors, and examiners would tend in the course of their careers to aggregate into blocs for the purpose of supporting or contesting certain policies or the advocates of those policies. These ties of mutual interest sometimes overlapped with family ties and were often further reinforced by matrimonial alliances.<sup>37</sup> It was customary, outside the actual arena of political activity, to express and confirm the solidarity of these ties through literary exchanges, especially the exchange of verse, which was considered the most civilized medium of intercourse. Poetry of this sort bulks large in the collected works of most Sung literati and ranges from polite *vers de société* on the most trivial subjects (e.g., poems written to accompany a gift

<sup>37</sup> Factional divisions in Sung court politics, certainly in Su Shih's lifetime, read like a complex genealogical chart, with many members of the same faction (and sometimes even of opposing factions) connected to one another several times over as natives of the same region, examination candidates matriculating in the same year, in-laws in the same network of extended families, patrons of the same Buddhist sect, and so forth.

or to acknowledge the receipt of one, birthday greetings, felicitations on the successful candidacy of a grandson, and poetic jests) to poems reflecting genuine friendship. Su Shih's exchanges with his brother Ch'e (better known by his *hao*, Tzu-yu 子由) are a good example of a poetic corpus that runs the gamut from social light verse to poems of deep feeling, as are many of the poems he exchanged with Ts'an Liao, the poet-monk mentioned at the beginning of this paper.<sup>38</sup>

The Middle T'ang poets had popularized the practice of composing poems together or in sequence as a literary game played among friends (e.g., the linked verse of the Han Yü circle and Po Chü-i's [772-846] correspondence with Yüan Chen [779-831]). In the Sung most literary exchanges fell into one prosodic category, the so-called "rhyme-harmonies" or "rhyme-matching poems" (*ho-yün shih* 和韻詩), poems written to the same set of rhymes. Ou-yang Hsiu occasionally matched rhymes with his friends Mei Yao-ch'en and Su Shun-ch'in 蘇舜欽 (1008-1048). With Su Shih's generation and especially in the hands of his coterie, rhyme-harmony became an enormously fashionable practice, intensely competitive and sometimes involving fantastical levels of technical sophistication. The previous generation had experimented with different forms of rhyme-harmony, representing differing degrees of difficulty, such as composing in the same rhyme category but not necessarily with the same rhyme-words (*t'ung-yün* 同韻) and using the same rhyme-words but not necessarily all of them or in the same order (*yung-yün* 用韻); but Su Shih and his literary friends quickly abandoned these easier options in favor of the most difficult of the rhyme-matching forms, namely, using all of the same rhyme-words and in exactly the same order (*tz'u-yün* 次韻). Apart from intensifying the challenge of the game, the popularity of *tz'u-yün* over the other forms meant that the kind of competition in which participants simultaneously composed poems to set rhymes gave way to a sequential mode of composition, in which one poet would compose a poem and then others would compose following the pattern of the rhyme-words in his poem.

<sup>38</sup> Even though, as clergy, their connection to the literati would not have originated in politics, Buddhist monks and Taoist priests tended, for obvious reasons, not to consort with men who were known to be political antagonists.



Here the first poem to be composed becomes the occasion for composing a second, which this second poem acknowledges by making tactful or droll references to the first, and so on; thus each new poem incorporates something of all the poems preceding it. Competition in this case takes the form of one-upmanship, for each poet faces the challenge not only of demonstrating ingenuity and originality (as in the case of simultaneous composition), but of demonstrating them in a greater degree than poets who have already contributed to the set. As the poems accumulated—as the store of available allusions for expanding on the given theme became depleted and as the poets worked through all the possible permutations of the rhyme—the challenge steepened and the competition escalated accordingly. In the hands of the truly gifted, the results were dazzling pyrotechnical displays of virtuosity; but from mediocre poets often came pieces that were overwrought, limp, and straggling. These poetic games were described in the dramatic metaphor of battle scenes by those who took part;<sup>39</sup> for, as in battle, the rules are such that one can acquit oneself only at the expense of others. The object is not simply to produce a good poem, but to produce a poem so good that it makes all others look bad in comparison, and the crowning coup is when a poem is so excellent in every way—in perfection of form and treatment of subject—that, regardless of its place in the actual order of composition, it gains first place by being the best. Su Shih was used to winning at these games.<sup>40</sup> The poems he wrote to match the rhymes of someone else's poem often came to take precedence over the original, and sometimes the original poem is preserved only because it has been appended to Su Shih's collection.<sup>41</sup> He was, after

<sup>39</sup> Su Shih's response to Ch'in Kuan's poem on plum blossoms, cited earlier, presents Ch'in Kuan's poem in the flattering terms of a contest between Ch'in Kuan and Lin Pu in which the former is the victor. The subtext of this polite compliment is of course that, just as Ch'in Kuan's poem has "vanquished" Lin Pu's, so Su Shih's may in turn vanquish Ch'in Kuan's. See n. 13.

<sup>40</sup> His *tz'u* lyric on poplar blossoms, "To the Tune 'Murmur of Water Dragons' " 水龍吟, matching the rhymes of one by Chang Ch'un 章惇 (1035-1105), is universally regarded as reading as if it were the original poem, while the original by Chang Ch'un seems in comparison like a response. Both lyrics appear in *Tung-p'o yüeh-fu chien* 東坡樂府箋, ed. Lung Mutsün 龍沐勛 (1935; rpt., Taipei: Hua-cheng shu-chü, 1980), 2.41a-b.

<sup>41</sup> *Su shih pu-chu* 蘇詩補注, ed. Cha Shen-hsing, appends all known rhyme-matching poems by other poets after Su Shih's (Wen-yüan-ko ssu-k'u ch'üan-shu edition; photoprnt., Taipei: Shang-wu yin-shu-kuan, 1983).

all, a maestro among maestri, and even a superior craftsman like Huang T'ing-chien had to yield pride of place to him. But is it possible to compete with a poet of the past in the same way?

I have suggested looking at "Mirage on the Sea" as though the motive and stimulus for its composition came from a competitive interaction with Han Yü's "Visiting Mount Heng" of the kind I have just described. Certainly the shape and form of Su Shih's poem are derived from Han Yü's in a way reminiscent of the rhyme-matching sequence, and Su Shih's approach to the subject of vision is also conditioned by his expressed need to improve upon Han Yü's treatment of the same. Whether or not Su Shih consciously envisioned his interaction with Han Yü in such terms (which I think highly unlikely) is not important.<sup>42</sup> What is important is that he is extremely competitive toward Han Yü, and that there is an inherent contradiction in his being competitive in this way with someone so long dead.

For, when all is said and done, one cannot compete with the past. Such an undertaking is not only unfair but ultimately self-defeating. Han Yü's poem stands, regardless of Su Shih's attempts at emendation. The original words represent the text in its primary form (*cheng-t'i* 正體), while Su Shih's words are variants, the text in a "changed" form (*p'ien-t'i* 變體). In correcting (*cheng*) Han Yü, Su Shih tries to challenge the authority of the older version of the text and replace it with his own version, in effect to change places with Han Yü and claim Han Yü's prior position for himself. But he cannot, because, no matter what he does, Han Yü was there first. Momentarily subjugated by Su Shih to his own purposes, the text of Han Yü's poem nevertheless remains intact, inviolable. It is the "new poem" and not the old that must give way at last, a fact that Su Shih recognizes as he bids it farewell in the wake of his disappearing vision.

The intertextual nature of Su Shih's poem is one of its most distinctive qualities; indeed, as an example of a certain kind of Sung

<sup>42</sup> It may be worth noting, however, that quite early in his career as a poet, Su Shih composed a poem to match the rhymes (*tz'u-yün*) of Han Yü's "Mountain rocks" 山石, SSSC 5.1989-99 (dated to 1064, when he was 29). It is the earliest instance among Su Shih's extant poems of a rhyme-matching effort to be inspired by a poet no longer living, although later in life he was to make a practice of rhyme-matching T'ao Ch'ien (365-427) and other poets of the past.

poetry, intertextuality is this poem's single most important quality. Han Yü's poem lives inside Su Shih's, is an inseparable part of it, and it is Su Shih's consciousness of this fact—that his new poem could not have come into existence without the prior existence of the old—that drives him thus to disparage Han Yü. With all his evinced assumption of superiority toward his predecessor, Su Shih knows—and knows that his readers know (because if they are reading Su Shih they will probably have read Han Yü)—that, far from being able to “overawe” Han Yü, Su Shih's own achievement rests upon the achievement of this great poet of the past.<sup>43</sup>

#### TRANSFORMATION OR DEVIATION?

Roughly a hundred years after Su Shih's time, a Fukienese literatus named Yen Yü, himself no poet though a sometime poetaster, wrote a manifesto on the poetic art that was to have incalculably far-reaching effects on Chinese approaches to poetry and poetics well into the modern era. The *Ts'ang-lang shih-hua* claims to be the last word in “the way of poetry” (*shih-tao* 詩道). Actually very little in Yen Yü's theories is original, some parts being borrowed from the very poets he excoriates;<sup>44</sup> but the manner in which he propounds these theories is unique. As he lays down the law, in exquisitely bad prose and with an evangelist's conviction that no one besides himself had ever had—or ever would have—anything worthwhile to say about literary history and aesthetics, Yen Yü takes ideas that were already widely in circulation by the late Northern Sung and turns them into fundamentalist gospel.<sup>45</sup> Perhaps, to the overrefined tastes

<sup>43</sup> As Su Shih himself so eloquently puts it in his youthful “Song of the Stone Drums” 石鼓歌, written in imitation of a Han Yü poem by the same title: “My master Han, a lover of antiquity, was already born too late, / How much the more I, hundreds of years later still” (韓公好古生已遲, 我今況又百年後), *SSSC* 3.100. For Han Yü's poem, see *Han Ch'ang-li shih hsi-nien chi-shih*, pp. 347–52.

<sup>44</sup> As Chu Tung-jun 朱東潤 points out, Ch'an meditation and the pursuit of enlightenment as metaphors for poetic practice are first documented in remarks on poetry attributed to Han Ch'ü 韓駒 (?–1135), Lü Pen-chung 呂本中 (1084–1145), and Fan Wen 范溫, all poets of the Chiang-hsi school, for whom Yen Yü professes the utmost contempt. See “Ts'ang-lang shih-hua ts'an-cheng” 滄浪詩話參證, collected in his *Chung-kuo wen-hsiieh lun-chi* 中國文學論集 (Peking: Chung-hua shu-chü, 1983), p. 32.

<sup>45</sup> For example, Chiang K'uei 姜夔 (?1155–?1221), a slightly earlier contemporary, treats the poetic art as something that cannot be learned but only grasped by intuition, expressing

of his Southern Sung contemporaries, the sheer offensiveness of Yen Yü's style was appealing. In an age of uncertainty one so assured of being right may be taken at his own valuation.<sup>46</sup>

Yen Yü has basically one idea around which he builds his entire treatise: that the great age of poetry has already come and gone; in other words, that the past is irrecoverable.<sup>47</sup> Yen Yü's reasoning is simple: once the zenith has already been reached, any further movement can only be in the nature of a decline. All that poets, present and future, can do is to try not to move too far from that zone of original perfection, to minimize the rate of the inevitable falling away. To such an idealistic conception of the past, which in effect puts an end to literary history, anything in the way of innovation—anything that savors of change—would be anathema. Thus, to do as certain Sung poets have done—here Yen Yü specifically names Su Shih and Huang T'ing-chien (1045–1105)—“who took it

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with less vehemence but more elegance the central tenet in Yen Yü's theory. See *Pai-shih tao-jen shih-shuo* 白石道人詩說, in *Li-tai shih-hua* 歷代詩話, comp. Ho Wen-huan 何文煥 (1770; rpt., Taipei: I-wen yin-shu-kuan, 1956), 2:439–41. Chang Chieh 張戒 (fl. 1124–1135), writing considerably earlier, anticipates Yen Yü's denunciation of the poetic styles of Su Shih and Huang T'ing-chien and specifically charges Su Shih with “making poetry out of discursive argument,” a phrase later elaborated in the *Ts'ang-lang shih-hua*. See *Sui-han-t'ang shih-hua* 歲寒堂詩話, in *Hsü li-tai shih-hua* 續歷代詩話, comp. Ting Fu-pao 丁福保 (Taipei: I-wen yin-shu-kuan, 1974), esp. 1:548.

<sup>46</sup> For more detailed treatments of the poetic theory in the *Ts'ang-lang shih-hua*, see Chang Chien 張健, *Ts'ang-lang shih-hua yen-chiu* 滄浪詩話研究 (Taipei: History and Chinese Literature Series, No. 21, Taipei University, 1966); Yen Yü *hsüeh-shu yen-chiu lun-wen hsüan* 嚴羽學術研究論文選, comp. Fu-chien shih-fan ta-hsüeh chung-wen hsi 福建師範大學中文系 (Hsia-men: Lu-chiang ch'u-pan-she, 1987); and Li Yui-ching [Li Jui-ch'ing] 李銳清, *Ts'ang-lang shih-hua te shih-ko li-lun yen-chiu* 滄浪詩話的詩歌理論研究 (Hong Kong: Chinese University Press, 1992).

<sup>47</sup> Yen Yü defines this great age, the epoch of “the ancients,” as including earlier periods but essentially centered in the High T'ang. In this he is being innovative, since for many Sung poets before him the T'ang, even the relatively remote part of the T'ang occupied by Li Po (701–762) and Tu Fu (712–770), was conceived of as being “recent.” Ssu-ma Kuang (1019–1086), for instance, blithely refers to Tu Fu as “a poet of recent times” in *Wen-kung hsü-shih-hua* 溫公續詩話, collected in *Li-tai shih-hua*, 1:165. But while Yen Yü is not very specific as to which of the High T'ang poets he means for us to take as models of the period style (he talks vaguely of “Li and Tu,” which by this time was formulaic), he seems to be describing the characteristics of poets like Wang Wei (ca. 699–761) and Meng Hao-jan (ca. 689–740) rather than Tu Fu, who was the definitive High T'ang poet for both Han Yü and the poets of the late Northern Sung. The quintessential quality of a good poem, *ju-shen*, is more readily associated with the serenity of Meng Hao-jan and the other-worldly transcendence of Wang Wei than with the passionate engagement of a suffering Tu Fu.

upon themselves to fashion poems out of their own ideas” instead of relying on past models, is to “bring about a radical change (*pien*) in the style of the T’ang poets.” In the context of this grim pronouncement, *pien* can only be understood in one way. It is “change” for the worse, an accelerated “deviation” from the normative pattern set by the ancients.<sup>48</sup> The innovations made by these poets, says Yen Yü, were “making poetry out of (mere) language, making poetry out of (mere) learning, and making poetry out of discursive argument.” What he finds so objectionable in poetry of this sort is not that it is not well-wrought (*kung*) and therefore of some merit in itself, but that ultimately such poems have ceased to be poetical—according to his definition of what poetry should be.<sup>49</sup>

Many of Su Shih’s poems represent just the sort of “change” and “deviancy” that Yen Yü has described, delighting as they do in the sophisticated manipulation of language, in recondite allusions that presume a vast amount of learning, and in elaborate conceits that require considerable mental effort to unravel. “Mirage on the Sea” is definitely such a poem. It is full of the conscious play on words, insisting that we recognize it as mere words; it depends on the interplay of text with text, its very existence being premised on the poet’s broad knowledge of the tradition and the reader’s appreciation of the same; and it is largely made up of a clever concatenation of ideas charmingly and sophisticatedly argued. According to the criteria of the *Ts’ang-lang shih-hua*, this is not a good poem, or rather it is not really a poem at all. For Yen Yü, poetry appeals to the intuition and not the intellect; it can be understood perhaps, but never comprehended. A poem should mediate experience but give the illusion that the experience is unmediated, hiding itself so that the reader remains unconscious of its existence as medium. In other words, a poet should allow us to feel his power without letting us know that he is wielding it. Su Shih has instead repeatedly and insistently thrust his poem and his own presence in his poem at us. In Yen Yü’s view, this would prevent the poem from doing what poems are supposed to do. How can the poet (and hence his reader)

<sup>48</sup> The Great Preface to the *Book of Songs*, in reconstructing an order of origin (from primary to derivative), divides the *shih* into “normative” (*cheng*) and “deviant” (*pien*). Here Yen Yü politicizes the ancient dichotomy. See *Mao-shih chu-shu*, 1.7b.

<sup>49</sup> Yen Yü, *Ts’ang-lang shih-hua chiao-shih*, p. 24.

enter into that moment of lyrical suspension in which self and world cease to be differentiated, when the poem through which this is to come about seems so solidly a thing, so uncompromisingly in the way? Yet cannot we also say that this same poem of Su Shih's—so self-reflexive, bookish, and intellectual—is also magically, translucently beautiful, so that it has accomplished all of the things that Yen Yü would contend by its nature it is incapable of accomplishing: that it is both the dream that disappears as well as the solemn reminder that the dream was but a dream, because it is not only the product of a wonderfully wrought human artifice (*kung*) but also a passageway that conducts us through to the realm of *shen-kung*?<sup>50</sup>

We can say that Su Shih's "Mirage on the Sea" is a perfect example of all that is bad about Sung poetry from the point of view of those who might agree with Yen Yü, and of all that is good about Sung poetry from the point of view of those in whom Yen Yü's theories provoke disagreement. The crucial judgment (whether this poem is "good" or "bad") seems to depend on the reader's attitude to the literary-historical concept, *pien* ("change, transformation"), and a term closely related to it, *hsin* ("originality, creativity"). Su Shih himself has something to say on both subjects. We have seen where he stands on the issue of *hsin*: *hsin* is desirable so long as it is not "contrived originality" (*wu-hsin*), originality for its own sake.<sup>51</sup> On *pien* his views are more complicated. In a sense it is impossible to do anything new or original unless one "transforms" one's heritage. But if such changes are merely trivial or superficial—if they are made for the sake of variety rather than out of some organic imperative, some inner compulsion guided by true artistic necessity—then the resulting originality would be contrived, false, and lacking in integrity. Yet Su Shih seems distrustful at times even of organic change, in a way that anticipates a little of Yen Yü's categorical disapprobation.

<sup>50</sup> The way of poetry, says Yen Yü, "involves a kind of material that does not come from books, a state of mind that has nothing to do with the principles (on which philosophical argument is founded)." "Mirage at Sea" is, however, precisely the work of one who has "read widely and delved deeply into principles," yet strangely it is by these same means that Su Shih has arrived where book-learning and philosophical cogitation are not supposed to be able to convey him. See *Ts'ang-lang shih-hua chiao-shih*, p. 23.

<sup>51</sup> See n. 8.

“In calligraphy,” Su Shih is recorded as saying, “none equals that of Yen Lu-kung [Chen-ch’ing 顏真卿] in beauty; yet the ruin (*huai* 壞) of calligraphic technique began with Lu-kung. In poetry, none equals that of Han T’ui-chih [Yü] in beauty; yet the mutation (*pien*) of prosodic form began with T’ui-chih.”<sup>52</sup> These two sentences are couched in the symmetrically balanced construction typical of classical prose, with *pien* and *huai* in exactly corresponding positions. It is clear from context that we are meant to understand *pien* in its sinister meaning. Elsewhere Su Shih speaks, without a trace of deprecation, of how Yen Chen-ch’ing’s style “transformed (*pien*) all who had gone before him,”<sup>53</sup> and he even compares his own calligraphy favorably to the T’ang master’s in respect of the novel use of technique.<sup>54</sup> Here, however, he suggests that Yen’s boldly innovative approach has opened up the way to alterations for the worse in the basic forms of his art. Similarly, the comment on Han Yü’s poetic achievement yokes together highest encomium with tacit indictment.<sup>55</sup> Han Yü is responsible for introducing changes that resulted in some of the most beautiful effects in poetry, but those same changes ultimately led to corruption and decay in the way of poetry, for which Han Yü must also be held accountable. The historian Chao I 趙翼 (1727–1814), a great admirer of Su Shih, has this to say on Han Yü’s innovations: with Li Po and Tu Fu dividing the poetic world between them, Han Yü found that “no matter how hard his efforts at transformation (*pien*), he would never be able to cleave a new pathway,” except perhaps in the direction of developing certain tendencies in Tu Fu’s work towards the “strange and difficult” (*ch’i-hsien* 奇險). “Strange and difficult” refers sometimes to subject

<sup>52</sup> Quoted in Hu Tzu 胡仔, comp., *Tiao-hsi yü-yin ts’ung-hua ch’ien-chi* 苕溪漁隱叢話前集 (Peking: Jen-min wen-hsüeh ch’u-pan-she, 1962), 17.109–110; also in *Shih-jen yü-hsieh* (Shanghai: Ku-tien wen-hsüeh ch’u-pan-she, 1958), 15.320.

<sup>53</sup> “Inscribed at the end of [a scroll of] calligraphy by six T’ang masters” 書唐氏六家書後, *SSWC* 69.2206.

<sup>54</sup> “A note on P’an Yen-chih’s evaluation of my calligraphy” 記潘延之評予書, *SSWC* 69.2189.

<sup>55</sup> On Han Yü’s contribution to the *ku-wen* revival, Su Shih has the authority of Ou-yang Hsiu to obey and his statements do not go far beyond what his mentor has already said or implied. See, for instance, Su’s “Stele Inscription for the Temple of Han Wen-kung of Ch’ao-chou” 潮州韓文公廟碑, *SSWC* 17.508–510, which closely replicates Ou-yang’s assessment at the end of the *Hsin T’ang shu* biography of Han Yü (Peking: Chung-hua shu-chü, 1975), 17:5269. Su’s views on Han Yü’s poetry are considerably more varied and idiosyncratic.

matter, but much more often to diction and prosodic usage—the so-called “deviant forms” (*pien-t'i*) of regulated verse, difficult rhyme-schemes (*hsien-yün* 險韻, literally “steep” or “precipitous” rhymes), and so forth. The gist of this view of Han Yü is that he consciously sought to carve his own niche, to “make a name for himself” (*tzu-ch'eng i-chia* 自成一家) by the cultivation of certain stylistic characteristics in his poetry. While this is not the whole of his achievement, Chao I goes on to say, it is something that Han Yü set his mind to with a view to distinguishing himself from his forebears, and in doing so he created effects that sometimes bore “the marks of the [craftsman's] axe,” in other words, that did not always seem natural and inevitable.<sup>56</sup> This is not an unjust evaluation of Han Yü's “transformation” of the poetic tradition and may serve as a subcomment to Su Shih's.

Ironically, what Su Shih says about the legacy of Han Yü—that it contains peril as well as great promise—reappears in grossly exaggerated terms in his immediate posterity's judgment of his own work. But whereas Su Shih uses the term *pien* sometimes with a positive connotation, sometimes negatively, but essentially preserving its neutrality, his critics in the Southern Sung have narrowed the scope of the word's meaning considerably. Innovative change seems never to lead to *pien* in the sense of “(adaptive) transformation (that ensures) continuity” (*pien-t'ung*), but only to *pien* in its more restricted sense of deterioration and decline. Borrowing his idiom from Ch'an sectarianism, Yen Yü promulgates with urgent insistence the difference between the “right way” (*cheng-tao* 正道) and the “wrong way” (*hsieh-tao* 邪道)—orthodoxy and heterodoxy—in poetry. Chang Chieh, writing some fifty years before Yen Yü, had already made many of the same condemnatory remarks about Su Shih and Huang T'ing-chien, attributing the ruin of the poetic tradition to their innovations<sup>57</sup> and further charging the latter with writing poetry full of “heterodox thoughts,” thoughts with evil tendencies

<sup>56</sup> *Ou-pei shih-hua* 甌北詩話 (Peking: Jen-min wen-hsüeh ch'u-pan-she, 1963), 3.28.

<sup>57</sup> “Poetry,” says Chang Chieh, “was perfected by Li and Tu and ruined by Su and Huang.” He does not, however, necessarily regard as culpable any sort of innovative change, only those initiated by Su and Huang. Thus Han Yü, in whose poems “countless transformations are exhibited,” is ranked in greatness right after Li Po and Tu Fu. See *Sui-han-t'ang shih-hua*, in *Hsü li-tai shih-hua*, 1:548 and 1:553 respectively.



(*hsieh-ssu* 邪思).<sup>58</sup> It is not surprising that a wave of reaction should have set in against the style of the Yüan-yü (1086–1093) era (chiefly exemplified by Su Shih and his literary friends) and its offshoot the Chiang-hsi style after these had dominated poetic fashion for several generations. What is unexpected is the dogmatic exclusivity of this reaction. When there is only one view as to what constitutes true poetry, any departure from it is susceptible of only one interpretation.<sup>59</sup>

The modern scholar Ch'ien Chung-shu 錢鍾書 (1910– ) has noted that the words “T'ang” and “Sung,” used in literary criticism, refer less to the two periods than to differences in generic style associated with the two periods.<sup>60</sup> Certainly, after the Southern Sung, “Sung poetry” comes to designate not the poetry of a particular period, but a particular style of poetry, represented by the poetry of ideas of Su Shih and Huang T'ing-chien and even more especially by that of Huang T'ing-chien and his imitators, the so-called Chiang-hsi school. Strictly speaking, the Chiang-hsi style was not the only style prevalent in the Sung,<sup>61</sup> but when critics of later periods refer to “Sung poetry” or the “Sung style” (*Sung-t'i*) they seem to mean the highly intellectual, discursive style typical of the Chiang-hsi poets, just as the “T'ang style” (*T'ang-t'i*) is often taken as designating, among all the different kinds of T'ang poetic styles, the style of High T'ang poetry that Yen Yü singles out for praise. Indeed, we can say that after Yen Yü created these two broad stylistic categories, they came to dominate the terms of poetry criticism, so that for the next four hundred years literary judgment consisted for the most part of conferring merit on those poets who

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*, 1:561.

<sup>59</sup> There may be an explanation for this with a broader frame of reference than that of aesthetic taste. The Sung reexamination of Confucian principles, which began in the eleventh century as an open inquiry into all areas of history, politics, and philosophical, ethical, and religious thought, led eventually in the thirteenth century to the establishment and promulgation of an orthodoxy on the correct interpretation of those principles. Perhaps this narrowing of the field of vision in the cultural activity of the literati—until the need to know became the need to know what was right and that in turn became the need to declaim this knowledge against all rival claims to knowledge—is also reflected in more purely literary pursuits, such as the study and transmission of the poetic tradition.

<sup>60</sup> *T'an-i lu* 談藝錄 (Shanghai: K'ai-ming shu-chü, 1937), p. 2.

<sup>61</sup> Nor the only one disliked by Yen Yü, who writes even more contemptuously of the Chiang-hu (“Rivers and Lakes”) poets.

successfully approximated High T'ang models and disparagement on those who deviated from them. As Yeh Hsieh 葉燮 (1627-1703) wrote in 1686, "Ever since it was proposed that we should not read anything written after the T'ang, praising a poem has invariably meant saying that it is a T'ang [kind of] poem, while to say that someone's poetry was [in the] Sung [mode] would be tantamount to the grossest derision."<sup>62</sup> And while it was theoretically possible and actually quite reasonable to enjoy and admire different poetic styles, few critics professed such a middle position.<sup>63</sup> The polemics of the *Tsang-lang shih-hua* established an orthodoxy so deeply sectarian that "T'ang" and "Sung" ceased entirely to be meaningful as historical designations and instead came to stand for mutually incompatible tastes. A pro-T'ang taste prevailed throughout the Ming, largely due to the popularity of the archaist poets. The early Ch'ing saw the beginnings of a pro-Sung reaction in the anti-T'ang sentiments expressed by Ch'ien Ch'ien-i 錢謙益 (1582-1664) and efforts by Cha Shen-hsing, Wu Chih-chen 吳之振 (1640-1717), and others to promulgate the neglected texts of the Sung poets. But it was not until Yeh Hsieh's *Yüan shih*, in which he reassessed in historical terms the place of the Sung in the poetic tradition, that we begin to have more balanced, inclusive views.<sup>64</sup>

When Su Shih calls his poem on the mirage a "new poem" in the penultimate line and asks what good it is, the question is not completely neutral. After all, a new poem, one that the individual poet has "taken it upon himself to fashion out of his own ideas," is by definition both a wonderful and a dangerous thing. But the closing couplet, by associating *pien* with *hsin*, has embedded in it an ancient memory that may answer Su Shih's question for him. Lu Chi (261-303), in the closing peroration of his "Poetic Exposition on

<sup>62</sup> *Yüan shih* 原詩, in Ting Fu-pao, comp., *Ch'ing shih-hua* 清詩話 (Taipei: Ming-lun ch'u-pan-she, 1971), pp. 561-612.

<sup>63</sup> Among the exceptions, the Ming critic Tu Mu 都穆. See his *Nan-hao shih-hua* 南濠詩話, in *Hsi li-tai shih-hua*, esp. pp. 1604-5.

<sup>64</sup> Yeh Hsieh devotes the first section of the first chapter of his *Yüan shih* to the rehabilitation of *pien* as a dynamic term in the study of stylistic evolution, specifically arguing for a new understanding of the historical importance of Sung poetry in transforming the tradition. The historicist interpretation of the differences between T'ang and Sung poetry is continued in the eighteenth century in the theoretical writings of such men as Yüan Mei (1716-1797) and Chao I.

Literature” (*Wen fu* 文賦), writes: “Paired with rain and clouds in nourishing moisture, / Imaging gods and spirits in its transformations / When covered in metal and stone, it enlarges virtue, / Flowing through pipes and strings, it is daily made new” (配露潤於雲雨，象變化乎鬼神，被金石而德廣，流管絃而日新).<sup>65</sup> In the chapter called “Continuity and Change” (*T’ung-pien*) in the *Wen-hsin tiao-lung* 文心雕龍, Liu Hsieh 劉勰 (ca. 465–513) also draws the connection between adaptive changes (*t’ung-pien* and *shih-pien* 適變) in literature throughout the ages and the “daily renewal of its enterprise” (*jih hsin ch’i yeh* 日新其業).<sup>66</sup> The great enterprise of literature, as in the *Wen fu*, is to broadcast and illumine virtue. Both passages derive from the *Book of Changes* where, under Hexagram XXVI, “Great Accumulation” (*Ta Ch’u* 大畜), we have: “He daily renews his virtue” (*jih hsin ch’i te* 日新其德).<sup>67</sup> Liu Hsieh goes on: “Through change comes endurance, in continuity there will be no lacking” (*pieu tse ch’i chiu, t’ung tse pu fa* 變則其久，通則不乏).<sup>68</sup> This too is from the *Chou I*: “When the changes [that is, the cosmic principles as they become manifest in the hexagrams] reach their limit, they mutate; in mutating they find continuity; in continuity, they endure” (*i ch’iung tse pieu, pieu tse t’ung, t’ung tse chiu* 易窮則變，變則通，通則久).<sup>69</sup>

Returning to Su Shih’s question, “What use is my new poem?” perhaps we can now say that the use (*yung*) of such a poem is to transform what has gone before. The mirage changes and disappears, extinguished (*mieh*) in the slanting rays of the setting sun. Poetry changes too, but unlike that fleeting phantasm compounded of air and waves, it does not grow dim and indistinct; it survives because, in changing, it confers upon itself renewed existence. The great fear in the Southern Sung was that, having already reached and passed its apogee, the poetic tradition would fall into ruin, even extinction, and in Su Shih’s literary thought there is already a glimmering suspicion of this fear. But while the transformations of poetry may bring about the decline and fall of “the way of poetry,” it is

<sup>65</sup> *Wen Hsüan* (SPPY ed.), 17.7b, lines 259–62.

<sup>66</sup> Liu Hsieh *Wen-hsin tiao-lung chu* 文心雕龍注, ed. Fan Wen-lan 范文瀾 (Peking: Jen-min wen-hsüeh ch’u-pan-she, 1958), 29.521.

<sup>67</sup> *Chou I* (SPPY ed.), 3.6b.

<sup>68</sup> *Wen-hsin tiao-lung chu*, 29.521.

<sup>69</sup> *Chou I, Hsi-tz’u chuan* 繫辭傳, 8.2b.

through transformation that the way of poetry continues and endures. Only by weaving a new poem out of the old has Su Shih created change and, with change, something that does not fade away.

Su Shih lived in an intellectually volatile period, he himself contributing greatly to the ferment of inquiry that stimulated new discoveries in many branches of cultural endeavor. As far as literary history is concerned, Su Shih's generation and the generation immediately after his (which would include such protégés as Huang T'ing-chien, Ch'in Kuan, Chang Lei 張耒 (1052-1112), and Ch'ao Pu-chih 晁補之 (1053-1110), the so-called "Four Scholars of the School of Su Shih") were on the cusp of a change between a reading of the poetic tradition as primarily represented by a family of individual poets which one hoped to be able to join and of the tradition as primarily made up of a body of texts, of differing levels of authority, to which one hoped to be able to add. On one side of the transition falls the generation of Ou-yang Hsiu and Ssu-ma Kuang; on the other side clearly belong those coming after the Chin invasion—the later Chiang-hsi poets and men like Chiang K'uei and Chang Chieh.<sup>70</sup> Su Shih and his contemporaries, in the unsettledness of their literary thinking, reflect the ideas and preoccupations of the transitional period. In many ways a sensibility like Su Shih's belongs, with ours, to the modern age, heavily conscious of the weight of tradition and in consequence fearful of its own ability to break new ground along the well-worn pathways of the ancients. At the same time he is not so modern that he cannot sometimes be free from the perturbations of a ubiquitous self-consciousness. Thus it is possible to have, in the same person, at times magnificently complex responses to the past, such as we have seen in Su Shih's attitude to Han Yü, and at times delightfully simple-minded ones, as when Su Shih demonstrates the ability to reconcile a deep veneration of Tu Fu as "the great synthesizer of the poetic tradition" (*shih*

<sup>70</sup> Changes in the understanding of the nature of poetic transmission are registered in the changing nature of *shih-hua* from the earliest examples of the genre in the eleventh century to examples of *shih-hua* in its fully developed form in the thirteenth. The *shih-hua* of Ou-yang Hsiu and Ssu-ma Kuang are mostly made up of anecdotes about poets; later *shih-hua*, with their growing emphasis on form and technique, show a much more text-centered orientation. As Chang Chieh says, "The proper analysis of poetry begins with generic form." See *Suihan-t'ang shih-hua*, in *Hsü li-tai shih-hua*, 2:554.

*chih chi-ta-ch'eng che* 詩之集大成者)<sup>71</sup> with occasionally calling him a “village yokel” (*ts'un-lou* 村陋)<sup>72</sup> and taking him to task for going to all the fuss and bother of visiting Su Shih in a dream simply to argue a minor point of interpretation.<sup>73</sup> Su Shih can experience the anxiety of a latecomer to the tradition, but he can also enjoy lapses from anxiety in which to make offhanded judgments only to shrug them off again. For the charm of Su Shih is that, while he anticipates many of the concerns that began to occupy readers of poetry from the Southern Sung onwards, he is not yet inextricably, irresolvably caught up in them. We discern in his equivocation the beginnings of cracks in the perceived wholeness of the transmission of the poetic tradition, but the cracks—for him and for us through him—make an arresting pattern in and of themselves. He appeals to us in the modernity of his concerns, but unlike us he is not fully given over to those concerns. He reminds us of ourselves, and of what we could be if we had a little more of his joy.

<sup>71</sup> Ch'en Shih-tao 陳師道 (1053–1102) attributes this famous remark to Su Shih in his *Hou-shan shih-hua* 後山詩話, *Li-tai shih-hua*, 1:182. The original “synthesis” (*chi-ta-ch'eng*) of the culture as a whole was the work of Confucius himself (*Mencius* X, 10.1).

<sup>72</sup> *Shih-jen yü-hsieh*, 14.313. Tu Fu's standing in the early Sung is not wholly unlike that enjoyed by Shakespeare during the Enlightenment. Yang I 楊億, the foremost of the Hsi-k'ün 西昆 poets, dismissed Tu Fu as a “village pedant” (*ts'un fu-tzu* 村夫子), a remark of which Su Shih's is a late echo. See Liu Pin 劉攽 (1022–1088), *Chung-shan shih-hua* 中山詩話, in *Li-tai shih-hua*, 1:171.

<sup>73</sup> Recorded in *T'iao-hsi yü-yin ts'ung-hua ch'ien-chi*, 8.51. Although, as Stuart Sargent reminds me, we should not miss the sly humor with which Su Shih has invoked Tu Fu in order to assert what is really *his* own idiosyncratic reading of Tu Fu's poem.