

The irretrievability of the past: nostalgia in Chinese literature from Tang—Song poetry to Ming—Qing *san-wen*

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Abstract Nostalgia is an overwhelming trope in Chinese literature. Finding paradigmatic expression in Tang—Song poetry, nostalgia was to become a standard motif in imperial Chinese literature. This article argues that the dominance of the nostalgic motif in Chinese literature is related to the Chinese philosophical conception of time. Unlike the Western tradition which treats time as an inferior to eternal being, the Chinese tradition understands the reality of experience within becoming itself. The remembrance of time’s passing thus becomes a kind of metaphysical experience, to remember the past is to remember that humans are indelibly part of an eternal cycle of change. The self in memory, concomitantly, contra critics who would read autobiography into the “dream reminiscence” (梦忆) genre of late imperial Chinese literature, is thus evoked not as a monument to the self, but to show its ultimate passing. The nostalgic construction of an idealised moment in one’s past, pregnant with the tragic presumption of a happiness never realised in actuality, is paralleled by the literary topos of paradise. Structurally similar to the operation of nostalgia, the encounter with paradise in folklores such as 《刘晨阮肇入天台》 and literati essays such as 《桃花源记》, was a halcyon moment in the protagonist’s life which cannot be regained. The literary *topos* of paradise in the Chinese in contrast to the *pastoral* of the Western tradition, thus exists within time. Nostalgia as does paradise, points toward the metaphysical promise of happiness lost in an irretrievable past.

Keywords Time · Nostalgia · Poetry · Memory · Philosophy · Subjectivity

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Introduction

There is a particular quality to nostalgia in Classical Chinese literature which finds no parallel in Western literature. In *The Art of Chinese Poetry*, James Liu wrote that,

No one who has read any amount of Chinese poetry, even in translation, can fail to notice the abundance of poems on nostalgia. Chinese poets seem to be perpetually bewailing their exile and longing to return home. This again may seem sentimental to Western readers, but one should remember the vastness of China, the difficulties of communication that existed, the sharp contrast between highly cultured life in the main cities and the harsh conditions in the remoter regions of the country [...] It is not surprising, therefore, that nostalgia should have become a constant, and hence conventional, theme in Chinese poetry.¹

Whilst the socio-geographical factors are an undeniable influence on the character of poetries, there is a philosophical explanation for Chinese literati's obsession with memory which has not been remarked upon by scholars of Chinese literature. The pervasiveness of nostalgia and the particular way it is evoked has much to do with the respective status that *time* has within the Western Chinese traditions. This experience of nostalgia is almost a *metaphysical* experience, and is related to Chinese culture's understanding and expression of time. Whilst *meta*-physics in the Western understanding is that which transcends physics, metaphysics in the Chinese tradition arguably lies within the process of transformation itself.

In the Chinese tradition, *change* is *becoming*, as such the act of remembering is thus to re-situate oneself within the Heraclitean stream of *becoming*, to recall the process of becoming itself. This is why recalling the past or dwelling on the process of change becomes an almost metaphysical experience for the literati who were compelled to nostalgia, because recalling the pivots of change in their lives is to evoke the process of becoming.

In "Meditation on Metaphysics" from *Negative Dialectics*, Adorno exemplifies metaphysical experience through childhood happiness. For Adorno, childhood happiness relates to the unique particularity of things, such that "happiness, the only thing in metaphysical experience that is more than impotent craving [*Verlangen*], grants the interior of things as being at the same time something which is removed from them".² The child's fantasy of the special place, such as Proust's reflections on childhood fantasies about place names, is not realised by reaching the place, but such fantasies make sense by the way in which they offer a renewable promise of something beyond the mundane. Metaphysical experience is the promise that children see in things, which may not be fulfilled, but which need not disappear when the fulfilment does not occur. The meaning that the child gains is not a definitive grasping of sense and conceptual resolution of a dilemma; it is a promise of something beyond the given.³

¹ Liu (1962, p. 55).

² Bowie (2013, p. 186).

³ Bowie (2013, p. 186).

I think that Adorno's characterization of metaphysical experience describes very well the nostalgic trope in Chinese literature. The fantasy of a promise which cannot find fulfillment, is retrospectively constructed in the Chinese motif of nostalgia. Poets create an idealized moment in the past, pregnant with promise and potential of enduring happiness, only to see it thwarted by the passage of time.

As this point, it is interesting to recall that Stephen Owen's remarks in *Remembrances: The Experience of the Past in Classical Chinese Literature* that whereas the master-figure in Western discourse on literature is that of Truth wearing a veil, in Chinese literature, this is secondary to another mode of knowing, "a gap of time, effacement, and memory. The master figure here is synecdoche, the part that leads to the whole, some enduring fragment from which we try to reconstruct the lost totality."⁴ The metaphysical experience in the Western tradition may be *Truth*, and the effort of literature is the veil which simultaneously covers and uncovers it, in the sense that language is the beginning of an enquiry which will always fall short. The metaphysical experience in Chinese literature however is nostalgia, the promise of a moment in the past which is already gone.

Whilst I enjoy Owen's insight into the master motifs in Western and Chinese literature, I would argue that it isn't the promise of *fullness*, "the part that leads to the whole, some enduring fragment from which we try to reconstruct the lost totality," which compelled literati to nostalgia, or indeed why these nostalgic literature in the Chinese canon are so compelling, and became so compelling as a genre. I would argue instead, that the evocation of nostalgia in classical Chinese literature operates much like Adorno's conception of metaphysical experience. Nostalgia is after all the knowledge that one can never again be at a particular place of a particular time. The remembrance of the past in Classical Chinese nostalgic literature is *in itself* the metaphysical experience. That is to say, contra Owen, that the poems are not attempts at the reconstruction of a "lost totality," it is the impossibility of fulfillment, the realization of time itself which is the metaphysical experience.

Time in Western and Chinese philosophy

In the history of Western philosophy, time has been identified with change and *becoming* (*phusis*), and stands as a contrasting inferior to the realm of *being*. We can see this division of the world of becoming from the world of being as early on as the philosophies of the Pre-Socratics. According to Nietzsche, Anaximander (c. 610–c. 546 BC) introduced the idea that all that becomes is not true, "Anaximander introduced for the first time the dichotomy between a world of Being and a world of Becoming (Not-Being)."⁵ As soon as something has attributes or is predicable by a certain quality, it is in the process of becoming and no longer partakes of *Being*. It is for this reason that Aristotle's analysis of time is in his *Physics* as opposed to his *Metaphysics*. The connection between truth and timelessness is continued in

⁴ Owen (1986, p. 2).

⁵ Nietzsche (2001, p. 81).

Christian theology, where in Book I of St Augustine's *Confessions*, true presence is the preserve of the trans-temporal God, "For you [God] are infinite and never change [...] and yet our 'today' does come to an end in you, because time, as well as everything else, exists in you." In the Early Modern period, rationalist philosophers like Spinoza saw time as an illusion resulting from our incomplete understandings of God. The rise to prominence of Newtonian physics transformed this theological notion of eternity to a scientific one; under the scientific worldview, it is the physical laws of nature which endure in the face of seeming, phenomenal change.

Inasmuch as the Chinese tradition does not have a comparable notion of *being*, all is understood as part of *becoming*. In the *Yijing*, one of the earliest philosophical texts, the hexagrams are used to describe the phenomenal manifold in terms of its coordinates for change. Each line of the hexagram is in dynamic inter-relation with the next, illustrating the next phase of becoming. The reality of the world in the *Yijing* is not trans-temporal rather, it is to be found in an accurate description of this very process of change. The Daoist tradition would later name this accurate description of the process of change, the *Dao*. As François Jullien writes in his *Du «temps»: Éléments d'une philosophie du vivre*,

D'une façon générale, si la Chine n'a pas appréhendé la nature en termes de mouvement [...] mais de *facteurs* en corrélation, se constituant en pôles [...] Pensant le cours ininterrompu de ces phases, la Chine était conduite à penser, non le «temps», mais le *procès*.⁶

For Jullien, the Chinese tradition had never conceived of time as an abstract entity which envelopes, or is the basis of, change; nor did it see time and eternity as dualisms, the former being a "chute" of the latter.⁷ The linear *arrow* of time, which marks the Western concept of time⁸ is replaced by the notion of process. Change and process occur, irreducible to a quantifiable abstraction. Time is thus more real in the Chinese tradition for two related reasons: it is not merely a lesser form of eternity, it is *process* and so unlike the Western concept of time as an empty container, it is formed from within and embedded in our actions. In the first lines of the *Great Commentary* to the *Yijing*, we find the following cosmogony:

天尊地卑，乾坤定矣。卑高以陈，贵贱位矣。动静有常，刚柔断矣。方以类聚，物以群分，吉凶生矣。在天成象，在地成形，变化见矣。
是故刚柔相摩，八卦相荡，鼓之以雷霆，润之以风雨；日月运行，一寒一暑。

The points of correlation are the yielding and unyielding elements, whose interaction with each other cause the manifold things to find their ordering and thereby causing the onset of day and night, summer and winter. It is the correlation of the initial yielding and unyielding elements which sets off the process of ordering, and time becomes a manifestation of the ordered changes which arise as a result. Time is thus ever-present because change itself is ever-present, and change, as demonstrated by the *Yijing* is tantamount to creation and life itself. Change and

⁶ Jullien (2001, pp. 26–27).

⁷ Jullien (2001, p. 31).

⁸ Jullien (2001, p. 24).

transformation (变化) allow for things to be, tout court. As such, time cannot be aporetic in the same way as it is in the Western tradition:

Acohérente en ce qui la consitue, la notion de temps est aporétique quant à l'existence même de ce qu'elle est censée désigner [...] l'énigme s'est têt figée: le passé n'est plus et le futur n'est pas encore; or le temps ne se composant que de ces deux parties, comment pourrait-il lui-même exister? [...] si le passé n'est plus et le futur n'est pas encore, le présent n'«est» pas non plus, puisque, pour être du temps, et non point se confondre avec l'éternel, il doit «rejoindre» aussitôt le passé - et ne peut donc «être» qu'en «cessant d'être» [...] ⁹

The past is not *real* because the Western tradition conflates the notion of *being* or *existence* with endurance. The paradox of time that Jullien speaks of here, falls under the Anaximandrian paradigm where only being, and not becoming is true. If only the present is true, in the sense that it is neither past nor future, but the present is perpetually falling into past-ness then, time itself is not *true*, in the sense that it doesn't endure.

Time in Chinese literature

It may now be clearer why, as Stephen Owen remarks, whereas the master-figure in Western discourse on literature is that of Truth wearing a veil, in Chinese literature, this is secondary to another mode of knowing, “a gap of time, effacement, and memory.” For unlike the Western philosophical tradition, the Chinese tradition does not understand “truth” or *being* as ontologically separated from the sensuous, phenomenal world. This, I take it, is what Owen means when he writes that in Chinese literature, there is “another mode of knowing.” This kind of knowing in the Chinese literary tradition is fully situated within time itself. Furthermore, it is for this reason that nostalgic literature is such a significant genre in the Chinese literary tradition: time is that which separates the present self from an irretrievable past, and because the Chinese tradition treats time as fully real in a way that the Western tradition does not, time cannot be overcome. It is due to the reality of time, its uncompromised status, which renders our separation from the past so tragic. This sense of the tragedy of time finds no counterpart in the Western canon, for time is never conceived as really real, in comparison with the spatial infinity and temporal endurance of God.

Time and selfhood: Proust's autobiography

This particular relationship with time finds its manifestation in the literatures of the Western and Chinese canons. If one looks upon the most famous piece of memory-making in the Western canon (mentioned in the above by Adorno), Proust's *In*

⁹ Jullien (2001, p. 19).

Search of Lost Time, one discovers that the act of remembering is in the service of conquering time itself:

[...] memory, by bringing the past into the present without making any changes to it, just as it was at the moment when it was the present, *suppresses* precisely this great dimension of Time through which a life is given reality.¹⁰

It is somewhat ironic that the purpose of Proust's memory-making, and so his entering into times past, is to in fact, to overcome time. Proust's last volume, *Le Temps Retrouvé* is thus aptly titled. The purpose of Proust's enterprise is to reconstruct the reality of ourselves through involuntary memory's ability to overcome time. Inextricable from Proust's memorialising is selfhood: the persistence of the self through time, as means of ensuring reality of the self. To use Owen's paradigm, the veil is our own buried histories which, reconstructed through autobiography offers the *truth* of who we are.

By involuntary memory "Proust understands something like those 'unconscious remembrances' which, randomly triggered by some sensation, some spoken word or some encounter, arise from the very depths of our being [...]"¹¹ The effect of involuntary memory is a kind of flattening, to bring, regardless of temporal sequence, all events to the same dimension, and thus for the self to perceive in a single instant the causal relationships that formed the present self. The ability of memory to ensure a kind of eternal stronghold of the self is exemplified by the famous moment when Marcel tasted the madeleine:

"Just as at the moment when I tasted the madeleine, all uneasiness about the future and all intellectual doubt were gone."¹²

The Proustian enterprise is to achieve security in the self's sense of itself through memory's ability to conquer time. Remembering is a kind of epiphany, a kind of soteriological salvation which ensures the essence and unity of the self against the vagaries of time as well as intellectual uncertainty. In this regard, Proust's aesthetic is the same of the painter Elstir, whom Marcel meets in *À l'ombre des jeunes filles en fleurs*, and is very much the mouthpiece of Proust's aesthetic philosophy. As Christopher Prendergast has written,

[...] Elstir as analogue for Proust's own writing practice understood as a frontier-abolishing enterprise, bringing things together across space and time in a different configuration.¹³

For Elstir, the work of the painter is, like the work of memory, to draw out the essence of reality, and in *In Search of*, the great interest in objects, be they the Madeleine, the three trees in the chapter "Place-names: The Place", or the uneven paving stones in *Time Regained*, lies in these objects' ability to trigger internal processes of the mind: involuntary memory. When Marcel encounters other figures,

¹⁰ Proust (2002, p. 341).

¹¹ de Beistegui (2013, p. 38).

¹² Proust (2002, p. 175).

¹³ Prendergast (2000, p. 153).

Gilbert in the park, the fisher-girls on the way to Balbec; there is an immediate tension, or desire to impress himself on them, or to capture their essence.

In Proust's works, as in Modern European notions of memory in general, memory is inextricable from selfhood. From Henri Bergson, Walter Benjamin to Sigmund Freud and Pierre Nora, the palimpsest of our past is the key that unlocks our identities today.

Un-Proustian Chinese memories

There is been a tendency in scholarship on memory and nostalgia in pre-modern Chinese literature to interpret memory-making or nostalgia in terms of autobiography or the affirmation of the self. This approach is very much similar to Owen's notion that through memory, the author reconstructs a lost totality, as it assumes that the temporal dimension *can* be overcome, that the lost totality *can* be reconstructed. In this sense, it is also very similar to the Proustian enterprise described above. In her article, "Remembering When: The Uses of Nostalgia in the Poetry of Bai Juyi and Yuan Zhen" Anna Shields writes of nostalgic poetry's role as an aid in self-portraiture and autobiography:

Nostalgic texts serve yet another critical function: preserved in collected works long after their composition, they contribute to the *persona* created over time by a literary corpus. Whatever diverse meaning [...] found in reminiscence over the years, [...] retrospective *self-portrait* stands out as an important part of [...] *literary autobiography*.¹⁴ (My Italics)

Shields is focusing on the poetry exchange between Bai Juyi and Yuan Zhen and writes that their exchange of poems, not unlike the *Bildungsroman* or Freudian psychoanalysis, creates the truth of the self through personal narrative:

The purpose of personal reminiscence, in these [nostalgic poetry] as in journey poems, was to describe a process of self-discovery through time [...]¹⁵

In Philip Kafalas's book about Zhang Dai's (張岱) (1597–1684) 陶庵夢憶, *In Limpid Dream: Nostalgia and Zhang Dai's Reminiscences of the Ming*, Kafalas writes:

he [Zhang Dai] is very much undertaking just this process of the memorialising his self by inviting isolated moments, sites, images, sensations, and gestures to pour out their significances [...] Neither did Proust invent his Madeleine; he discovered its personal significance, and in so doing discovered an *essential node in the structure of his own memory of his existence*.¹⁶ (My italics)

¹⁴ Shields (2006, p. 326).

¹⁵ Shields (2006, p. 324).

¹⁶ Kafalas (2007, p. 166).

Kafalas, as is clear from the above, perceives the desire to construct a consistent self in Zhang Dai's miscellaneous memory-making. There are essentials to be distilled from the heterogeneity, and objects can be made to yield personal significances in order to complete the puzzle of the self. Kafalas, furthermore is reading Zhang Dai with Proustian grammar:

The whole aim of his collection is [...] to follow those attachments [delightful worldly life] from the incidents back to himself – to start from the *remembered things and gather up those threads of thought to hold fast his unsure self*.¹⁷ (My italics)

As Martin Huang's *Literati and Self-Re/Presentation: Autobiographical Sensibility in the Eighteenth-Century Chinese Novel*¹⁸ and Pei-Yi Wu's *The Confucian's Progress: Autobiographical Writings in Traditional China*¹⁹ have shown, writings about the self proliferated in the Ming dynasty. What a lot of recent scholarship, valuable as they are, miss about the genre of memory-writings however is the particular nature of nostalgia in these literary works. Although there was increasing attention to the self in Ming literature, the construction of memory still operates under certain literary paradigms. The appellation of "autobiography" to works such as Zhang Dai's 陶庵夢憶 may thus be a misnomer, for like the *Bildungsroman*, autobiography operates in a teleological manner. Autobiography lifts episodes from one's life into a trans-temporal framework in order to map out the causal explanations for the present self.

Chinese imperial era memory-making however is more closely tied to nostalgia, and the delight in nostalgia is the delight in the full actuality of time's passing itself, and attendant with the passing of time, is the passing of the self. Contra Shields and Kafalas, I argue that true presence in nostalgic literature is located *within* temporality and *below* the threshold of individuation. The Proustian self may hold forth to itself as a means of transcending time, and so achieving a kind of metaphysical salvation, but the self of nostalgic Chinese literature sees the very reality of time as the metaphysical experience par excellence. The self exists *within* time, is not reconstructed as in autobiography, as a narrative summation whose significance culminates outside of time.

The literary trope of nostalgia is not confined to particular epochs of Chinese literary culture. Perhaps due to the *Xuanxue* influence of the Wei-Jin period, it grows to prominence during the Tang dynasty. Subsequent to that however, one sees it pervasively throughout Chinese literature. I have chosen some famous examples in Tang and Song poetry to discuss in detail, but will also focus on some Ming–Qing dynasty *San-wen* (散文) to demonstrate the ubiquity of the motif across literary production as a whole.

¹⁷ Kafalas (2007, p. 198).

¹⁸ Huang (1995).

¹⁹ Wu (1992).

Nostalgic poetry of Shu Shi, Du Fu and Xin Qiji

Take 《木兰花令·次欧公西湖韵》 by Shu Shi for example,

霜余已失长淮阔.空听潺潺清潁咽.佳人犹唱醉翁词,四十叁年如电抹.
草头秋露流珠滑.叁五盈盈还二八.与余同是识翁人,惟有西湖波底月.

Forty years later, people are still singing the lines of Ouyang Xiu, but if we took Su Shi back to the Yingzhou of forty years ago, he may not necessarily have reached the happiness assumed to be the case by the lines; for it would simply be reality. It would simply be Yingzhou, albeit with Ou Yangxiu still there, but that particular picture is not something to write poetry about. It is the alchemy of nostalgia, the gap of time between the past and the present, which offers the promise of something beyond the mundane.

The last two lines: 与余同是识翁人, 惟有西湖波底月, that only the moon reflected at the bottom of West Lake and Su Shi himself remember Ouyang Xiu are interesting, for the evocation of the moon is doubly, if not triply removed. It is not merely a moon, nor a moon reflected on West Lake, but the reflection of the moon sinking all the way to the bottom of West Lake. This particular veil of memory operates much like, or is a miniature of the nostalgia. It is a riddle wrapped in a mystery inside an enigma; and the particular sublime of nostalgia is that this processing of wrapping, irrevocably removes the past from the present.

That nostalgia can be construed as the impossibility of being at a particular place at a particular time is exemplified in 《江城子·乙卯正月二十日夜记梦》 by Su Shi:

十年生死两茫茫.不思量.自难忘.千里孤坟,无处话凄凉.纵使相逢应不识,尘满面,鬓如霜.
夜来幽梦忽还乡.小轩窗.正梳妆.相顾无言,惟有泪千行.料得年年断肠处,明月夜,短松冈

In this mourning poem, Su Shi enacts the fantasy of being transported back to his hometown, to find his deceased wife exhumed from oblivion, back into intimate familiarity. She is just brushing her hair, as if they were picking up their lives from the day before, as if nothing was interrupted. As if, should Su Shi want it, the past could become the present, and yet he realises, his wife would not recognise him after all. So many years have passed, and he has become an old man. In this instance therefore, even if Su Shi can be at a particular place, he cannot be simultaneously in the particular *place* of that particular time. It is this double equation which gives nostalgia its full force and impact: the simultaneity of space and time. And so even in this materialisation of a fantasy, in this physical enactment of nostalgia, it is time which stands between him and his wife.

It is thus the very impossibility of the recovery of the past which allows it to become so beguiling. Nostalgia gathers fragments of a remembered past, imaginatively reconstructs them, idealises their content and projects the idealised portrait of the past: a poem may look to the past, but it is only truly nostalgic if that past is idealised. Take 《江南逢李龟年》 by Du Fu,

岐王宅里寻常见，崔九堂前几度闻。
正是江南好风景，落花时节又逢君。

The hinge of the nostalgia in this instance, hangs on the fact that in Du Fu's memory, it was 正是, exactly, precisely the period when the scenery in the south of China was at its peak. It was a moment in time which, in some senses, one can only talk about retrospectively. For how can one know when the flower is at the peak of its bloom, if not retrospectively, if not in relation the moments previous, and the moments that would pass. It is in this sense therefore that this perfect moment can only ever be a (re)construction, a creation in the mind of the poet. As lived, in the present of the event's happening, Du Fu could not have recognised the significance that this meeting with 李龟年 would later become, could not that is, recognise all the significance which he would later imbue it with. The pathos of this poem lies in the fact that Du Fu is writing this after the An Lushan rebellion; he is evoking an idealised vision of a past from the perspective of the present. The pathos lies in the contrast between the imagined perfect scenery of the past, and the disillusion of the present. Nostalgia is in this sense, not about the past inasmuch as it is about an idealized moment in time when all was 正是, when circumstances were at their height.

The idealized moment of the past, for 刘希夷(Liu Xiyi) (ca. 651- ca. 680) as it was for Du Fu, is elusive. All that we can evoke is time's passing, and within the constancy of change, suggest the brief glimmer of when situations were at their peak. Blink, however and that moment is gone, drowning in the sea of time.

洛阳城东桃李花，飞来飞去落谁家？
洛阳女儿好颜色，坐见落花长叹息。
今年花落颜色改，明年花开复谁在？
已见松柏摧为薪，更闻桑田变成海。
古人无复洛城东，今人还对落花风。
年年岁岁花相似，岁岁年年人不同。
寄言全盛红颜子，应怜半死白头翁。
此翁白头真可怜，伊昔红颜美少年。
公子王孙芳树下，清歌妙舞落花前。
光禄池台文锦绣，将军楼阁画神仙。
一朝卧病无相识，三春行乐在谁边？
宛转蛾眉能几时？须臾鹤发乱如丝。
但看古来歌舞地，惟有黄昏鸟雀悲。

For the daughter of Luoyang, that perfect moment was 洛阳城东桃李花，飞来飞去落谁家？ The moment however, when all things were purely potential, when the flowers *could well* fall in her courtyard and when she was at the height of her beauty, would be all too fleeting. Precipitately and surreptitiously it is already a new year and the colour of the flowers has changed. The world changes but she is still faithful to the hope that her lover may return. The perfect moment, as in Shu Shi's 《江城子·乙卯正月二十日夜记梦》， requires a confluence of time and space. The daughter of Luoyang still sits at the same place pining for her lover, but the propitious time for it is long gone.

For the handsome youth, the height of his magnificence was 公子王孙芳树下，清歌妙舞落花前。光禄池台文锦绣，将军楼阁画神仙。 How long however, can

beauty ultimately last (宛转蛾眉能几时?) That enchanting moment in the narrative stream where everything was as perfect as a painting, would imperceptibly fade into dissolution. The moment when old age overtook youth can hardly even be noted, when exactly did time gain in on us? All too soon, the imagery has changed, and we are confronted with the loneliness of birds at dusk.

Irretrievable time

The delight in the irrevocability of the past finds eloquent and paradigmatic expression in 《前赤壁賦》 by Su Shi.

苏子愀然，正襟危坐，而问客曰：“何为其然也？”客曰：“‘月明星稀，乌鹊南飞。’此非曹孟德之诗乎？西望夏口，东望武昌，山川相缪，郁乎苍苍，此非孟德之困于周郎者乎？方其破荆州，下江陵，顺流而东也，舳舻千里，旌旗蔽空，酹酒临江，横槊赋诗，固一世之雄也，而今安在哉？况吾与子渔樵于江渚之上，侣鱼虾而友麋鹿，驾一叶之扁舟，举匏尊以相属。寄蜉蝣于天地，渺沧海之一粟。哀吾生之须臾，羨长江之无穷。挟飞仙以遨游，抱明月而长终。知不可乎骤得，托遗响于悲风。”

苏子曰：“客亦知夫水与月乎？逝者如斯，而未尝往也；盈虚者如彼，而卒莫消长也。盖将自其变者而观之，则天地曾不能以一瞬；自其不变者而观之，则物与我皆无尽也，而又何羨乎！且夫天地之间，物各有主，苟非吾之所有，虽一毫而莫取。惟江上之清风，与山间之明月，耳得之而为声，目遇之而成色，取之无禁，用之不竭。是造物者之无尽藏也，而吾与子之所共食。”

Whilst his friend mourns the insignificance of man due to his inability to endure, Su Shi in a Daoist fashion, counsels his friend that even the moon waxes and wanes and that the process of change is constant. Whilst man may not become eternal by being trans-temporal, he can become eternal by partaking of the eternal processes of nature. Su Shi's friend may lament the insignificance of their existence, their boat a mere leaf in cosmic space and time, but for Su Shi, their very mortality and subjection to time is what makes them a part of nature. Inhabiting the world according to the same temporal rhythms as nature is what allows one to be a part of the *Dao*.

To remember that Cao Cao was once an all commanding hero in his time may grieve Su Shi's friend, for if someone of such fame and glory could not endure, then nothing can endure. For Su Shi however, the dissolution of the self into the anonymity of time may itself be the metaphysical experience which endurance promises in the Western tradition.

In 《青玉案·元夕》 by 辛弃疾, it is not clear if the poem is describing an event as it is unfolding, or if it is describing an event which happened in the past. In either case however, there is a poetic trope at work here which I have associated with the nostalgic:

东风夜放花千树，更吹落，星如雨。宝马雕车香满路。凤箫声动，玉壶光转，一夜鱼龙舞。蛾儿雪柳黄金缕，笑语盈盈暗香去。众里寻他千百度，蓦然回首，那人却在，灯火阑珊处。

The poem begins with a subject-less description of the sights, sounds and smells of carnivalesque night. But it is only by the last few stanzas, 众里寻他千百度，蓦然回首，那人却在，灯火阑珊处, that the reader recognises the poem as bearing a poetic voice, as having a subject. And crucially, this poetic voice only materialises in relation to the figure that it is chasing. If we do take this poem as one which recalls the past, we could perhaps say that the self only begins to exist in relation to that which it is searching. (The absent figure is like a black hole which gravitationally pulls all around it into alignment and position). It is only once the speaker has 蓦然回首, that we know there is a speaker and this verbal action of turning back is to look for the sought-for figure. But there is a gap here, the figure is elusive, she or he is in the dark. We know he or she is there, in the beyond. But how is it that we do know? It's somehow an assertion that the missed figure is there, for all that we *do* see is the nebulous dark. And yet, somehow, the sought-for figure is *there*. Thus, although it is not clear if the poem is taking place in the present or the past, the poem operates nostalgically, in that there is a fragment which offers the promise of a redemptive totality. And this very assertion of presence feels more like a trope of memory, we can retrospectively assert that the figure was there, but their features are all hazy in our memories.

Such is the allure of nostalgia, there is forever the tantalising promise that if we but concentrated more fully, we could make out the features of the person shrouded in darkness. That, could we but move through the crowds, and reach the sought-for figure, they would be fully present to us. 辛弃疾's poem thus enacts the chimera of nostalgia, the fool's gold, the Sisyphusian promise of redemption. Unlike Su Shi's 《江城子》, in which Su Shi was able to be at the particular *place*, but not at the particular *time*. In this poem, the poetic voice is in the same place as the figure of redemption, but like Achilles chasing the turtle, will always be a few steps behind, unable to catch up with the absent figure.

The metaphysical experience of nostalgia lies perhaps in the fact that, within the narrative reconstruction of the past, one creates a location in time in which one was completely authentic (in the sense of being cognisant of all the significances of the moment; something which one can only do in hindsight) to oneself. In our daily lives, we are subject to so many heteronymous forces that we are like passive passengers carried along by so many currents. It is only through the process of nostalgically recalling the past that we can create a moment which is weighted with all that we cannot be whilst we are in the present. In Du Fu's case therefore, the very process of nostalgising about the past, is a kind of catharsis which he needs to perform during the upheavals of the present.

Nostalgia: the self lost in space and time

For Zhang Dai as for Du Fu, the past is gone, never to be reclaimed, and the very irrevocability of the past says something about our fundamentally ephemeral condition. *Tao'an Dream Reminiscences* (陶庵梦忆) is a collection of one hundred and twenty-two *xiaopin* essays written by the aesthete, historian and poet Zhang Dai (1597–1689) after the fall of the Ming dynasty. Born into a wealthy family, Zhang Dai spent a life of leisure during his youth, pursuing the latest fashions. His fortunes however fell with the defeat of the Ming dynasty by the Manchus (1644). His middle and old age were embittered by disappointments, and it is during this period that the *Tao'an Dream Reminiscences* are written. These essays detail various episodes, people and places from his past.

Reminiscences does not follow a chronological order. The various essays about the people and events from Zhang Dai's past life are heterogeneous, suggesting that they do not form a linear narrative, and typically, the evocation of the self disappears within a cavernous landscape. In the following essay, Zhang Dai visits West Lake on a snowy day:

湖心亭看雪

崇祯五年十二月，余住西湖。大雪三日，湖中人鸟声俱绝。是日更定矣，余拿一小舟，拥毳衣炉火，独往湖心亭看雪。雾淞沆砀，天与云、与山、与水，上下一白。湖上影子，惟长堤一痕，湖心亭一点，与余舟一芥，舟中人两三粒而已。

到亭上，有两人铺毡对坐，一童子烧酒，炉正沸。见余大喜，曰：“湖中焉得更有此人！”拉余同饮。余强饮三大白而别。问其姓氏，是金陵人，客此。及下船，舟子喃喃曰：“莫说相公痴，更有痴似相公者。”

By associating “man” with bird, (“湖中人鸟声俱绝” “lake middle man bird all ceased”), and human artifice with smallness, (小舟 “a little boat,” 湖心亭一点 “the pavilion in the middle as a dot,” 与余舟一芥 “and my boat as a mustard seed,” 舟中两三粒而已 “but two or three grains of other people in my boat.”), Zhang Dai is associating himself with the miniature. Furthermore the human figure, its activities and its imprint (as in its architecture) is described as a blemish. The only “shadow” on an otherwise white landscape is the dam which is described as a “scar” (痕); and the two or three grains of people (两三粒而已). The use of “惟” and “而已” is again, intended to diminish and dismiss the human figure.

The effect of diminution is of course further compounded by the undifferentiated vastness (大雪) of the landscape. It is, furthermore, the homogenous nature of the landscape, the fact that the sky merges with clouds, with the mountains, with the water with the hoar-frost on the trees, which allows the landscape to seem so vast, and the figures so small. The effect is of humans being subsumed in the midst of nature. In this sense, the conspicuous evocation of middle-ness (mi-lieu) (湖心, 湖中) is congruent with the underlying theme.

Whereas I see the disappearance and dissolution of the human figure however, Kafalas sees its drawing forth:

It is in this aspect that the essay becomes an exploration of the *essence of human presence*—presence in a blank context [...] Zhang seems to be asking just what a person is at bottom [...] As is so often the case, Zhang is also observing himself from outside himself; considering his own appearance from some anonymous vantage point far off in that winter blankness [...] (Kafalas, my italics, 101)

From this, we can see just how much Kafalas is reading Zhang Dai under a Proustian paradigm. For in Proust, the engagement with nature is always a means towards an end: the self. When Marcel encounters nature or other people, the narrative immediately deflects back to his own introspections. The nature and people he encounters are in some senses always objectivised, and this object is then fixed in the museum of his memory as specimens to construct his own self-identity. I would argue however that the self in *Reminiscences*, inasmuch as it is evoked, is to allow for its dissolution. Zhang Dai is employing a fundamentally nostalgic sensibility whereby the self is only brought to our consciousness in order to portray the process of its dissolution in time. As such, there is a tendency for the self to disappear in nature, in the essays 金山夜戏 and 陈章侯 for example, transitory figures are placed against a vast and amorphous landscape, and there is often the employment of the classical literary, 物在人非 (The object remains, the people have departed), to evoke the poignancy of time's passing.

Paradise found and lost: 刘晨阮肇入天台

In the last essay of *Reminiscences* Zhang describes the plot of land which is to be his final resting place: 琅嬛福地 (the blessed grounds of Langhuan). The story from which the name “Langhuan” comes, is about a Jin dynasty (265–420) traveler, whom whilst touring a mountain encounters an old man who invites him to a grotto where there was every kind of book. When the traveler asks the name of the place, the man says, “the Blessed Grounds of Langhuan.” As the traveler leaves, the stone door closes behind him, and he was never again able to find it.

When Zhang Dai evokes Langhuan, he is therefore evoking a well-known topos with specific connotations. Furthermore, Langhuan as a paradise found but then lost, gestures to Tao Yuanming's *Peach Blossom Spring* (桃花源记). As is often remarked, what is so interesting about the Chinese idea of paradise, is its immanence. Both Langhuan and Peach Blossom Spring exist within an (albeit unknown) part of the Middle Kingdom. What is interesting furthermore, is how much these paradisiacal realms operate like the fantasy of an unfulfillable promise. Both Langhuan and Peach Blossom spring, like the poet's nostalgia for an idealized past, are lost in space and time.

In writing *Reminiscences* Zhang is therefore performing the same cultural ritual as the Song dynasty aristocrat Zhao Cangyun (赵苍云), when he painted the famous story *Liu Chen and Ruan Zhao Enter the Tiantai Mountains* (刘晨阮肇入天台),

after his dynasty fell to the Mongols in 1279 (below). The story is structurally the same as *Peach Blossom Spring* and *The Blessed Grounds of Langhuan*. In the story two travelers happen upon a paradisiac world, seemingly removed from time itself, but once they leave this paradisiac world and return to their former homes, they find their own world has already aged generations. (《幽明录》~243~)



When Zhao Cangyun paints this story and when Zhang Dai records his past life, they are identifying themselves with the travelers to Tiantai Mountains, to the Blessed Grounds of Langhuan, or to Peach Blossom Spring. Happiness was so fleeting and what is gone, cannot be reclaimed. The *Peach Blossom Spring* and *Blessed Grounds of Langhuan* motif thus operates exactly like nostalgia. There is a place and time which cannot be regained, only evoked in memory.

When Zhang Dai evokes some idyllic past after the experiences of personal trauma, he is enacting the cultural expression as Meng Yuanlao (孟元老) when he describes from memory, in *Dream Records of Dong Jing* (东京梦华录), the city of Kaifeng after the fall of the Northern Song dynasty. The motif of recalling an idyllic past in time from the ruins of the traumatic present is standard genre that encompasses Cao Xueqin (曹雪芹) description of the glories of the Jia household in *Hong Lou Meng* (红楼梦); Chen Fu's (沉浮) depiction of the harmonious days spent with his wife before her premature death in *Six Chapters of a Floating Life* (浮生六记); Shen Yazhi's (沈亚之) dreams of marrying a princess in *Dream Records of Qin* (秦梦记); Shen Jiji's (沈既济) *Records from a Pillow* (枕中记); Li Gongzuo's (李公佐) *Biography of a prefect in Nanke* (南柯太守传) and Wu Mingshi's (无名氏) *Cherry Qingyi* (樱桃青衣).

All these writers are partaking of a normative mode of cultural expression, which, through lamenting the glories of a past that is no more, evokes the Buddhist-Daoist perception of the fundamental transience of life. This underlying philosophy explains why the self has a tendency to disappear in the landscapes which Zhang Dai depict. The forces of the world; the fall of dynasties, the passing of time, a hidden world of immortals, are greater than the individual. Similarly, this is why this genre of "dream reminisces", is almost always written after someone has

undergone personal trauma. The writer, by evoking the past, seeks to contrast his present condition, and so gestures towards the futility of the self. “Instead of trying to force the calendar of the outer world on the people of Peach Blossom Spring,” Zhang Dai wrote about Tao Yuanming’s vision, “how much better would it be if the outer world accepted the forgotten valley’s dateless calendar, which proceeded according to the natural rhythms of life and death.”²⁰ This is an inherently Daoist sensibility, an anti-individualist philosophy, in which the self is but another aspect of the process of time, and as such, subject to the same uncontrollable momentums beyond the self. In *Reminiscences*, it’s not so much that there is no self, the self is always implied; but it is not the locus of meaning. Zhang Dai evokes the self as a means to an end: the very Chinese *topos* of transience.

Conclusion: *Verlangen* for a past that never was

Not all writings about the past are intrinsically nostalgic. In Xin Qiji’s 《永遇乐·千古江山》 for example,

千古江山,英雄无觅,孙仲谋处。舞榭歌臺,风流总被,雨打风吹去。斜阳草树,
寻常巷陌,人道寄奴曾住。想当年,金戈铁马,气吞万里如虎。元嘉草草,封狼居
胥,赢得仓皇北顾。四十三年,望中犹记,烽火扬州路。可堪回首,佛狸祠下,
一片神鸦社鼓。凭谁问,廉颇老矣,尚能饭否?

Xin Qiji builds a vivid portrait of a scene of battle. So vivid in fact that the reader is almost transported back to the days of battle. And yet the recollection of the past is not the beguiling, bittersweet yearning of nostalgic poems. In this poem, the past is too complete and one is transported back to an almost photo-realistic past. A gut-wrenchingly nostalgic poem is one in which there is the tantalising promise, never to be realized, of paradise regained. Just as Proust chases his memories too assiduously, analytically and descriptively for his work to be nostalgic in the way of Shu Shi’s 《木兰花令·次欧公西湖韵》, there must always be a gap, a suggestion of the irretrievability of the past and the inevitability of its passing, for the poem to be fully nostalgic.

All literary cultures are compelled by the impotence of mortal man. Sophocles for example, expressed Oedipus’ impotence through the *topos* of fate, through Oedipus’s helplessness in the face of his own fate. But the Platonic-Augustinian and latterly Enlightenment tradition tries to overcome man’s inherent disabilities via a soteriology of transcendence. By the partaking of the eternal, transcendent and infinite, man can endure. This is why time has no place in the philosophical frameworks of the Enlightenment thinkers and why time is not a conspicuous motif in Pre-Modern Western literature.

The only genre which comes close to the Chinese obsession with time is the *Carpe Diem* poetry of the Italian Renaissance. The evocation of time’s passing in these poems however is meant to propitiate a zeal for a command of the present. In

²⁰ Spence (2007, p. 278).

Lorenzo de' Medici's famous poem, *Trionfo di Bacco e di Arianna*, the uncertainty about tomorrow rouses the youths to take advantage of today:

Quant'è bella giovinezza
 Che si fugge tuttavia!
 Chi vuol esser lieto, sia:
 Di doman non c'è certezza.

Quest'è Bacco e Arianna,
 Belli, e l'un dell'altro ardenti:
 Perchè'l tempo fugge e'nganna,
 Sempre insieme stan contenti.

[...]

Queste ninfe hanno anco oro
 Da loro essere ingannate;
 Non puon far a Amor riparo
 Se non genti rozze e'ngrate:
 Ora insieme mescolate
 Suonan, cantan tuttavia.
 Chi vuol essere lieto, sia:
 Di doman non c'è certezza.

The *topos* of time in the Western canon is not nearly as sophisticated and developed as it became in the Chinese canon. It would only be in the twentieth century, with the works of Virginia Woolf, that we have a similar treatment of time and nostalgia for the past. The temporal sensibility in Virginia Woolf partakes of a larger philosophical turn towards time in the works of Heidegger, Husserl, Bergson, Whitehead and Einstein, but this will have to be explored in another essay.

The magic of nostalgia in the Chinese literary tradition is perhaps nowhere better expressed than in the following passage from the *Huainanzi*:

时之反侧，间不容息；先之则太过，后之则不逮。夫日月回而月周，日不与人游。故圣人
 不贵尺之璧而重寸之阴，时难得而易失也。禹之趋时也，覆遗而弗取，冠挂而弗顾，非争
 其先也，而争其得时也。是故圣人守清道而抱雌节，因循应变，常后而不先；柔弱以静，
 舒安以定，攻大礪坚，莫能与之争。（淮南子，第一张）

If time is so inescapably pressing on, then one cannot overcome time. Instead of overtaking time, Yu sought to find the *right* moment (禹之趋时也 [...] 非争其先也,而争其得时也). When literati lamented nostalgically about their pasts therefore, they like Yu, were not seeking to overcome time; they were searching for that pivotal moment imbued with a potential which had not yet become a disappointing reality. The nostalgic construction of the past makes a paradise of a particular moment, which the unfolding of our lives ultimately could not fulfill.

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