

A Reflection on culture & Confinement

Wen and the art of lockdown maintenance

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It's another beautiful spring day. The sun is shining. But we are to stay home, to be safe and to protect each other and the NHS. The daily update is on. Dominic Raab is leading the briefing while Boris Johnson recovers in intensive care. The calm and steady rhetoric of the speakers cannot smooth over the conundrum all around, in the air, hovering beyond and above the words of reassurance that the small TV screen before me is spewing out. When will science catch up with this wily virus so we can all come out of isolation? What will happen to the already financially troubled SOAS? Where are our students? Are they coping? How can third world countries cope with what the first world countries can't? But I sit in my comfortable loft room and count my blessings. Up here, at least for one day, I can feel the sunshine and the gentle breeze through my open skylight, hear children playing in their backyards, and even smell the barbecue cooking deliciously on invisible grills. On my desert island, I don't think about the uncertainties. I fantasize. I imagine a future SOAS saved by innovative online teaching. I wish for this feeling of 'we're all in this together' to last. I dream that a harmonious world will rise out of the coronavirus wreckage. I will humanity to leave behind conflict, violence and destruction. And I contemplate the future of comparative literature against a backdrop of discourses on cultural difference.

Trump's violent name-and-blame rhetoric – 'Chinese virus' and 'Chinese rape of our country' – bores me. The comparisons between 'Western' democracy and 'Oriental' despotism, between European liberal values and Asian Confucian ethos, or between diversity among European or Asian responses, do not excite me. I think of Du Fu instead, of his poetry and the Chinese culture of *wen*, and of what his life and poetry can mean for us today. Du Fu (712-770) was on BBC Four last night. Our enthusiastic host, Michael Wood, tells us that he is the greatest Chinese poet. He wanted to be a civil servant but failed at the examinations twice and was fated to live in poverty and obscurity. The An Lu Shan Rebellion (755-763) devastated Tang Dynasty and Du Fu's life. He wandered to escape the war, taking his family from one city to another, and for a long time lived on a boat, in fact, until he died at the age of 58 on the Yangtze River. His disappointments did not diminish his strong sense of history or his moral engagement, and he wrote the most moving poetry about the quotidian suffering of the common people and conscripted soldiers. In time he came to be known as 'poet sage' (comparable to Confucius's 'philosopher sage'), in contradistinction to Li Bai's 'poet immortal'.

Du Fu, the more Confucian of the two poets, remained committed to the human society, while Li Bai (701-762) sought transcendence in solitude, nature and wine. I have a soft spot

for Li Bai, the free spirit who scoffs at man's worldly concerns, celebrates the transience of life on earth, and soars with us to mountaintops and clouds. With him we see immortality in our reunion with nature.

Here among flowers a single jug of wine,
No close friends here, I pour alone
And lift cup to bright moon, ask it to join me,
Then face my shadow and we become three.
The moon never has known how to drink,
All my shadow does is follow my body,
But with moon and shadow as companions a while,
This joy I find will surely last till spring.
I sing, the moon just lingers on,
I dance, and my shadow scatters wildly.
When still sober we share friendship and pleasure,
Then entirely drunk each goes his own way—
Let us join in travels beyond human feelings
To meet far in the river of stars.

'Drinking Alone by Moonlight'. Tr. Stephen Owen.
The Great Age of Chinese Poetry: The High Tang (Yale 1981), 138

Du Fu brings us down to earth, puts us back in the society we are trying to escape, and throws us into the quandary of daily life and mundane concerns.

I came through the gate, I heard a crying out,
my youngest child had died of starvation ...
And this thought obsesses me—as a father,
Lack of food resulted in infant death;
I could not have known that even after harvest
Through our poverty there would be such distress.
All my life I've been exempt from taxes,
and my name is not registered for conscription.
Brooding on what I have lived through, if even I
know such suffering,
The common man must surely be rattled by the winds;
Then thoughts silently turn to those who have lost
all livelihood
and to troops in far garrisons.
Sorrow's source is as huge as South Mountain,
a formless, whirling chaos that the hand cannot grasp.

From 'Going from the Capital to Feng-hsien, Singing my Feelings'.
Tr. Stephen Owen.
The Great Age of Chinese Poetry: The High Tang (Yale 1981), 196.

Today, it is Du Fu's pity for those 'who have lost all livelihood', despite his own loss, that strikes a chord: the sorrow for all our losses, brought into sharp focus in the age of coronavirus, and for what none of us can overcome, our very humanity. Our selfish desires make us hog, con, flout rules, and harm. Du Fu's poetry, and the *wen* culture in which he was

schooled, show us that it is possible and necessary to discipline desires into empathy so that they can become forces for good. Chinese *wen* reminds me of Arabic *adab*, the fundamental education of a cultured Muslim, and of the other protagonist of *wen* and *adab*, of storytelling like *Dreams of the Red Mansion* and *The Plum in the Golden Vase* in Chinese, and *Kalila wa Dimna* and *The Thousand and One Nights* in Arabic. Here, the fates of the individual and community are bound up together. When wily desire, of the king, his officers and subjects, is educated into proper love, harmony graces human society. If love is left to run wild and turn into unchecked cunning desire, dynasties and families fall. Isn't it time to bring these two literary cultures together and find out what they say about how we can tame our passions and become good human beings? I can always dream, no?