

FILM REVIEWS

Chinese Poetry is an accessible and enjoyable overview of the development of poetry under Confucian influence, following a chronological outline. Making sure students viewed the first film on the Confucian Tradition would be smart, because this film, part II, gives little background or information about Confucianism, focusing instead on tracing Confucian principles through eight centuries of Chinese poetry. I shared the film with my first semester Freshman Humanities survey class to elicit their responses, and many of them mentioned it left them wanting more context, more information in particular about Chinese history and the *Book of Songs*.

The film briefly summarizes Shang and Zhou poetry, mentioning the importance of ritual in this early poetry, then discusses five ideas influencing the development of Chinese poetry and the selection of the *Book of Songs*. First, poetry is the opportunity for expression of deep emotion; many of these poems are about courtship and marriage. Secondly, the poet comments indirectly on historical events, reflecting on the poem's context. Third, poetry provides clues to the poet's character and personality, as well as (fourth) his ethical concepts and moral fiber; and, fifth, poetry's contributions live on beyond the poet's death. We then have examples of poetry reflecting these Confucian traits, both from the *Book of Songs* and from later Han poetry.

The introduction of each poem begins with the recita-

tion of the opening lines in Chinese. This I found refreshing. It was a wonderful opportunity for my class to hear the sounds and meter of Chinese poetry, an opportunity rare for my rural community college students. Almost every student commented on how much he or she enjoyed hearing the poetry in Chinese. Listening to the opening lines in Chinese, I kept wishing that we could hear the entire poem; those beginning lines whetted my appetite for more—as well as my students' desire to hear more in Chinese!

The selection of the poems used in the film is careful and varied, covering many topics; all these poems are vivid and accessible, with strong central imagery that reached across the centuries, appealing to my students. One student commented on Chinese being a language that seems to express emotions strongly and clearly; another felt "the Confucian lyrics expressed their everyday prob-

lems clearly, coming right out and saying just what they thought!" Wang Can's early third-century poem, "A Song of Seven Sorrows," about abandoning Chang-an and fleeing south without family or friends, seeing the weak starving and abandoned all along the road, sorrowing over their fate, yet in turn neglecting his own Confucian duties, again abandoning the abandoned, recreated and expressed his helplessness and grief beautifully over the centuries to my students, who loved it. Tao Qian's poem "I Picked Chrysanthemums" effectively illustrates the paradox of society—that a man can live in a state of seclusion yet continue to participate in society. It also shows the paradox of poetry: "There is some real meaning in this, but when I try to grasp it, I forget the words."

Thoughtful and effective as the selection of poetry is, its beauty would be enhanced by more art and music. The accompanying art was well

chosen, but limited in amount and extent. The discussion of poetry of retreat, using Tao Qian's "I Picked Chrysanthemums" and "Returning to Dwell in Gardens and Fields," pointed out the power of retreat to nature for second and third-century Chinese intellectuals. Tao Qian himself abandoned public service and retreated to his family's small farm. His line, "Caged bird yearns for its former woods," effectively reinforced the message. However, there is much splendid art illustrating this theme from Daoist and Neo-Confucian masters, illustrating how Confucian sensibilities became combined with a Daoist search for unity with nature. More art, and more variation in background music would have been welcome.

One of my students commented that "the background music was stuffy and I almost fell asleep." Another commented that the editing was somewhat slow and ponderous; the transitions could have been more exciting. He wanted more use of art. However, the film was enjoyable and informative, but best of all, it centered on and did justice to the poetry, communicating it effectively even to students with little background in literature and less in Chinese culture. ■

MARY KAREN SOLOMON is an Associate Professor of Humanities at Colorado Northwestern Community College in Craig, Co. She is interested in Asian religions, particularly Daoism in China, and Zoroastrianism and Islamic Sufism in Persia.

The Confucian Tradition in Literature

PART TWO

Chinese Poetry: Origins of a Literary Tradition

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