

An enthusiastic and erudite group of specialists in Chinese literature are brought together in this video to discuss the achievement of Chinese poetry as it reaches its pinnacle in the works of Wang Wei (699–761), Li Bo (701–762), and Du Fu (721–770) in the Tang dynasty (618–907). Dr. Robert Oxnam, President Emeritus of the Asia Society, Dr. Stephen Owen from Harvard University, and Drs. David D. W. Wang, Marsha Wagner, and Paul Rouzer from Columbia University present their views in separate interviews which are then linked together. If limited to these discussions, the video would be informative, but perhaps somewhat dull. There are special features that add spice to the video. When poems are chanted, beginning in Mandarin Chinese and then fading into English, Chinese paintings fill the screen and serve as backdrop. Traditional Chinese music also brings the poems to life.

There are positive and negative features of the editing style. It links the discussions of the various speakers so that they appear to be responding to and elaborating upon one another's comments. The cutting in the video is often choppy. Sometimes a speaker is given one short line or phrase and then abruptly cut off.

The social, political and philosophical context in the Tang dynasty which gave impetus to the writing of poetry is explained in the beginning of the video. In order to pass the Civil Service Examination, one had to be proficient in poetry composition. A good portion of the work, accomplished with

# The Confucian Tradition in Literature

PART THREE

## *Poetry of the Tang and Later Dynasties*

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the express purpose of achieving social mobility, left much to be desired. All of the scholars agree that poetry writing permeated every facet of the educated person's life. The video stressed that the ability to compose poetry was so universal, there was no special role for "the poet." From the description of the Tang setting, students are sure to see how great poetic masterpieces are not simply the result of individual genius but emerge out of particular social and political circumstances.

The video introduces the three main Chinese religious traditions—Confucianism, Buddhism and Daoism—and shows how their influence intermingled in the thought of the great poets, each of whom had a special affinity for one of the religions. The philosophical propensities of the poets illustrate how religion in China was not so much belief in a dogma as it was a personal preference or style.

Wang Wei, the first of the three great Tang poets presen-

ted in the video, was both a recluse intent on self-cultivation and a participant at the imperial court. His poetic composition took the "regulated verse," four-couplet form, to new heights. The video really shines in its close analysis of the poems. An English translation of the poem is displayed on the screen with each couplet highlighted as its role in the poem is explained. For example, in Wang Wei's poem, "Fields and Gardens by the River Qi" the first couplet sets the scene; where, when and in what season does the action take place? The parts of speech in lines three and four are parallel, and the juxtaposition of the words in the two lines resonates in meaning. The final couplet sums up the emotional response of the poet. This part of the video would be useful in a comparative literature course where the "regulated verse" form could be compared to the sonnet or other forms of poetry.

Students will be intrigued to learn about the traditional complementary relationship of

the arts of poetry and painting in China. Wang Wei set the precedent of the poet-painter. Professors Oxnam and Owen discuss Wang's Buddhist perception of the world as an illusion whose presence fades in and out like the mountains showing through the mists and clouds. There is an omission here; one wonders why copies of Wang Wei's own paintings, instead of the work of later painters, were not used to complement the discussion of his poetry. In fact, the curious viewer with interest in Chinese painting might long to know the names and dates of the artists whose paintings are shown throughout the video, but never identified.

The fact that the legacy of the poet-painters such as Wang Wei still lives on is clearly illustrated by Dr. David Wang, who discusses his early experience of mastering both art forms. Wang says: "When you compose a poem, you want to eventually visualize the poem. When you paint, you paint in suggestion of some poetic images." The scene comes to a climax when the camera rests on a lovely landscape scroll inscribed with a poem, hanging beside the speaker who modestly claims it as his own work.

The video then turns to the next great poet of the Tang, Li Bo, who would create a unique persona for himself as an eccentric and free character, perhaps in response to being a "nobody" in the hierarchical aristocratic society of his day. At court he served as a kind of jester entertaining everyone with his antics while showing disdain for all social conventions. We are told that "he

## FILM REVIEWS

wrote poems in a Daoist trance as quick as a flash, even in the presence of the emperor." One of Li Bo's well-known poems, "Drinking Alone Under the Moon," is analyzed in depth in the video. Not only did Li Bo break the convention that one should not drink alone, but he amusingly created his own companions, the moon and his shadow, to keep himself company.

Although the title suggests that the video is about Confucianism, the first two poets were influenced more by Buddhism and Daoism. The title fits best with the third poet, Du Fu, who was serious about his role as statesman and servant to the imperial dynasty. At the time of the An Lu Shan Rebellion, Du Fu fled the capital with the emperor and his court. When he returned, he was captured by the rebels and held as a prisoner in Chang-an. This was the setting for one of his most memorable poems,

"Views in Springtime." The scholars all seem to agree that Du Fu is the greatest of the Chinese poets. He made good use of ambiguity and creatively altered the parts of speech in the language of his poetry. But it is the complexity and depth of his personality that endears him to readers across the ages.

Another poetic form, the lyrics to songs, emerges in the Song dynasty (960–1278). There were women masters of this form, but their works are lost except for the poetry of Li Qingzhao (1084–1151) who was well known when still in her teens. In keeping with the purpose in the popular songs to capture the mood of the moment, the poet in her work, "Southern Song" describes how the lotus leaf appliqué on her old autumn dress is flecking off, suggesting the disintegration of the real lotus plants in the autumn of the year. Dr. Owen demystifies the songs and makes them accessible to

students when he says they were meant to be sung to popular melodies, just like Emily Dickenson's poems can be sung to "The Yellow Rose of Texas."

An interesting discussion of the relationship of poets to their audience brings the video to its conclusion. The poets, we are told, wrote for appreciative kindred spirits across time. They sought not a collective but rather an individual reader, and in the same vein, Chinese readers also see poets as old friends. The engagement of Chinese poetry from the perspective of both the viewer and the creator is sociable.

The video takes us right into the present. We are told that traditional forms are still being written, but most contemporary poets write in both the old and in the newer free verse forms in order to link themselves with poets in the wider world. Despite the changes, many features of Chi-

nese intellectual life and poetry have remained the same. Chinese writers still use their poetry to speak out on social, political and moral issues just as they did in the Tang and Song dynasties.

Although it has imperfections, the video offers profound insights into some central features of Chinese culture. The video is packed full of information. Provided that the students have some background in the three main philosophical traditions and the Chinese bureaucratic system, it will stimulate discussion in high school and undergraduate courses in history, religion, philosophy and the arts. ■

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