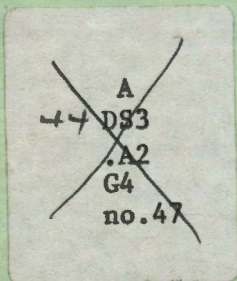


The 47th George Ernest Morrison Lecture in Ethnology 1986

THE CHINESE ATTITUDE TOWARDS THE PAST

PIERRE RYCKMANS



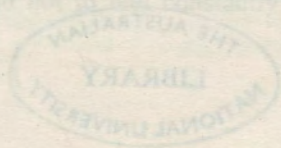
The Australian National University  
Canberra

**THE CHINESE ATTITUDE TOWARDS THE PAST**

**PIERRE RYCKMANS**

**The Forty-seventh  
George Ernest Morrison Lecture  
in Ethnology 1986**

**The Australian National University  
Canberra 1986**



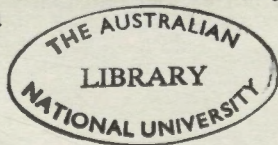


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## THE CHINESE ATTITUDE TOWARDS THE PAST

Le Tibre seul, qui vers la mer s'enfuit,  
Reste de Rome. O mondaine inconstance!  
Ce qui est ferme, est par le temps détruit,  
Et ce qui fuit, au temps fait résistance.

Joachim du Bellay, *Les Antiquités de Rome* (1558)

China is the oldest living civilization on Earth.<sup>1</sup> Such a unique continuity naturally implies a very complex relation between a people and their past. It seems that there is a paradox at the heart of this remarkable cultural longevity: cultivation of the moral and spiritual values of the Ancients appears to have most often combined with a curious neglect or indifference (even at times downright iconoclasm) towards the material heritage of the past. (Whether the spiritual continuity was achieved in spite of, or *thanks to*, a partial destruction of the material expressions of tradition is itself another issue, that will only be briefly evoked later on.)

This essay attempts a preliminary exploration of the parallel phenomena of spiritual preservation and material destruction that can be observed in the history of Chinese culture. The topic being vast, I shall merely outline here some of the directions and themes which a fuller inquiry ought to pursue. At this stage, my intention is not to provide any answers, but simply to define the question.

### Spiritual presence and physical absence of the past in China.

In his autobiography, Carl-Gustav Jung described how, in his old age, he wished to go to Rome, which he had never visited before. He had always postponed this project, fearing that he might not be able to withstand the emotional impact of such an encounter with the living heart of Europe's ancient culture. Eventually, as he entered a travel agency in Zürich to buy his ticket, he fainted and remained unconscious for a short moment. After this experience, he wisely decided to abandon his plans - and he never saw Rome.<sup>2</sup> Most sinologists are not endowed with antennae as subtle as Jung's - and yet, even without being possessed of such sensitivity, it would be difficult for whoever studied classical China, to approach the China of today, and not to feel constantly touched,



moved, overwhelmed by the extraordinary *aura* that seems to emanate everywhere from a land so suffused with history.

The presence of the past is constantly felt in China. Sometimes it is found in the most unexpected places, where it hits the visitor with added intensity: movie-theatre posters, advertisements for washing machines, televisions or toothpaste displayed along the streets are expressed in a written language that has remained practically unchanged for the last two thousand years. In kindergarten, toddlers chant Tang poems that were written some twelve hundred years ago. In railway stations, the mere consultation of a train timetable can be an intoxicating experience for any cultural historian: the imagination is stirred by these long lists of city names to which are still attached the vivid glories of past dynasties. Or again, in a typical and recent occurrence, archaeologists discovered in a two thousand year old tomb, among the foodstuff that had been buried with the deceased, *ravioli* which were in any respect identical to those that can be bought today in any street-corner shop. Similar examples could be multiplied endlessly.

Yet, at the same time, the paradox is that the very past which seems to penetrate everything, and to manifest itself with such surprising vigour, is also strangely evading our *physical* grasp. This same China which is loaded with so much history and so many memories is also oddly deprived of ancient monuments. In the Chinese landscape, there is a *material* absence of the past that can be most disconcerting for cultivated Western travellers - especially if they approach China with the criteria and standards that are naturally developed in a European environment. In Europe, in spite of countless wars and destruction, every age has left a considerable amount of monumental landmarks: the ruins of classical Greece and Rome, all the great medieval cathedrals, the churches and palaces of the Renaissance period, the monuments of the Baroque era - all these form an unbroken chain of architectural witnesses that perpetuate the memory of the past, right into the very heart of our modern cities. In China, on the contrary, if we except a very small number of famous *ensembles* (the antiquity of which is quite relative) what strikes the educated visitor is the monumental absence of the past. Most Chinese cities - including, and especially those which were ancient capital cities or prestigious cultural centres - present today an aspect that may not look exactly new or modern (for, if modernization is a target which China has now set for itself, there is still a long way to go before it can be reached), but appears strangely devoid of all traditional character. On the whole, they seem to be a product of late 19th century industrialization. Thus, the past which continues to animate Chinese life in so many striking, unexpected or subtle ways, seems to inhabit *the people* rather than the bricks and stones. The Chinese past is both spiritually active and physically invisible.



It should be noted that, when I mention this physical elimination of the past, I am not trying to refer once more to the widespread and systematic destruction perpetrated by the "Cultural Revolution". During the last years of the Maoist era, this destruction, it is true, literally resulted in a cultural desert - in some cities 95 to 100% of historic and cultural relics were indeed lost forever. However, we must immediately point out that, if in so many cities it was possible for mere gangs of schoolchildren to loot, burn and rase to the ground the near totality of the local antiquities, it was because in the first instance there had not been much left for them to destroy. Actually, very few monuments had survived earlier historical disasters and, in consequence, the Maoist vandals found only rare targets on which to spend their energy. In this perspective, it might even be a mistake to look at the "Cultural Revolution" as if it was an accidental aberration. If we replace it in a broader historical context, it may appear in fact as the latest expression of a very ancient phenomenon of massive iconoclasm, that was recurrent all through the ages. Without having to go very far back in time, the Taiping insurrection in the mid-19th century produced a devastation that was far more radical than the "Cultural Revolution" - I shall come back later to this question of the periodic destruction of the material heritage of the past, which seems to have characterized Chinese history.

Thus, the disconcerting barrenness of the Chinese monumental landscape cannot be read simply as a consequence of the chaotic years of the Maoist period. It is a feature much more permanent and deep - and it had already struck Western travellers in the 19th and at the beginning of the 20th century.

In this particular respect, I think it would be difficult to find a witness better qualified and more articulate than Victor Segalen (1878-1919), a remarkable poet who was also a sinologist and archaeologist of considerable achievement; he spent several years in China at the end of the empire, and led two long archaeological expeditions into the more remote provinces of the interior. In one prose poem, "Aux Dix mille années" (1912),<sup>3</sup> he memorably summarized the paradox which is, I think, at the root of the Chinese attitude towards the past. (Actually my entire essay was originally triggered by this piece, and what I am trying to do here is merely to provide a comment to it.)

Segalen's poem is a meditation on the relation between Chinese culture and time. It starts from a comparative evocation of the architectural principles of the great civilizations of the past, and opposes them to the Chinese conception. The non-Chinese attitude - from ancient Egypt to the modern West - is essentially an active, aggressive attempt to challenge and overcome the erosion of time. Its ambition is to build for all eternity by adopting the strongest possible materials and using techniques that will ensure maximum resilience. Yet, by doing this, the



builders are merely postponing their ineluctable defeat. The Chinese, on the contrary, have realized that - in Segalen's words - "nothing immobile can escape the hungry teeth of the ages." Thus, the Chinese constructors yielded to the onrush of time, the better to deflect it.

Segalen's reflection developed from technically accurate information: Chinese architecture is essentially made of perishable and fragile materials; it embodies a sort of "in-built obsolescence"; it decays rapidly and requires frequent rebuilding. From these practical observations, he drew a philosophical conclusion: the Chinese actually transferred the problem - eternity should not inhabit the building, it should inhabit the builder. The transient nature of the construction is like an offering to the voracity of time; for the price of such sacrifices, the constructors ensure the everlastingness of their spiritual designs.

### Limits of Chinese antiquarianism

Although, on the whole, it would not be wrong to say that the Chinese largely neglected to maintain and preserve the *material* expressions of their culture, such a statement would obviously require qualification.

Antiquarianism\* did develop in China, and constitutes in itself a topic that

would deserve a thorough study. Here I wish merely to emphasize its two major limitations: first, antiquarianism appeared very late in Chinese cultural history; secondly, it remained essentially restricted to a narrow category of objects.

On the first point: although some aspects of antiquarianism (mostly literary) had already appeared in late Tang (after the crisis of An Lushan's rebellion in 756), it essentially developed from the beginning of the Song (11th century) - in Western terms, this may seem quite ancient, but in Chinese history it is in fact rather late, as it represents the beginning of the modern times. The Song displayed a passionate curiosity for Antiquity, and this interest found many expressions: the first manifestations of scholarly archaeology, the study and collection of antique bronzes, the great, systematic compilations of ancient epigraphs.

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\* By "antiquarianism" I mean not only the taste and passion for all things antique, but also their various corollaries: the development of archaeology, the activities of art collectors, dealers and forgers, the aesthetics of archaism: "ancient is beautiful", the poetry of the past, meditation over ancient ruins as a literary theme, etc. etc.



More generally, Song tastes and fashions all began to reflect this new cult for the artistic forms of the past.

What is remarkable is that in China the development of antiquarianism actually reflected a highly abnormal situation. It resulted from a spiritual crisis and represented a new desire to define and affirm a Chinese cultural identity. The Song empire was a menaced world, a mutilated empire. Not only had the Chinese territory dangerously shrunk, but for the first time the Chinese emperors had to deal not with mere nomadic raiders, but with alien leaders ruling in their own right. China's aggressive neighbours now possessed set institutions and a fairly sophisticated culture; they directly challenged the Chinese traditional conception whereby China was the centre of the world. From the 17th century, the Chinese faith in the universality of their world-order seems to have been deeply shaken by the permanent politico-military crisis resulting from the foreign menace, and it is in this particular context that, for the first time in Chinese history, a massive cultural escape took place backwards in time: Chinese intellectuals effected a retreat into their glorious antiquity and undertook a systematic investigation of the splendours of their past (modern scholars have called this phenomenon "Chinese culturalism" and see in it a forerunner of the nationalism that was to develop many centuries later in reaction against the Manchu rule and the Western aggressions.)

In this perspective, antiquarianism appears essentially as a search for spiritual shelter and moral comfort. Antiquarian pursuits were to provide Chinese intellectuals with a much-needed reassurance at a time when they felt threatened in their cultural identity.

On the second point (the limited object of antiquarianism): traditionally Chinese aesthetes, connoisseurs and collectors were exclusively interested in calligraphy and painting; later on, their interest also extended to bronzes and to a few other categories of antiques. However, we must immediately observe that painting is in fact an extension of calligraphy - or at least, that it had first to adopt the instruments and techniques of calligraphy before it could attract the attention of the aesthetes. As to the bronzes, their value was directly dependent upon whether they carried epigraphs.<sup>4</sup> In conclusion, it would not be an excessive simplification to state that, in China, the taste for antiques has always remained closely - if not exclusively - related to the prestige of the *written word*.



## Art collections

A study of Chinese antiquarianism should naturally include a chapter on art collecting in China. On this important topic we must limit ourselves here to a few basic remarks.<sup>5</sup>

The earliest collections recorded in history were the imperial collections. The early collections of the archaic rulers were comprised of symbolic objects, with magic and cosmological properties, whose possession entailed possession of political power. Progressively, the magic-cosmological collections of "maps and documents" (*tuji* or *tushu*) evolved into art collections of "calligraphy and painting" - the transition took place around the end of the Han period. (Note the ambiguity of the word *tu* which means both *map* and *image*. Originally, to possess the map-image of a territory was to have control over that territory. In international relations in pre-imperial China, when a state yielded territory to another state, the transaction was effected by surrendering the map-image of that territory.)

It is interesting to observe that, even after the magic-cosmological collections turned into aesthetic collections, the memory of their original function never disappeared completely. For instance, a Tang emperor, who was a connoisseur and avid collector, having learned that one of his high officials had some very rare ancient paintings, "invited" him to present them to the imperial collections. Needless to say, this kind of "invitation" could not be declined, and the minister, heartbroken, complied immediately. The emperor personally acknowledged the gift, and in his letter took the pain to emphasize that, in taking possession of these paintings, he was not pursuing an idle and frivolous, private aesthetic curiosity, but actually meant to assume fully his public responsibility as a ruler.<sup>6</sup>

In fact, the imperial collections never entirely lost their archaic role of legitimizing political authority. It is remarkable to see how this function has actually survived until today. Chiang Kai-shek, who was never particularly noted for his artistic inclinations, diverted considerable resources and energy in a time of acute emergency, in order to have the former imperial collections removed to Taiwan just before he had to evacuate the mainland. By doing this, it was generally considered that he had secured a fairly substantial support for his claim that he still was the legitimate ruler of all China. At the time, Peking experienced this move as a bitter political set-back, and the presence of the imperial collections in Taiwan has always remained a very sore issue for the People's Republic. The communist leaders too can hardly be suspected of much aesthetic indulgence - and yet, as soon as they assumed power, they immediately attempted to rebuild an "imperial" collection in Peking -



partly by "inviting" private collectors to contribute with their paintings (in a fashion quite similar to the Tang episode which we just evoked), and partly by buying back, at great cost, some ancient masterpieces of Chinese art on the international art market.<sup>7</sup>

All through history, imperial collections achieved an extraordinary concentration of ancient masterpieces, amounting at times to a virtual monopoly over the artistic heritage of the past. Two important consequences resulted from this situation.

(1) Without access to the imperial collections - and only a very small number of high-ranking officials enjoyed such a privilege - it was practically impossible for most artists, aesthetes, connoisseurs and critics to acquire a full, first-hand knowledge of ancient art. On this subject, even historians were dealing mostly with abstract concepts, unverified stereotypes and literary information.<sup>8</sup> Sifting through the vast literature of connoisseurs' notes, one is constantly struck by the fact that, when the writers refer to ancient paintings which they personally had the chance to examine, these works are seldom more than two hundred years old. Moreover, it is not uncommon to come across influential critics and collectors who confess that they hardly ever saw any works by famous artists who lived barely one century before them.<sup>9</sup> (This situation provided ideal conditions for a thriving industry of art forgery - another important topic that unfortunately cannot be covered here.)<sup>10</sup>

(2) It is mostly because each dynasty achieved a huge concentration of art treasures that China's heritage repeatedly suffered such massive losses. The fall of practically every dynasty entailed the looting and burning of the imperial palace, and each time, with one stroke, the cream of the artistic production of the preceding centuries would vanish in smoke. The stunning extent of these recurrent disasters is documented in great detail by the historical records.

Here, a side-comment could be made: we must lament the grievous losses that were inflicted upon the cultural heritage of China - and of mankind - and yet, we may wonder if there was perhaps not *some* relation between the inexhaustible creativity displayed by Chinese culture through the ages, and the periodic *tabula rasa* that prevented this culture from becoming clogged up, inhibited and crushed under the weight of the treasures accumulated by earlier ages. Like individuals, civilizations do need a certain amount of *creative forgetfulness*. Too many memories can hinder intellectual and spiritual activity, as it is suggested in a well-known tale by Jorge Luis Borges, describing the ordeal of a man who cannot forget anything. A total, perfect, infallible memory is a curse: the mind of Borges' character is turned into a huge garbage heap from which



nothing can be subtracted, and where, as a result, no imaginative or thinking process can take place any more - for to think is to discard.<sup>11</sup>

### **Ideological background: the cult of the past in Chinese thought.**

As we have just noted, Chinese antiquarianism remained limited both in *time* (it appeared late) and in *scope* (it was mostly concerned with the diverse manifestations of the written word).

These limitations may seem paradoxical when we consider that two important cultural factors ought apparently to have produced an environment particularly conducive to antiquarian pursuits. These factors are: 1) that China's dominant ideology - Confucianism - extolled the values of the past; and 2) that China from a very early age developed an extraordinary sense of history - it actually possesses the longest uninterrupted historiographical tradition.

On the question of the Confucian cult of the past,<sup>12</sup> two significant qualifications should be made.

First, in ancient Chinese thought, the cult of the past was far from being a universal dogma. The quarrel between the "Ancients" and the "Moderns" occupied a considerable part of the philosophical debates in pre-imperial China - the most creative period in the history of Chinese thought. At the end of that period, the modern school gained the upper hand, thus providing the ideological framework for the establishment of the first Chinese empire (in fact, the notorious initiative of the first emperor, who decided "to burn the books and bury the scholars alive", marked the gruesome climax of this movement to obliterate the past). Shortly before, the last (and most agile) of the great exponents of Confucianism, Xun Zi, had come to terms with "modernism" and accommodated the Confucian tradition to the prevalent trends of the time.<sup>13</sup>

Secondly, it is true that Confucius considered Antiquity as the repository of all human values. Therefore, according to him, the Sage's mission was not to *create* anything anew, but merely to *transmit* the heritage of the Ancients. In actual fact, such a program was far less conservative than might first appear (Confucius himself played a revolutionary role in his time): the Antiquity to which he referred was a *lost* Antiquity, which the Sage had to seek and practically to *reinvent*. Its actual contents were thus highly fluid and not susceptible to objective definition or circumscription by a specific historical tradition. Similarly, in later periods, nearly all the great Confucian reformers in Chinese history used to invoke the authority of the Ancients to condemn modern practices - but what was meant by these semantic conventions practically amounted to the exact opposite: their so-called "Antiquity" referred to a



mythical Golden Age - actually their utopian vision of the *future* - whereas the so-called "modern practices" referred to the inheritance of the recent past, i.e. in fact the *real past*.

On the question of the great historiographical tradition of China, and the unique awareness of history developed by Chinese culture, only one basic observation should be made here, in direct connection with our topic. It is true that China produced from a very early period a magnificent historiography. Two thousand years ago, Chinese historians already displayed methods that were remarkably modern and scientific; this, however, should not lead us to misunderstand their objective, which remained essentially philosophic and moral.

From a very early stage - well before Confucius - the Chinese evolved the notion that there could only be one form of immortality: the immortality conferred by history. In other words, life-after-life was not to be found in a supernature, nor could it rely upon artefacts: man only survives in man - which means, in practical terms, in the memory of posterity, through the medium of the written word.<sup>14</sup>

This brings us back to our starting point: Segalen's poetical intuition that Chinese everlastingness does not inhabit monuments, but people. Permanence does not negate change, it informs change. Continuity is not ensured by the immobility of inanimate objects, it is achieved through the fluidity of the successive generations.<sup>15</sup>

#### **A case-study: the "Preface of the Orchid Pavilion".**

After having dealt with theoretical notions, let us now conclude by examining one exemplary case - a concrete instance that could illustrate the actual mechanisms of the relations between a "spiritual" tradition and its material expressions.

My example is taken from calligraphy, which - as we already pointed out - is considered in China as the supreme art. The particular piece which I am going to present is itself traditionally considered as the absolute masterpiece of this supreme art. In the entire history of Chinese art there is probably no other individual work that could claim a similar prestige, or could have exerted as wide and lasting an influence. It became a cornerstone in the development of calligraphy. Practically all the major calligraphers of later centuries defined themselves in relation to this particular work.

This arch-famous work is called the *Lan ting xu*, or "Preface of the Orchid Pavilion", by Wang Xizhi (307-365), the greatest calligrapher of all ages.<sup>16</sup>

First, a few words need to be said on the work itself and the circumstances of its creation. In 353, on the occasion of a spring ritual, a



group of scholars went on an excursion to a beautiful spot called the Orchid Pavilion. It was a merry and refined gathering, dedicated to the enjoyment of friendship, poetry and wine. At the end of the day, all the poems that had been improvised by the participants were collected, and Wang Xizhi wrote a preface to the collection. The preface itself is a short prose-essay in 320 words. On that day, Wang Xizhi was particularly inspired, and when he calligraphed his "Preface", he really surpassed himself. Later on, he repeatedly tried to recapture the unique quality of his original creation, and literally made hundreds of attempts to reduplicate his own masterpiece, but never succeeded in equalling the miraculous beauty of the *premier jet*.

How was this calligraphy handed down in history? Here the plot thickens and even acquires the bizarre and murky twists of a detective story.

After Wang Xizhi's death, the "Orchid Pavilion" was kept by his descendants and remained within the family. However, during the first two hundred years of its existence, no mention was ever made of it; seemingly, no one had the chance of seeing it.

Two hundred and fifty years later, it came into the hands of a monk who made copies of it, had these distributed and thus laid the ground for Wang's subsequent artistic reputation.

Three hundred years later, Wang's calligraphic style aroused the enthusiasm of Emperor Tang Taizong. Taizong avidly hunted for his calligraphies and gathered the most exhaustive collection of his autographs (2,290 items - all to be eventually scattered). However, the crowning jewel, the "Orchid Pavilion" was still missing from this collection. After devious manœuvres, combining deception and violence, the emperor finally succeeded in securing possession of the masterpiece - at the cost of a human life.<sup>17</sup> Taizong treasured the "Orchid Pavilion" and ordered copies to be made from it (both tracing copies and free-hand copies); these copies were then carved on stone, and rubbings were taken from the stone-tablets. Eventually the original stones were lost or destroyed, but new tablets were carved from the original rubbings. As the original rubbings themselves disappeared, new rubbings were taken from later engravings - and with the passing of time, the study of the pedigree of these copies of copies of copies, and the establishment of their genealogical tree became a specialized discipline of mind-boggling complexity.

Meanwhile, Wang Xizhi's original manuscript had long ceased to be available for reference. Tang Taizong, who died in 649, had demanded that the "Orchid Pavilion" be buried with him in his grave at Zhaoling - some thirty kilometres north of what is now Sian, where it should still be lying today (if the imperial records told us the truth).



Remarkable paradox: it is only *after* it finally disappeared forever in the imperial grave, that this particular work (which very few calligraphers ever saw in its original form) began to exert its greatest influence, through various indirect and questionable copies. It eventually acquired its greatest impact at the beginning of the Song period (11th century) - seven hundred years after Wang Xizhi's time. It was then popularized by a calligrapher of genius, Mi Fu, who under the guise of propounding Wang's calligraphic style, displayed in fact his own personal creations. The educated public was unable to distinguish the Mi product from the Wang label, as, by this time, practically nothing remained of Wang Xizhi's original works, with the exception of a very few small, uncertain fragments. From then on, the prestige and influence of the "Orchid Pavilion" continued steadily to grow. As L. Ledderose neatly summarized it: "It seems somehow uncomfortably symptomatic that it was the lost "Orchid Pavilion" that was to emerge as the most celebrated work in the history of Chinese calligraphy .... What is even more astonishing is that the "Orchid Pavilion" in addition to being glorified also became a stylistic model: it has been studied by calligraphers for centuries although nobody has ever seen the original!"<sup>18</sup>

Furthermore, there was a final, ironic twist to the story: in 1965, the famous scholar and archaeologist Guo Moruo threw a bomb that put the Chinese academic world in turmoil and initiated a heated debate still unresolved. According to Guo's findings, not only is the calligraphy of the "Orchid Pavilion" as we know it through its Tang and Song copies, from a much later date than Wang Xizhi, but even the text itself could not have been composed by him: in other words, Wang Xizhi never wrote it, nor calligraphed it. The sublime model which inspired the entire development of Chinese calligraphy, the aesthetic and technical cornerstone of this art, *may in fact never have existed!*

Whether or not this conclusion is accurate (there are some flaws in Guo's argumentation, but let us leave that aside), it can still provide us with an important clue to the broader issue which we attempted to address: the vital strength, the creativity, the seemingly unlimited capacity for metamorphosis and adaptation which the Chinese tradition displayed for 3,500 years may well derive from the fact that this tradition never let itself be trapped into set forms, static objects and things, where it would have run the risk of paralysis and death.<sup>19</sup>

In a sense, one of the best metaphors for this tradition could be provided by the description of a Chinese garden which a Ming scholar wrote in the 16th century. It was a fashion among intellectuals and artists to write records of beautiful gardens, but in the case of our writer, there was a new dimension added to the *genre*. The garden which he described was called the Wuyou Garden - which means "The Garden-that-does-not-



exist". In his essay, the author observed that many famous gardens of the past have entirely disappeared and survive only on paper in literary descriptions. Hence, he wondered why it should be necessary for a garden to have first existed in reality. Why not skip the preliminary stage of actual existence and jump directly into the final state of literary existence which, after all, is the common end of all gardens? What difference is there between a famous garden which exists no more, and this particular garden, which never existed at all, since in the end both the former and the latter are known only through the same medium of the written word?<sup>20</sup>

Western visitors in China seem to have been irritated to the point of obsession with what came to be called "Chinese lies" or the "Chinese art of stage-setting and make-believe". Even intelligent and perceptive observers did not completely escape this trap; in a clever piece written a few years ago by a good scholar,<sup>21</sup> I came across an anecdote which, I think, presents a much deeper bearing than the author himself may have realized: a great Buddhist monastery near Nanking was famous for its purity and orthodoxy. The monks were following a rule that conformed strictly to the original tradition of the Indian monasteries: whereas, in other Chinese monasteries, an evening meal is served, in this particular monastery, every evening the monks received only a bowl of tea. Foreign scholars who visited the monastery at the beginning of this century much admired the austerity of this custom. These visitors, however, were quite naive. If they had had the curiosity to actually look into the bowls of the monks, they would have found that what was served under the name of "tea" was in fact a fairly nourishing rice congee, similar in any respect to the food which is being provided at night in all other Chinese monasteries. Only in this particular monastery, out of respect for an ancient tradition, the rice congee was conventionally called "the bowl of tea".

I wonder if, to some extent, Chinese tradition is not such a "bowl of tea", which under a most ancient, venerable and constant name can in fact contain all sorts of things, and finally, anything but tea. Its permanence is first and foremost a Permanence of Names, covering the endlessly changing and fluid nature of its actual contents.

If this observation is correct, it could also have interesting implications in other areas, and you would naturally be free, for instance, to read in it a forecast regarding the eventual fate of Marxism-Leninism and Mao Zedong Thought. This essay, however, was only concerned with China's past.



## NOTES

1. The civilizations of Egypt, the Middle East, Persia and ancient India are no less ancient, but their continuity has been broken. Only the Jewish tradition may present a significant parallel to the phenomenon of spiritual continuity which I am trying to study here.

2. "I have travelled a great deal in my life, and I should very much have liked to go to Rome, but I felt that I was not really up to the impression the city would have made upon me. Pompeii alone was more than enough; the impressions very nearly exceeded my powers of receptivity. .... In 1912 I was on a ship sailing from Genoa to Naples. As the vessel neared the latitude of Rome, I stood at the railing. Out there lay Rome, the still smoking and fiery hearth from which ancient cultures had spread, enclosed in the tangled rootwork of the Christian and Occidental Middle Ages. There classical antiquity still lived in all its splendour and ruthlessness.

"I always wonder about people who go to Rome as they might go, for example, to Paris or to London. Certainly Rome as well as these other cities can be enjoyed aesthetically but if you are affected to the depths of your being at every step by the spirit that broods there, if a remnant of a wall here and a column there gaze upon you with a face instantly recognised, then it becomes another matter entirely. Even in Pompeii, unforeseen vistas opened, unexpected things became conscious, and questions were posed which were beyond my power to handle.

"In my old age - in 1949 - I wished to repair this omission, but was stricken with a faint while I was buying tickets. After that, the plans for a trip to Rome were once and for all laid aside." C.G. Jung, *Memories, Dreams, Reflections* (Collins, London 1973), pp. 318-19.

3. Aux Dix mille années

Ces barbares écartant le bois, et la brique et la terre,  
bâtissent dans le roc afin de bâtir éternel !

Ils vénèrent des tombeaux dont la gloire est d'exister  
encore; des ponts renommés d'être vieux et des temples de pierre  
trop dure dont pas une assise ne joue.

Ils vantent que leur ciment durcit avec les soleils; les  
lunes meurent en polissant leurs dalles; rien ne disjoint la durée  
dont ils s'affublent, ces ignorants, ces barbares!



Vous! fils de Han, dont la sagesse atteint dix mille années et dix mille dix milliers d'années, gardez-vous de cette méprise.

Rien d'immobile n'échappe aux dents affamées des âges. La durée n'est point le sort du solide. L'immuable n'habite pas vos murs, mais en vous, hommes lents, hommes continuels.

Si le temps ne s'attaque à l'œuvre, c'est l'ouvrier qu'il mord. Qu'on le rassasie: ces troncs pleins de sève, ces couleurs vivantes, ces ors que la pluie lave et que le soleil éteint.

Fondez sur le sable. Mouillez copieusement votre argile. Montez les bois pour le sacrifice; bientôt le sable cèdera, l'argile gonflera, le double toit criblera le sol de ses écailles:

Toute l'offrande est agréée!

Or, si vous devez subir la pierre insolente et le bronze orgueilleux, que la pierre et que le bronze subissent les contours du bois périssable et simulent son effort caduc:

Point de révolte: honorons les âges dans leurs chutes successives et le temps dans sa voracité.

V. Segalen, *Stèles* (Crès, Paris, 1922), pp. 29-31.

4. A telling illustration of this point can be found in Li Qingzhao's moving memoir, *Jin shi lu houxu* (1132). After the fall of the Northern Song, as Li was fleeing south, she had to carry with her the precious collections of her husband. The latter, who was prevented by his official duties from accompanying her, gave her precise instructions concerning those parts of the collections that could be discarded, and those that should be retained at all costs, should the situation force her to reduce her luggage. The most dispensable possessions were the *printed* books (as opposed to hand-written copies); then the pictorial albums (as opposed to individual paintings); then the bronzes that *carried no epigraphs*; then the printed books published by the Imperial College; then the paintings of average quality... The most treasured items - besides the vessels and relics pertaining to the ancestors' cult (under no conditions were these ever to be discarded) - were the antique bronzes with epigraphs, precious paintings and calligraphies and rare manuscripts. *Li Qingzhao ji jiaozhu* (Renmin wenxue chubanshe, Peking 1979), pp. 179-181.
5. The classic study on art collecting in China is R. van Gulik, *Chinese Pictorial Art as Viewed by the Connoisseur* (Rome 1958) (reissued by Hacker Art Books, New York 1981). On the



particular subject of the imperial collections, see L. Ledderose: "Some observations on the imperial art collection in China", in *Transactions of the Oriental Ceramic Society*, 1978-1979, vol. 43, pp. 33-46.

6. The episode which occurred in 818 involved Emperor Xianzong and the grandfather of the great art historian Zhang Yanyuan; the latter told it in his *Lidai ming hua ji*. See Zhang Yanyuan, *Lidai ming hua ji*, (Renmin meishu chubanshe, Peking 1963), vol.I, no. 2, pp. 10-11. See also W. Acker: *Some T'ang and pre-T'ang texts on Chinese painting* (Brill, Leiden 1954), pp. 138-141.
7. It is at this time, for example, that "The Night revels of Han Xizai" by Gu Hongzhong (10th century) and "Qingming festival along the river" by Zhang Zeduan (12th century) returned to China. (Both paintings are kept in the Ancient Palace Museum, Peking.)
8. The fact that an author describes in vivid terms the pictorial style of a given artist never implies that he actually saw any works by that artist; sometimes, in another passage of the same text, he may even explicitly acknowledge that he never had such an opportunity.
9. For example, Mi Fu (1051-1107) who was one of the most learned connoisseurs of his time, with privileged access to the best collections, confessed that, in his entire life, he only saw *two* authentic paintings by Li Cheng, the greatest and most influential landscape painter of the 10th century (Li Cheng died in 967, less than a century before Mi Fu's birth). Mi Fu, *Hua shi*, in *Meishu congkan* (Taipei 1956), vol.I, p. 88. See also N. Vandier-Nicolas, *Le Houa-che de Mi Fou* (Presses universitaires de France, Paris 1964), pp. 32-33. Similar evidence can be found in abundance, it only remains to be systematically compiled.
10. Besides being an important business, art forgery also fulfilled very significant artistic and socio-cultural functions. Every scholarly family *had* to possess a collection of paintings and calligraphy; needless to say, not every scholarly family had the financial means to acquire ancient works of art, the supply of which was necessarily limited. Hence, forgers provided "imaginary" collections, that conformed to stylistic stereotypes, and simultaneously popularized those stereotypes. In this respect, forgeries played a role not entirely dissimilar to the one which is



taken now by cheap, popular prints and reproductions. This situation largely persists till today: I have seen eminent Chinese intellectuals living in narrow circumstances, who derived immense enjoyment and spiritual solace from an assortment of ludicrous fakes. (One is reminded of Balzac's notorious collections of phony Titians and ridiculous Raphaels - these bizarre *croûtes* acted as a powerful stimulant on his visionary imagination).

Finally, it should also be observed that Chinese forgeries could achieve very high standards of aesthetic and technical quality. In every period, including our own time, some of the greatest artists had no qualms about indulging in this activity.

11. Jorge Luis Borges, "Funes the Memorious", *Labyrinth* (Penguin, Harmondsworth, 1981), pp. 87-95.
12. On this subject see also Wang Gungwu, "Loving the Ancient in China", in I. McBryde (ed.), *Who Owns the Past?* (Oxford University Press, Melbourne, 1985).
13. Xun Zi's journey to the totalitarian state of Qin as its power was on the rise, calls irresistibly to mind the political pilgrimages which Western intellectuals undertook in the 1930s to the Soviet Union of Stalin. Xun Zi's account of his visit (*Xun Zi* XVI: "Qiang guo") could in a way be summarized by Lincoln Steffens' notorious utterance: "I have seen the future and it works."
14. I am referring here to a famous passage of the *Zuo zhuan* (24th year of Duke Xiang) which relates a dialogue that took place between Shusun Bao and Fan Xuanzi. Fan asked: "What is immortality? Could it be the continuous transmission of certain titles within a same family?" and he invoked the example of his own ancestors who had occupied high positions since the Xia dynasty. "No", replies Shusun, "that is merely a case of hereditary privilege, which can be found everywhere and merely rests upon a continuity of the family clan. The true immortality consists in establishing virtue, in establishing deeds and in establishing words [that can continue to live in posterity], whereas the mere preservation of the greatest dignity cannot be called freedom from decay." The philosophical interpretation which I present here comes from Qian Mu, *Zhongguo lishi jingshen* (Guomin chubanshe, Taipei, 1954), pp. 94-95.



15. The Ancestors cult - which was the cornerstone of Chinese culture and society - should be studied in this connection.
16. On this subject, I am drawing heavily from L. Ledderose's masterful study, *Mi Fu and the Classical Tradition of Chinese Calligraphy* (Princeton University Press, 1979).
17. It was suspected that the "Orchid Pavilion" was in the hands of a monk called Biancai, but the monk denied possessing it. Emperor Taizong then dispatched the censor Xiao Yi, disguised as an itinerant scholar, to visit Biancai. Xiao Yi gained the confidence of the monk and showed him various autographs of Wang Xizhi from the imperial collection, which he had brought along to be used as bait. Excited by this sight, Biancai told his visitor that he could show him even better stuff - and he picked from among the rafters of the roof where it was hidden, the original scroll of the "Orchid Pavilion". In front of this masterpiece, Xiao Yi pretended to be unmoved and even questioned its authenticity. Biancai, suffocating with indignation, stormed out of his hut. Xiao Yi grabbed the calligraphy, put on his court attire, and when Biancai returned, the visitor informed the monk that, from now on, the "Orchid Pavilion" would belong to the imperial collection. Struck with horror and grief, Biancai fainted. When he recovered, it was found that he could not swallow anymore - the emotional shock having resulted in a constriction of his gullet. Unable to absorb any solid food, he died a few months later. This arch-famous anecdote has provided the subject of many paintings.
18. L. Ledderose, *op.cit.*, p. 20.
19. This is the positive aspect of the phenomenon - but it also has a negative side. Modern Chinese intellectuals, progressives and revolutionaries have increasingly felt strangled by the seeming invincibility and deadly pervasiveness of tradition. The outstanding exponent of the struggle to get rid of the past was of course Lu Xun, who analysed with unique clear-sightedness the desperate nature of the modernizers' predicament: they can never pin the enemy down, for the enemy is a formless, invisible ghost, an indestructible shadow.



20. Liu Shilong, "Wuyou yuan ji", in *Wan Ming bai jia xiao pin*, pp. 104-107. This delightful (and very Borgesian !) little essay was brought to my attention some years ago in a seminar given at the ANU by Dr Tu Lien-che.
21. Holmes Welch, "The Chinese Art of Make-Believe", *Encounter*, May, 1968.

### Postscript

As this essay is going to the printers, I have obtained a remarkable article by F.W. Mote, "A Millenium of Chinese Urban History: Form, Time and Space Concepts in Soochow", kindly sent to me by Professor John Rosenfield from Harvard University. (The photocopy carried no date, but it was made from *Rice University Studies*, and the article itself is based on a lecture delivered by Professor Mote at Rice University in October 1972).

Reading some of the conclusions which Professor Mote drew fifteen years ago from a case study in Chinese urban history, one will realize that the ideas which I ventured here are both less original and more sound than might have first appeared!

Having quoted a Western writer who observed at the beginning of the 20th century that there were no ancient ruins in Suzhou, Mote comments: "His observation is largely correct. Is Soochow then a city of ancient monuments, or a city in which the awareness of antiquity comes from something else? In our tradition we tend to equate the antique presence with authentically ancient physical objects. China has no ruins comparable to the Roman Forum, or even to Angkor Wat, which is a thousand years younger. It has no ancient buildings kept continually in use such as Rome's Pantheon and Istanbul's Hagia Sophia. It does not have those, *not* because of incapacity to build with 'hewn stone, as in Athens and Rome' as du Bose suggests. It does not have those because of differences in attitude - a different attitude toward the way of making the monumental achievement, and a different attitude toward the ways of achieving the enduring monument." Mote then illustrates his point by sketching the history of Suzhou's Great Pagoda - with a history going back to the 3rd century A.D., it was modified, destroyed and rebuilt many times during the ages, ending up as a 20th century construction: "This history is typical of China's ancient monuments. No building with such a pedigree would count for much as an authentic antiquity even in the United States, much less in Rome. It certainly would not count for much among Ruskin's *Stones of Venice*."



Mote concludes: "The point most emphatically is not that China was *not* obsessed with its past. It studied its past, and drew upon it, using it to design and to maintain its present as has no other civilization. But its ancient cities such as Soochow were "time free" as purely physical objects. They were repositories of the past in a very special way - they embodied or suggested associations whose value lay elsewhere. *The past was a past of words not of stones.*\* China kept the largest and longest-enduring of all mankind's documentations of the past. It constantly scrutinized that past as recorded in words, and caused it to function in the life of its present. But it built no Acropolis, it preserved no Roman Forum, and not because it lacked the materials or the techniques. Its enduring structures of cut stone in antiquity were most characteristically burial vaults secreted underground, and, in the later imperial era, were bridges. Those vaults and bridges were called upon to serve a different level of utility; enduring public monuments to man's achievements did not call forth those means.

*"Chinese civilization did not lodge its history in buildings .\** Even its most grandiose palace and city complexes stressed grand layout, the employment of space, and not buildings, which were added as a relatively impermanent superstructure. Chinese civilization seems not to have regarded its history as violated or abused when the historic monuments collapsed or burned, as long as those could be replaced or restored, and their functions regained. *In short we can say that the real past of Soochow is a past of the mind,\** its imperishable elements are moments of human experience. *The only truly enduring embodiments of the eternal human moments are the literary ones."*\*

This final point is then illustrated by the concrete example of Soochow's Maple Bridge which became a poetical topic in literary history: "In all that psycho-historical material associated with the Maple Bridge, *the bridge as an object is of little importance* \* .... No single poem refers to its physical presence. The bridge as idea was an item in the consciousness of all Chinese .... yet, its reality to them was not the stones forming its span so much as the imperishable associations with it; *those eternal moments realized in words.*\* The physical object is entirely secondary. Anyone planning to achieve immortality in the minds of his fellow men might well give a lower priority to building some great stone monument than to cultivating his human capacities so that he might express himself imperishably in words, or at least be alluded to in some enduring line by a poet or essayist of immortal achievement."

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\* My emphasis.



**THE GEORGE ERNEST MORRISON  
LECTURE IN ETHNOLOGY**

The George Ernest Morrison Lecture was founded by Chinese residents in Australia and others in honour of the late Dr G.E. Morrison, a native of Geelong, Victoria, Australia.

The objects of the foundation of the lectureship were to honour for all time the memory of a great Australian who rendered valuable services to China, and to improve cultural relations between China and Australia. The foundation of the lectureship had the official support of the Chinese Consulate-General and was due in particular to the efforts of Mr William Liu, merchant, of Sydney; Mr William Ah Ket, barrister, of Melbourne; Mr F.J. Quinlan and Sir Colin MacKenzie, of Canberra. From the time of its inception until 1948 the lecture was associated with the Australian Institute of Anatomy, but in the latter year the responsibility for the management of the lectureship was taken over by the Australian National University, and the lectures delivered since that date have been given under the auspices of the University.

*The following lectures have been delivered:*

- Inaugural: W.P. Chen, *The Objects of the Foundation of the Lectureship and a review of Dr Morrison's Life in China*. 10 May 1932.
- Second: W.Ah Ket, *Eastern Thought, with More Particular Reference to Confucius*. 3 May 1933.
- Third: J.S. MacDonald, *The History and Development of Chinese Art*. 3 May 1934.
- Fourth: W.P. Chen, *The New Culture Movement in China*. 10 May 1935.
- Fifth: Wu Lien-teh, *Reminiscences of George E. Morrison; and Chinese Abroad*. 2 September 1936.\*
- Sixth: Chun-jien Pai, *China Today: With Special Reference to Higher Education*. 4 May 1937.
- Seventh: A.F. Barker, *The Impact of Western Industrialism on China*. 17 May 1939.
- Eighth: S.H. Roberts, *The Gifts of the Old China to the New*. 5 June 1939.
- Ninth: Howard Mowll, *West China as Seen Through the Eyes of the Westerner*. 29 May 1949.
- Tenth: W.G. Goddard, *The Ming Shen. A study in Chinese Democracy*. 5 June 1941.
- Eleventh: D.B. Copland, *The Chinese Social Structure*. 27 September 1948.\*



- Twelfth: J.K. Rideout, *Politics in Medieval China*. 28 October 1949.
- Thirteenth: C.P. FitzGerald, *The Revolutionary Tradition in China*.  
19 March 1951.
- Fourteenth: H.V. Evatt, *Some Aspects of Morrison's Life and Work*.  
4 December 1952.
- Fifteenth: Lord Lindsay of Birker, *China and the West*. 20 October  
1953.
- Sixteenth: M. Titiev, *Chinese Elements in Japanese Culture*. 27 July  
1954.
- Seventeenth: H. Bielenstein, *Emperor Kuang-Wu (A.D. 25-27) and the  
Northern Barbarians*. 2 November 1955.\*
- Eighteenth: Leonard B. Cox, *The Buddhist Temples of Yun-Kang and  
Lung-Men*. 17 October 1956.\*
- Nineteenth: Otto P.N. Berkelbach van der Sprenkel, *The Chinese Civil  
Service*. 4 November 1957.
- Twentieth: A.R. Davies, *The Narrow Lane: Some Observations on the  
Recluse in Traditional Chinese Society*. 19 November 1958.
- Twenty-first: C.N. Spinks, *The Khmer Temple of Prah Vihar*.  
6 October 1959.\*
- Twenty-second: Chen Chih-mai, *Chinese Landscape Painting: The  
Golden Age*. 5 October 1960.\*
- Twenty-third: L.Carrington Goodrich, *China's Contacts with Other Parts  
of Asia in Ancient Times*. 1 August 1961.\*
- Twenty-fourth: N.G.D. Malmqvist, *Problems and Methods in Chinese  
Linguistics*. 22 November 1962.\*
- Twenty-fifth: H.F. Simon, *Some Motivations of Chinese Foreign  
Policy*. 3 October 1963.
- Twenty-sixth: Wang Ling, *Calendar, Cannon and Clock in the Cultural  
Relations between Europe and China*. 18 November 1964.
- Twenty-seventh: A.M. Halpern, *Chinese Foreign Policy - Success or  
Failure?* 9 August 1966.\*
- Twenty-eighth: J.W. de Jong, *Buddha's Word in China*. 18 October  
1967.\*
- Twenty-ninth: J.D. Frodsham, *New Perspectives in Chinese Literature*.  
23 July 1968.\*
- Thirtieth: E.A. Huck, *The Assimilation of the Chinese in Australia*.  
6 November 1969.\*
- Thirty-first: K.A. Wittfogel, *Agriculture: A Key to the Understanding of  
Chinese Society, Past and Present*. 6 April 1970.\*
- Thirty-second: I. de Rachewiltz, *Prester John and Europe's Discovery of  
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- Thirty-third: Eugene Kamenka, *Marx, Marxism and China*. 6 September  
1972.



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- Thirty-fourth: Liu Ts'un-yan, *On the Art of Ruling a Big Country: Views of Three Chinese Emperors*. 13 November 1973.\*  
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 Forty-second: T'ien Ju-K'ang, *Moslem Rebellion in China: A Yunnan Controversy*, 17 June 1981.\*  
 Forty-third: Alan Thorne, *China and Australia: Forty Thousand Years of Contact*, 4 August 1982.  
 Forty-fourth: Chan Hok-lam, *Control of Publishing in China, Past and Present*, 24 August 1983.\*  
 Forty-fifth: J.S. Gregory, *The Chinese and Their Revolutions*. 8 August 1984.\*  
 Forty-sixth: Allen S. Whiting, *China and the World: Independence v Dependence*. 31 July 1985.\*  
 Forty-seventh: Pierre Ryckmans, *The Chinese Attitude Towards the Past*. 16 July 1986.\*

\* Available from Contemporary China Centre, Research School of Pacific Studies.

