Literary History in and beyond China

Reading Text and World

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CHAPTER 7

Poetic Omens and Poetic History

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This chapter explores the usefulness to literary history of topics that may seem to lie on the margins of literature. One of the difficulties of writing "literary history" at the temporal and cultural remove from premodern China at which we currently find ourselves lies in the fact that the concept of "literature" represents neither a native nor a neutral description of the phenomena we treat under this heading. While it is true, therefore, that even the most focused literary history will "often have to draw upon a wide variety of facts in order to account for the changes which occurred in that strand of human activity whose course [it] seeks to follow"—to recall the words of Maurice Mandelbaum cited by Michael A. Fuller in the preceding chapter's discussion of literature as a "special history"—it is ultimately "the [special] historian's conception of his subject matter that, in the first instance, dictates the principles of inclusion of certain materials in his work and governs the exclusion of others."[1] As a result, literary history is always in danger of creating its own object by isolating a static, preconceived, etic vision of "literature" out from the emic matrices into which its materials might originally have fit. To forestall this possibility, therefore, and to better understand those emic matrices and the ways they may have changed over time, it can be useful every now and then to turn our attention away from the core of what we recognize as literature and toward its entanglements with other domains.

1. Mandelbaum, "The History of Ideas," 45, and *The Anatomy of Historical Knowledge*, 34.

My case study here is the relationship between poetry and omens. Even though omens appear in poetic forms from the Han all the way through the Qing—whether sung by children in their villages, written by religious adepts, or produced unawares by literati poets—modern scholars have generally assumed, and sometimes explicitly argued, that properly "literary" poetry never had much to do with them. Pauline Yu, for example, took issue with the subtitle of Stephen Owen's *Traditional Chinese Poetry and Poetics: Omen of the World*, arguing that it cast "a more mystifying glow on the whole [poetic] process than seems appropriate," rendering the Chinese lyric not "an historical document" (as she believes it was) but "a kind of a sign" whose "true significance may lie on another order of experience from that of daily life," an order that may be "religious or even transcendent."[2] Certainly it is true, as Yu suggests, that most Chinese readers in the premodern era would not have considered most poems to be omens. Yet when we examine the poems they did treat as omens and the ways that treatment changed over time, it becomes apparent that these oppositions—between "history" and "religion," "transcendence" and "daily life"—should not be thought of as given or fixed. Instead, tracing the history of the relationship between poetry and omens can help us better understand in which periods and in what ways premodern Chinese poetry might have been suffused with a "mystifying glow" and where Yu's cautions might be more justified.

The key finding of this chapter is that, when we survey surviving materials that speak to these questions, we find significant heterogeneity over time—heterogeneity that is, moreover, of two different sorts. On the one hand, the relationship of poetry and omens develops from the Han dynasty to the Song along a linear trajectory, with poetic omens becoming increasingly domesticated to the contours of literati life. On the other hand, however, the changing status of omens in literary theoretical discourse suggests sharp discontinuities from period to period in emic understandings of the poetic art. After outlining these two historical narratives, the chapter concludes with a discussion of the apparent contradiction between them. This contradiction, I suggest, may help us better understand what it was in the nature of "literature" in the premodern

2. Yu, Review of *Traditional Chinese Poetry and Poetics*, 352. Note that Owen disavows these implications in the book, writing that "These omens are not prophecies (though one who knows the world's cycles may be able to read something of the future in them)"; see Owen, *Traditional Chinese Poetry and Poetics*, 44.

Chinese context that allowed incremental changes on its margins to contribute, over the centuries, to fundamental reorientations in its core matter.

Varieties of Poetic Omens and Their Evolution over Time

There is not space in this short essay to give anything like a detailed introduction to the premodern Chinese omenscape in general or even to the topic of poetic omens specifically, which has a surprisingly complex history.[3] Like "literature," "poetic omens" is an etic term grouping together materials that might not have made a natural category in the periods under consideration. Indeed, these materials are discussed under several different headings in surviving premodern texts, all of which imply slight but significant shifts in how these phenomena were understood. In official histories that follow the model established in Ban Gu's 班固 (32–92) *History of the Han* (*Han shu* 漢書), for instance, poetic omens are generally collected under the title *shiyao* 詩妖 (poetic prodigies); in various Song dynasty anecdote collections (broadly, *biji* 筆記), they are discussed under the heading of *shichen* 詩讖 (poetic prophecies); in the fourteenth-century compendium *Comprehensive Examination of Documents* (*Wenxian tongkao* 文獻通考), they are labeled *shiyi* 詩異 (poetic anomalies); in the Qing encyclopedia *Complete Collection of Illustrations and Writings from Antiquity to the Present* (*Gujin tushu jicheng* 古今圖書集成), they are collected as *yaochen* 謠讖 (folk-ditty prophecies); and in the Qing-compiled *Complete Tang Poems* (*Quan Tang shi* 全唐詩), they are separated into *yao* 謠 (folk ditties) and *chenji* 讖記 (records of prophecies). To further complicate matters, many of these categories contain omens that are not in what we would recognize as poetic forms—most

3. Here the most in-depth study is Sun Rongrong, *Chenwei yu wenxue yanjiu*, though it contains only one chapter on poetic omens. For a review of Chinese scholarship on the topic, see Wang Xian and Xiao Jing, "Jin shiwunian shichen." Although this article is now somewhat dated, it is largely the same scholars surveyed here who have continued to publish in the field. In Western languages, the best resource is Zongli Lu's *Power of the Words*, which gives extensive examples of poetic omens from the Han through the Six Dynasties. Despite its title and its useful discussion of related phenomena, Michel Strickmann's *Chinese Poetry and Prophecy* does not deal with these materials in any detail.

notably the official histories' *shiyao* sections, which also include linguistic omens of several other sorts.

Recognizing the difficulties presented by the many different premodern terms used for these materials, modern Chinese scholars who have worked on poetic omens have often simplified them into two categories: *yaochen* and *shichen*.[4] *Yaochen*, as they use the term, are predominantly oral, produced by the folk (*min* 民), and concerned with the governance of the empire. *Shichen*, by contrast, are predominantly written by literati (*shi* 士) and mostly concern the author's fate or that of people close to them. According to the commonly accepted narrative, *yaochen* make up the vast majority of poetic omens from the pre-Qin period through the Tang, while *shichen* originate in the Six Dynasties (220–589), appear occasionally in the Tang, and preponderate in the Song and late imperial period.

For the sake of convenience, I sometimes use the designations *yaochen* and *shichen* in what follows. But I would like to suggest that this distinction does not provide a fully adequate map of the materials in question. Instead, if we draw our categories more finely, as I do in the following two tables—Table 1 analyzes the *shiyao* collected in the eponymous sections of the official histories and Table 2 considers the *yaochen* compiled in the great *Gujin tushu jicheng*—we can begin to recognize somewhat more clearly the process by which this shift from a predominance of *yaochen* to a large percentage of *shichen* might have occurred.

These tables must be read with caution. Not only are the data far from robust—no doubt vastly more poetic omens were produced and lost over the centuries, especially in earlier periods from which so little survives—but by definition, the sources that preserve these poetic omens are always more recent (sometimes by centuries) than the omens are purported to be.[5] Although there is no reason I know of to suspect that the survival of

4. Wu Chengxue may have established this convention his 1996 article "Lun yaochen yu shichen." This article is expanded and republished in his *Zhongguo gudai wenti xingtai yanjiu*. See also Shu Daqing, "Zhongguo gudai zhengzhi tongyao."

5. When it comes to the standard histories at least, the date of their compilation can tell us more or less how far our texts are from the events they claim to record, but with *Gujin tushu jicheng*, the chronological difficulties are more pronounced. For example, I have not differentiated those poetic omens that derive from the Tang and are preserved in authentic Tang sources from those that supposedly derive from the Tang but are preserved in (sometimes quite late) Song *biji*, since it is generally impossible to know for certain whether the authors of those Song *biji* may have had access to earlier materials

Table 1
Poetic Omens in the Standard Histories

Title of History	*Han shu*	*Hou Han shu*	*Song shu*	*Nan Qi shu*	*Sui shu*	*Jin shu*
Date of history (CE)	82	445	488	537	636	648
Total page count[a]	4,273	3,682	2,470	1,036	1,904	3,306
Total entries[b]	6	12	48	16	19	41
By children[c]	6	11	23	4	10	20
By the folk	—	1	20	7	2	17
By special individuals[d]	—	—	4	—	3	3
By imperial family	—	—	1 (not a poem)	4 (2 poems)	4	1 (not a poem)
By literati	—	—	—	1 (not a poem)	—	—
Discovered, no author	—	—	—	—	—	—

Note: Table only includes standard histories where there is a section devoted to omens; no omens have been collected from other sections of the histories.

[a]Page numbers are from the Zhonghua shuju standard printings. No total page counts are given for *Wudai shiji bukao* or *Qing shi gao* because these are not standard histories but were prepared more recently on the basis of surviving materials.

[b]The total number of entries may not always be equivalent to the number given in the breakdown, as I double-count certain examples where both elements are present.

[c]I only attribute specific omens to children when the histories are explicit; unattributed "ditties" 謠 are listed under "By the folk."

[d]"Special individuals" include madmen, women, Buddhists, Daoists, and deities. This category is drawn from the traditional bibliographical practice of separating the writings of these groups out at the end of each temporal period, beginning with the *Sui shu* (the first surviving bibliographical catalog to include literary writings by these classes of individuals) and continuing through the compilation of late imperial and even modern compendia such as the *Quan Tang shi* and Lu Qinli's 逯欽立 (1910–1973) *Xian Qin Han Wei Jin nanbeichao shi* 先秦漢魏晉南北朝詩. The history of this practice is complex, with different groups separated out in different collections and bibliographies; there are also collections and bibliographies that do not draw these distinctions. Nonetheless, the fact that these groups were routinely separated out in this way suggests that their writings could sometimes be thought of as existing on the margins of the core literati tradition. This line of the table is thus intended to represent, however roughly, a traditional emic category; it is not an assertion that we should in general think of the literary productions of these classes of individuals as separate from those of "the literati."

Continued on next page

Table 1—*Continued*

Jiu Tang shu	*Xin Tang shu*	*Wudai shiji bukao*	*Jin shi*	*Song shi*	*Yuan shi*	*Ming shi*	*Qing shi gao*
945	1060	NA	1345	1345	1370	1739	NA
5,407	6,472	NA	2,906	14,262	4,678	8,642	NA
8	24	26	3	10	2	3	4
2	12	8	2	1	1	1	2
5	10	6	—	5	1	1	—
—	1	7	—	1	—	1	—
1 (not a poem)	—	5 (2 poems)	1 (not a poem)	—	—	—	—
1 (based on folk song)	1	—	—	1?	—	—	—
—	—	—	—	2	—	—	2

Table 2
Poetic Omens in the *Gujin tushu jicheng*

	Qin-Han	Six Dynasties	Sui-Tang-Wudai	Song-Liao-Jin	Yuan-Ming
Years in span	441	369	379	319	365
Total selections (no. per decade)[a]	22 (0.5)	128 (3.5)	78 (2.1)	70 (2.2)	31 (0.8)
Children, omens of the state (% of total)	19 (86)	63 (49)	19 (24)	10 (14)	12 (39)
Folk or soldiers, omens of the state (% of total)	2 (9)	48 (38)	21 (27)	13 (19)	11 (35)
Madmen, omens of the state (% of total)	—	1 (1)	—	—	—
Women, omens of the state (% of total)	1 (5)	—	—	—	—
Buddhists or Daoists, omens of the state (% of total)	—	7 (5)	7 (9)	2 (3)	2 (6)
Emperors or high officials, omens of self/state (% of total)	—	4 (3)	15 (19)	3 (4)	2 (6)
Literati, omens of the state (% of total)	—	3 (2)	5 (6)	3 (4)	—
Literati, omens of the self (% of total)	—	2 (2)	11 (14)	32 (45)	4 (13)
Literati, omens of others (% of total)	—	—	—	7 (10)	—

Note: This table only collects truly *poetic* omens, rather than the other sorts of linguistic omens that sometimes go under the title of *shiyao* in the histories.

[a] Since the *Gujin tushu jicheng* takes material (mostly) verbatim from heterogeneous sources, in some cases it can be difficult to determine what defines a "single" entry. These numbers are thus approximate, useful only for pointing out trends. I omit discovered omens, even when they are "poetic" in the sense of rhythmic and rhymed. I also exclude omens presented as faked.

our sources shows any particular bias against one type of poetic omen versus another, we should nonetheless bear in mind the possibility that dynamics of transmission are shaping what we can perceive in ways we cannot. These considerations suggest that there would only be marginal

that are now lost. As a result, omens attributed to the Tang in *Gujin tushu jicheng* may sometimes tell us more about the Song than they do about the Tang.

utility in incrementing these statistics through other sources, which still would not allow us to localize developments in the history of poetic omens with any real precision. Even the limited data given here can, I hope to suggest, illustrate something of the momentum characterizing the epochal shift from *yaochen* to *shichen*.

The most obvious trend discernible in these tables concerns the burgeoning and decline of poetic omens in the standard histories and in the sources surveyed by *Gujin tushu jicheng*. Poetic omens are relatively rare in the early period up to the Eastern Han; proliferate in and around the Six Dynasties, Tang, and Song; and become less frequent from the Yuan dynasty onward. The phenomenon does not disappear in these later dynasties—as readers of Chinese fiction will know—but the dwindling numbers in these sources are striking given the relatively large volume of textual materials that we have, especially from the Ming. The analysis below may suggest one explanation for this drop-off: that the mundanity of poetic omens in Song dynasty materials began to vitiate the interest of at least the *shichen* variety as anything other than a useful narrative device. But I leave it to other scholars with greater expertise in the late imperial period to confirm or disconfirm this suspicion and to offer other reasons this diminution might have occurred. Here I focus on those eras when poetic omens appear to have been a relatively prominent topic in literati culture.

A second trendline in these data traces an expansion over time in the types of subjects who can create poetic omens. Every one of the *shiyao* recorded in *Han shu* is a children's ditty (*tong yao* 童謠), sung by the presumably illiterate children of pre-Qin and Han villages.[6] *History of the Latter Han* (*Hou Han shu* 後漢書), however, introduces the possibility that omens might be produced by adult members of the folk as well,[7] and *History of the Song* (*Song shu* 宋書), compiled on the basis of fifth-century documents, for the first time includes poetic omens produced by madmen, Buddhists, and Daoists.[8] In histories compiled in the sixth and seventh centuries, emperors and members of the imperial family also prove capable of producing poetic omens,[9] and in *New History of the Tang* (*Xin*

6. See Ban Gu, *Han shu*, 27.2.1393–96.

7. Fan Ye, *Hou Han shu*, 13.3284.

8. Shen Yue, *Song shu*, 31.914, 919–20.

9. See, for instance, Xiao Zixian, *Nan Qi shu*, 19.382, and Wei Zheng et al., *Sui shu*, 22.636.

Tang shu 新唐書), we finally have a "poem" (*shi* 詩) apparently written by a literatus cited as an omen of the state.[10] One might say that the capacity for creating poetic omens gradually approached the literati from the margins of what they might have considered their familiar community. Children, the original producers of all such portents, are perhaps more distant—more difficult to understand, more capable of saying something strange and uncanny—than adult members of the folk;[11] Buddhists and Daoists, despite the arcana of their religions, increasingly frequented literati circles over the course of the Six Dynasties; and by the end of this period, even if members of the imperial family were invested with an aura that kept them distinct from the literati at large, they often strove to present themselves as exemplary members of that class. Each step along this path thus would have made it more conceivable that the literati responsible for transmitting these poetic omens might have produced some themselves.

This same narrative is also evident in the materials collected in *Gujin tushu jicheng*. But because this compendium (unlike the histories) includes materials that are not directly concerned with the fortunes of the state, it tells another story as well. Not only do we see in these materials that the proportion of children's ditties decreases in each period from the Six Dynasties through the Song, while the proportion produced by literate adults increases—that in the Han, 95 percent of poetic omens derive from the folk, whereas in the Song nearly 50 percent are produced by literati. Equally important, we see that omens predicting the fate of the poem's author, his family, or his friends become more common with each passing era. In the Han, again, all surviving poetic omens concern the state; by the Song, such omens make up less than half the total number. As the capacity to produce poetic omens gradually drew closer to the literati, so did the futures those omens portended.

To some degree, this second narrative may reflect the changing character of elite literary production, which over the course of the Tang and Song became decreasingly centered on the court and increasingly focused on the lives of the literati. Yet if there is in fact a connection here, then

10. Ouyang Xiu and Song Qi et al., *Xin Tang shu*, 35.920.

11. The most "uncanny" of all poetic omens, of course, are those that are not produced by any known agent but are instead discovered on rocks or other materials. For simplicity, I am leaving such discovered omens out of the discussion here.

poetic omens by this time must have been sufficiently linked to elite literature to have been influenced by its transformations. As we will see in the next section, that had not always been the case.

Changing Frameworks of Interpretation

Phenomena that we might be tempted to identify as poetic omens, or at least their precursors, appear in a number of early texts. In the *Zuo Tradition* (*Zuo zhuan* 左傳), for example, the Wu noble Jizha 季札 proves capable of recognizing the fate of various historical polities through the performance of their music and their poems.[12] Similar ideas are also found in other early texts, including *Xunzi* 荀子, the "Record of Music" ("Yue ji" 樂記) in *Records of Ritual* (*Li ji* 禮記), and the "Great Preface to the Mao Recension of the *Classic of Poetry*" ("Mao Shi daxu" 毛詩大序), which goes so far as to suggest that adepts could perceive the "impending doom of a state" (*wang guo* 亡國) from observing its poetry and music.[13] To some degree, these adepts are characterized by what we might reasonably call mantic abilities, and for this reason, these texts' visions of poetry's portentous significance might easily strike us as continuous with the poetic omens collected in the official histories and in encyclopedic compendiums like *Gujin tushu jicheng*.

Early writers, however, seem generally to have drawn a distinction between this latter sort of "poetic prodigies" and canonical poetry of the *Classic of Poetry* (*Shi jing* 詩經) type. Although *Han shu*, for example, cites two "children's ditties" from *Zuo zhuan* in its section on *Shiyao* 詩妖, it does not discuss the concert for Jizha or the *Classic of Poetry* in the same context. The distinction may have had to do with the greater orthodoxy of the *Shi jing* versus such prodigies. According to Han exegesis, the majority of the poetry in that classic derived from and documented the good governance of the ancient sages. By contrast, Han authors of surviving discourses on poetic anomalies discuss them only as deriving from and manifesting bad governance, which they understand as causing abnormal perturbations in

12. *Chunqiu Zuo zhuan zhushu*, 39.667b–73a.
13. See *Xunzi jishi*, 20.469; *Li ji zhushu*, 19.663b; and *Mao Shi zhengyi*, 1.14a.

the five phases (*wuxing* 五行) of cosmic *qi* 氣. Fu Sheng's 伏胜 (fl. ca. 200 BCE) *Great Commentary on the* Classic of Documents (*Shang shu dazhuan* 尚書大傳), for instance, lists poetic omens as one of five anomalies that occur as a result of "wood [*qi*] disturbing metal [*qi*]" 木沴金.[14] *Han shu*, likewise, offers a commentary on this passage as part of its "Wuxing zhi" 五行志 ("Treatise on the Five Phases"), explaining that "When a ruler is overwhelmingly *yang*, violent and oppressive, and his subjects fear punishment and thus block up their mouths, then *qi* of resentment and slander is expressed in children's ditties" 君炕陽而暴虐, 臣畏刑而柑口, 則怨謗之氣發於童謠.[15] Wang Chong 王充 (d. ca. 100 CE) similarly suggests that "Children's ditties are produced by the influence of the Sparkling Deluder [Mars]" 童謠熒惑使之, since "the Sparkling Deluder is a star of fire" 熒惑火星—that is, of "overwhelming *yang*." According to Wang, boys are associated with *yang qi*, and so is the mouth and hence speech. An overabundance of *yang* thus naturally produces anomalies related to boys and their words.[16]

Although this correlative quasi-physics never disappears from the tradition, the Six Dynasties and Tang witnessed the development of new explanations of poetic omens more in line with the philosophical and religious tendencies of the medieval period. One of these tendencies was the personalization of what, in the Han, had often been attributed to something more like mechanism. Whereas Wang Chong had credited children's ditties to the influence of Mars's "overwhelming *yang qi*," for instance, a number of Six Dynasties and Tang texts, from Gan Bao's 干寶 (d. 336) *In Search of the Supernatural* (*Soushen ji* 搜神記) to Pan Yan's 潘炎 (fl. 708) "Rhapsody on the Children's Ditty" ("Tongyao fu" 童謠賦), describe the Sparkling Deluder Star—now an immortal in the Daoist pantheon—taking the form of a child, "coming down to earth to create a children's ditty in order to communicate to the ruler" 降爲童謠兮告聖君.[17] Such poetic omens were now personalized, religious revelations

14. For this text, and the problems in reconstructing it, see Vankeerberghen and Lin, "*Shangshu dazhuan* de chengshu."

15. Ban Gu, *Han shu*, 27a.1377.

16. Wang Chong, *Lunheng jiaoshi*, 22.943–44 and 23.958.

17. Gan Bao, *Xinjiao Soushen ji*, 8.69; Pan Yan, "Tongyao fu," in Dong Gao et al., *Quan Tang wen*, 442.4508b.

delivered, in the words of Zhang Yue 張說 (663–730), by "messengers from Heaven" 天使.[18]

This development in the understanding of poetic omens can be seen as representing a step toward the literati, and it may have further paved the way for another: the appropriation of poetic prognostication by members of the religious orders that flourished in the Six Dynasties and Tang. In an early instance of this trend, *Song shu* records a children's ditty that had been started by the Eastern Jin Buddhist monk Zhu Tanlin 竺曇林, predicting (once its riddles were decoded) that Liu Yu 劉裕 (363–422) would defeat Huan Xuan 桓玄 (369–404) and overthrow the Jin dynasty.[19] *History of the Sui* (*Sui shu* 隋書), compiled a little more than a century later, similarly attributes to the Daoist patriarch Tao Hongjing 陶弘景 (456–536) a "pentasyllabic verse" (*wuyan shi* 五言詩) that predicted Hou Jing's 侯景 (503–552) rebellion against the Liang at least thirty years in advance.[20] Over the course of the Tang, anecdotes of this sort became so common that they account for the preponderance of Tang dynasty poetic omens preserved from recognizably Tang sources. Poetic omens of this kind even seem to have played a role in legitimizing the dynasty at important points in its history, as according to Wen Daya's 溫大雅 (d. 629) eyewitness account of the Tang founding, Li Yuan 李淵 (566–635) was not persuaded to ascend the throne until he heard that his accession had been predicted in "songs" 歌謠 composed by the "spirit person" 神人 Huihua Ni 慧化尼 (unknown elsewhere, but from her appellation here, a Buddhist nun) and in a "poetic prognostication" 詩讖 written by the Daoist Wei Yuansong 衛元嵩 (fl. 570).[21]

That such religious orders still remained at a certain mystifying remove from the literati who recorded their poetic omens may be suggested by the fact that all pre-Tang sources are silent on the question of exactly how they came up with their prognostications. Tang texts, however, do occasionally offer humanizing insight into the process. Sometimes these adepts are depicted as themselves taken by surprise by their own ability, as in a story

18. Zhang Yue, "Huangdi zai Luzhou xiangrui song" 皇帝在潞州祥瑞頌, in Dong Gao et al., *Quan Tang wen*, 221.2230a.

19. Shen Yue, *Song shu*, 31.919.

20. Wei Zheng et al., *Sui shu*, 22.637.

21. See Bingham, "The Rise of Li in a Ballad Prophecy"; and Bokenkamp, "Time after Time."

about the Daoist Li Xiazhou 李遐周, whose "techniques of the *dao*" (*daoshu* 道術) enabled him to write poems predicting the An Lushan rebellion but apparently did not allow him to understand that prediction until it came true.[22] Elsewhere, poetic prophecy seems to be an offshoot of the admirable insight such adepts possessed into darker layers of reality. When in the Tianbao period (742–756), for example, Gao Shi 高適 (d. 765) memorialized to the court a poetic omen that had supposedly foretold the empire's flourishing, he described the composition in the following terms:

> The arising of auspicious portents truly derives from the governance of a [righteous] king; the emergence of poetry derives at base from the mores of the state (*guo feng*). Humbly I observe that the mother of a certain Mr. Lu of Fanyang, *née* Wang, of Langya, had a nature that matched with the mysterious and faint and a substance that matched with the still and silent; she was refined and subtle with the root of the *dao* and sped to the gate of the mysterious. She thoroughly connected with the mind of heaven and earth and so in advance recorded a flourishing of excellent portents. Back in the second year of the Jinglong reign (708), she wrote a palindrome poem on "The Heavenly Treasure," in 812 words. It has a set number to its cycling, just as cold and hot alternate in due course; and its responsive transformations are inexhaustible, so it can be said to be unfathomed by *yin* and *yang* [like the *dao* itself]. She thus advised her son, saying: "After I die, you should put this down in a secret record. You will meet with a period wherein the court follows the great *dao* and will encounter an exceptional ruler. When this happens, present the immortal chart [i.e., the palindrome poem, which would have visually resembled a diagram] I have made to him."
>
> 符瑞之興，實由王政；歌詩之作，本自國風. 伏見范陽盧某母琅琊王氏，性合希夷，體於靜默，精微道本，馳騖元關，旁通天地之心，豫紀休徵之盛. 去景龍二載，撰天寶迴文詩，凡八百一十二字. 循環有數，若寒暑之遞遷；應變無窮，謂陰陽之莫測. 誡其子曰：吾沒之後，爾密記之. 當逢大道之朝，必遇非常之主. 則以圖之製，便可上言.[23]

22. This is how the story is presented in Lu Gui's 盧瑰 (fl. early tenth century) now-lost *Shu qing shi* 抒情詩 (which gives the name as Li Jinzhou 李進周); see Li Fang et al., *Taiping guangji*, 163.1184–85. Zheng Chuhui's 鄭處誨 (*jinshi* 834) account has it that others did not understand his poems (Zheng Chuhui, *Minghuang zalu*, 2.33).

23. Gao Shi, "Wei Dongping Xue Taishou jin Wangshi ruishi biao" 爲東平薛太守進王氏瑞詩表, in Gao Shi, *Gao Shi ji jiaozhu*, 305–6.

Here Ms. Wang's capacity to produce portents apparently derives from her access to the mysterious *dao*, which underlies the world's changes and thus allows her to predict them.

Some of the language Gao uses here is clearly Daoist in inclination. But it also echoes the Xuanxue/"obscure learning"–inflected thought of contemporary Classical study and thus signals how sharp distinctions that had previously been drawn between the Classics and poetic prodigies had by this point begun to break down.[24] Gao's claim that Ms. Wang's poem matches the *dao* in being "unfathomed by *yin* and *yang*," for example, directly recalls the official Tang interpretation of the *Classic of Changes* (*Yi jing* 易經), wherein we read that the *dao* "is what *yin* and *yang* do not fathom" 陰陽不測—an idea that provides a stark contrast to the mechanisms of *qi* by which Han writers understood poetic omens to be produced.[25] Equally important, Gao attempts in the first sentence of his memorial to link Ms. Wang's omen to the *Guo feng* 國風 ("Airs [or Mores] of the States") section of the *Shi jing*. In making this connection, Gao might have been drawing on the authority of the Tang subcommentary on that classic, *The Corrected Interpretations of Mao's Recension of the Classic of Poetry* (*Mao Shi zhengyi* 毛詩正義), since its introduction depicts the *Shi jing* as full of poetic omens.

> The arising of sadness and happiness is mysteriously one with what is so-of-itself (*ziran*); the beginnings of joy and anger are not within human control. Therefore, swallows and sparrows express their feelings in their chirping, and simurghs and phoenixes dance and sing. Thus, the antecedents of poetry's logic are at one with the creation of the universe, and the use of poetry's traces changes according to its cycles.
>
> 若夫哀樂之起, 冥於自然; 喜怒之端, 非由人事. 故燕雀表啁噍之感, 鸞鳳有歌舞之容, 然則詩理之先, 同夫開闢; 詩迹所用, 隨運而移.[26]

In context, the primary problem the editors of this commentary are trying to solve in this quote is the fact that—unlike the rest of the Classics,

24. For Xuanxue-inflected Classicism in the Tang, see Bender, "*The Corrected Interpretations of the Five Classics.*"

25. *Zhou Yi zhushu*, 7.149a.

26. *Mao Shi zhengyi*, "*Mao Shi zhengyi* xu," 3a.

which were originally produced by sages—many of the poems in the *Shi jing* derive from the nonsagely folk, who lack the authority to ground a classic. The subcommentary's solution is to suggest that the folk are a conduit for omens: their production of poetry is as spontaneous (*ziran*) and thus as revelatory of the deeper workings of the world as was the portentous appearance of the phoenix in response to the virtue of King Wen of Zhou. By linking Ms. Wang's palindrome poem with this tradition, Gao Shi assures the court there is nothing heterodox about her prognostications and that, in fact, they merely affirm the continuities between the current emperor and the ancient sages.

Similar connections between poetic omens and the Classics can also be found elsewhere in surviving Tang dynasty materials.[27] If *Mao Shi zhengyi* derives from the beginning of the dynasty, for instance, a similar account of the *Classic of Poetry* can be found near the end, in the preface to Gu Tao's 顧陶 (fl. 856) *Selections of Tang Poetry Arranged by Category* (*Tangshi leixuan* 唐詩類選), which argues that in the time of the ancient sages, "By getting [poetry] from reapers and wood-gatherers and presenting it to the court, they recognized in advance the sprouting of order and disorder: thus the importance of poetry is vast and far-reaching" 得芻蕘而上達，萌治亂而先覺. 詩之義也，大矣遠矣.[28] Tang readers would not have missed the echo of the *Yi jing*'s "its importance is vast" 義大矣, a phrase that is cited more than a dozen times in surviving Tang discussions of literature—including several official productions of the court—to the effect that the ancient sages "observed the patterns of heaven [i.e., astral signs] to know the changing times, and observed human patterns [i.e., literature] to complete the empire's moral transformation" 觀乎天文以察時變，觀乎人文以化成天下.[29] In each invocation of this phrase, a connection is drawn between literature and the portents that court astrologers observed

27. An example very close to Gao Shi's can also be found in Kāśyapa Zhizhong's 迦葉志忠 708 memorial presenting mantic folksongs to Empress Wei (d. 710) by saying that they manifest "the virtue of the Queen Consort" 后妃之德, a phrase from the Mao "Great Preface" to the *Shi jing*. See Liu Xu et al., *Jiu Tang shu*, 51.2173.

28. Li Fang et al., *Wenyuan yinghua* 文苑英華, 714.3686b.

29. The idea that *wen*'s "timely importance is vast" 時義大矣 is found in several places in the *Yi jing*; see *Zhou Yi zhushu*, 2.48b and 3.62b. For citations of this phrasing used with reference to contemporary literature, see Yang Jiong 楊炯 (ca. 650–ca. 693), *Yang Jiong ji*, 3.34; Xiao Yingshi 蕭穎士 (717–768), "Wei Chen Zhengqing jin *Xu shangshu* biao" 爲陳正卿

in the heavens, a connection that Tang intellectuals thus grounded, in stark contrast to their Han predecessors, in the *Classics*.

All these ideas appear in texts surviving from the early years of the Song as well, perhaps indicating the degree to which the nascent Song court, which quite explicitly set out to imitate the Tang, took this vision as characteristic of Tang ideology. The court-sponsored 1013 compendium, *Primal Tortoise of the Bureau of Bamboo-Strips* (*Cefu yuangui* 冊府元龜), for example, cites the above *Yi jing* passage prominently in the preface to its section on "Loving Literature" ("Hao wen" 好文) and invokes the idea that the poems of the *Shi jing* were poetic omens in the preface to its section on "Popular Ditties" ("Yaoyan" 謠言).[30] Beginning around the 1020s, however, interest in the connection between the Classics and state-oriented *yaochen* seems to have begun to diminish. What we find instead are an increasing number of discussions linking the canonical poetics of the *Classic of Poetry* to the burgeoning phenomenon of *shichen*: poetic omens by and about the literati.

This shift significantly changes the nature of the connection. In the case of *yaochen*, what had to be explained was the mechanism by which a particular sort of individual could predict events on such a large scale as the state. When it comes to *shichen*, by contrast, the author merely has to predict (generally inadvertently) what will happen to himself or his family. As a result, writers such as Wu Chuhou 吳處厚 (fl. 1087) turned to other aspects of *Shi jing* lore.

> Poetry articulates intent, and through words we know things: this is true and not deception. Li Gou [1009–1059] of the Jiangnan region was learned in the Classics and skilled at writing, and when he took the official exams, he claimed first place in a face-to-face test with the emperor. However, he once wrote a poem that went:
>
> People say that where the sun sets is the edge of heaven,
> but as I gaze toward heaven's edge, I do not see my home.
> I truly regret that green mountains block my view with their shining,
> and that now, even the green mountains have been blocked by clouds.

進續尚書表, in Dong Gao et al., *Quan Tang wen*, 322.3267a; and Lü Wen 呂溫 (772–811), "Renwen huacheng lun" 人文化成論, in Dong Gao et al., *Quan Tang wen*, 628.6342b.

30. Wang Qingruo et al., *Cefu yuangui*, 40.457a and 894.10576a.

Someone of understanding said, "Observing the meaning of this piece, it has many layers of obstruction; thus I fear that Mr. Li will not be successful in his career." In the end, it was as he said.

Similarly, before Lord Chen Wenhui [Chen Yaozuo 陳堯佐, 963–1044] had met with success, he once wrote a poem that went:

> Over ten-thousand leagues of fine mountains, the clouds suddenly withdraw;
> on this lone tower, the moonlight is bright as the rain begins to clear.

Observing this poem's meaning, we can see that it is different from Li Gou's. Is it not appropriate that Wenhui should have become prime minister and lived to over eighty years of age?

詩以言志, 言以知物, 信不誣矣. 江南李覯, 通經術, 有文章, 應大科, 召試第一. 嘗作詩曰: 人言日落是天涯, 望極天涯不見家. 堪恨碧山相掩映, 碧山還被暮雲遮. 識者曰: 觀此詩意, 此有重重障礙, 李君恐時命不偶. 後竟如其言. 又陳文惠公未達時, 嘗作詩曰: 千里好山雲乍斂, 一樓明月雨初晴. 觀此意, 與李君異矣. 然則文惠致位宰相, 壽餘八十, 不亦宜乎?[31]

In these stories, Wu appeals not to the legendary practice of collecting the poetry from among the folk but rather to the claim, made paradigmatically in the "Great Preface," that poetry "articulates intent" 言志, perfectly externalizing poets' internal dispositions.[32] Both the poems of the *Shi jing* and Song-dynasty *shichen*, he implies, are manifestations of the character of the poet—and character, as the saying goes, is destiny.

This explanation of the relationship between poetry and omens might seem more rational, less "mystifying," than the accounts of *yaochen* discussed above. In some cases, we do find the apparently reasonable idea that poetry is an expression of a writer's complement of *qi*, and that that *qi* will also determine whether they are healthy or frail, energetic or retiring.[33] Elsewhere, however, we find more mysterious processes at work in *shichen* as well. The 1169 collection *Matters Ancient and Modern, Divided by Category* (*Fenmen gujin leishi* 分門古今類事), for instance, attributes *shichen* to the workings of fate.[34] The preface explains that the collection

31. Wu Chuhou, *Qingxiang zaji*, 7.3a–b.
32. *Mao Shi zhengyi* 1.13a.
33. See Weixinzi, *Xinbian Fenmen gujin leishi*, 13.200.
34. See Weixinzi, *Xinbian Fenmen gujin leishi*, 14.215–16.

> records without exception [all anecdotes that show that] flourishing and decay, failure and success, nobility and baseness, poverty and wealth, death and life, longevity and early death, along with every motion and stillness, every word and every silence, every drink we take and bite we eat—our fate [in all of these things] is determined beforehand, and is given shape in dreams, portended in divination, and seen in physiognomy, ***and manifests correspondences*** between omens and what is experienced.
>
> 凡前定興衰、窮達、貴賤、貧富、死生、壽夭, 與夫一動一靜、一語一默、一飲一啄, 分已定於前, 而形於夢, 兆於卜, 見於相, 見應於讖驗者, 莫不錄之.[35]

Clearly, the idea that poetic omens (which make up one of the categories of materials collected in this text) might manifest more mysterious facets of reality—that they might be "determined," as the *Fenmen gujin leishu* puts it elsewhere in this preface, "in the darkness" 定於幽冥—had not disappeared. Instead, passages like this one suggest that these mysterious levels of reality had merely become more accessible and more germane to the daily life of the literati in Song accounts of *shichen* than they generally appeared to be in Six Dynasties and Tang accounts of *yaochen*. In contrast with these earlier texts, it is in the Song no longer merely religious adepts, madmen, children, or the uncanny folk who have access to these mysteries. Ordinary literati have it as well, in their dreams, in their poetry, and—as Wang Mao 王楙 (1151–1213) explains in his account of poetic omens—in their minds, the quintessentially mantic organ.[36]

Various other mechanisms that might account for *shichen* are also explored in Song texts, including the common idea that one might effectively curse oneself or others by writing inauspicious verse.[37] At this

35. "Shuben *Fenmen gujin leishi* xu" 蜀本分門古今類事序, in Weixinzi, comp., *Xinbian Fenmen gujin leishi*, 1.

36. Wang Mao, *Yeke congshu*, 19.183.

37. See the common attitude criticized in Huihong's 惠洪 (1071–1128) *Lengzhai yehua*, 4.37: "When you're rich you should not be talking about poverty; when young and hale you should not be talking about decline and old age; and when healthy and strong you should not be talking about sickness or death. When someone breaks these rules, people call that a *shichen*" 富貴中不得言貧賤事, 少壯中不得言衰老事, 康強中不得言疾病事死亡事, 脫或犯之, 人謂之詩讖. The same attitude is also criticized in Hong Mai's 洪邁 (1123–1202) *Rongzhai suibi*, 1.14.

point, however, further discussion of these ideas would largely reaffirm the narrative traced in this section and the last regarding the gradual migration of poetic omens to the provinces of the literati. Instead of belaboring that point, I turn now to consider how a recognition of this trend might contribute to understanding better the history of the supposedly nonmantic mainstream of poetry in middle-period China.

Poetic Omens and Poetic Thought

On this question, there are obvious limitations to what we can say with confidence. For most periods of Chinese history, there are relatively few surviving sources that explicitly link mainstream poetics with poetic omens, and the sources that do generally do so only glancingly. In some cases, however, a sensitivity to what sorts of omens were recognized at a given time can highlight previously overlooked facets of contemporary poetic discourse. This is true even when it comes to famous texts that have otherwise been well mined for their poetic thought.

I can find little evidence suggesting a strong connection between poetic omens and elite literary thought in the Han or the Six Dynasties. Instead, as I have already indicated, the few explicit discussions of poetic omens that survive tend to draw a clear distinction between the ditties of village children and the literary culture to which elites were supposed to aspire. Wang Chong, for instance, argues pointedly that the sort of intelligence that can be discerned in folk chants is fundamentally different from the knowledge of sages and worthies, which is achieved by learning. Children's ditties, he maintains, are an "aberration" or "prodigy" (*yao* 妖) of a sort more similar to a shaman (*wu* 巫) channeling the words of a spirit (*shen* 神).[38] And although the distinction between such mediumism and elite culture might be seen as breaking down in such famous early medieval works of literary theory as Lu Ji's 陸機 (261–303) "Poetic Exposition on Literature" ("Wen fu" 文賦) or Liu Xie's 劉勰 (ca. 460s–520s) *The Literary Mind and the Carving of Dragons* (*Wenxin diaolong* 文心雕龍)—both of which discuss literary creativity in

38. Wang Chong, *Lunheng jiaoshi*, 26.1082.

images drawn from shamanic spirit journeys—neither of these texts discuss poetic omens.[39]

In focusing attention on some of the more "mysterious" aspects of literary composition, however, texts such as *Wen fu* and *Wenxin diaolong* may have prepared the way for the eventual incorporation of poetic omens into Tang criticism. As is well known, the eighth and ninth centuries witnessed a proliferation of poetic discourse that suggests excellent lines come from "searching in the dark" (*mingsou* 冥搜), are inspired by the "aid of the spirits" (*shenzhu* 神助), draw on unaccountable "visions" (*jing* 境), and require that an author "pluck the remarkable from beyond images . . . and inscribe thought of the darkest mysteries" 采奇於象外 . . . 寫冥奧之思.[40] Tang sources also preserve numerous statements suggesting that the arcane practices of Buddhists and Daoists might aid in the production of verse that is nonetheless often indistinguishable from literati writings.[41] This effacement of clear boundaries between the mechanisms responsible for the production of elite poetry, on the one hand, and poetic prodigies, on the other, may have allowed the latter to become in this period a possible paradigm for understanding the former.

The earliest text I have found that directly invokes poetic omens in its discussion of mainstream verse is the early eighth-century Wuchen 五臣 ("Five Officials") commentary to the great medieval anthology *Selections of Refined Literature* (*Wen xuan* 文選). In a memorial introducing this commentary, Lü Yanzuo 呂延祚 (fl. ca. 718) depicts *Wen xuan* as a collection of omens produced by adepts possessed of mysterious insight into recondite realms of significance:

> Since the time of the [*Classic of*] *Poetry*, nothing is greater than [*Wen xuan*]. It preserves words impassioned and intense, and when we assessed the

39. Liu Xie comes closest in the "Yuefu" 樂府 and "Shixu" 時序 chapters of *Wenxin diaolong*, where he brings up the *Shi jing* mythology that adept interpreters could recognize the fate of a kingdom from its music. See Liu Xie, *Zengding Wenxin*, 7.82 and 45.539.

40. The final quote derives from Jiaoran's 皎然 (ca. 720–ca. 798) *Shiyi* 詩議; see Zhang Bowei, *Quan Tang Wudai shige*, 108. These discourses have been discussed in Owen, *The End of the Chinese "Middle Ages,"* 107–29.

41. On this topic, see Owen, "How Did Buddhism Matter in Tang Poetry?"; Mazanec, "How Poetry Became Meditation in Ninth Century China"; and Bender, "Against the Monist Model."

> matters they spoke of, [we could tell that their authors] lodged their minds in the hidden and subtle, darkening its omens, and that they adorned things to subtly criticize, borrowing other eras to tether their feelings [about their own]. If one does not have mysterious understanding, one cannot penetrate [the text's] meaning.
>
> 風雅其來, 不之能尚. 則有遺詞激切, 揆度其事, 宅心隱微, 晦滅其兆, 飾物反諷, 假時雜情, 非夫幽識, 莫能洞究.[42]

Explicitly mantic language of the sort found in this preface does not appear commonly in the commentary itself, and as far as I know, scholars have never considered the possibility that Lü was serious in suggesting that the authors collected in *Wen xuan* produced "darkened omens." Instead, the Wuchen annotators' propensity to tie the poetry in *Wen xuan* to "the affairs of the writers' times" has usually been understood as following in the tradition of the Mao-Zheng commentaries on the *Shi jing*.[43] Here, however, our recognition of the common Tang dynasty connection between the *Shi jing* and poetic omens—seen once again in Lü Yanzuo's memorial—may offer a new angle on Tang interpretative practice.

Chinese poetic omens are never clear: whether *yaochen* or *shichen*, all depend on reading the poem as saying something radically different from what it seems to be saying. Sometimes the meaning of such omens is only disclosed retrospectively by the events they turn out to predict; at other times, it can be understood in advance by acute interpreters. An example of this sort of interpretation can be found in an anecdote recorded in *History of the Jin* (*Jin shu* 晉書):

> When Wang Gong [d. 398] was defending Jingkou, he raised troops to punish Wang Guobao [d. 397]. A folk ditty went:
>
> In past years you ate white rice;
> this year you eat barley husks.
> The lord of heaven is punishing you,
> making it stick in your throat. . . .

42. Lü Yanzuo, "Jin jizhu *Wen xuan* biao" 進集注文選表, in Dong Gao et al., *Quan Tang wen*, 300.3042b.

43. For instance, see Zheng Tingyin, Wen xuan *wuchen zhushi*, which analyzes the Wuchen commentary in terms of techniques derived from *Shi jing*.

Someone of understanding said, "'In past years you ate white rice': this speaks of [Wang Gong] attaining his ambition. 'This year you eat barley husks': husks are coarse and foul, and the essence of the barley is gone; this indicates that he will be defeated. This is the lord of heaven punishing him. To have it 'stick in your throat' means that air won't get through. This is an omen of death. . . ." Wang Gong soon died.

王恭鎮京口，舉兵誅王國寶. 百姓謠云："昔年食白飯，今年食麥餅. 天公誅適汝，教汝捻嚨喉. . . ." 識者曰："昔年食白飯，言得志也. 今年食麥餅，餅粗穢，其精已去，明將敗也. 天公將加鐕適而誅之也. 捻嚨喉，氣不通，死之祥也. . . ." 恭尋死.[44]

In terms of its interpretative leaps, the reading offered in this passage by "someone of understanding" is relatively tame: poetic omens often use more elaborate sorts of indirection, involving puns, the rebus-like composition of single characters out of sequential characters in a line, and five-phase correspondence.[45] Yet even in this anecdote, we can discern in the "someone of understanding" an ostentatious interpretative virtuosity that resembles that evinced by the Wuchen commentators in their readings of *Wen xuan*. Consider, for example, the opening lines of their commentary to Cao Zhi's 曹植 (192–232) "To Ding Yi" ("Zeng Ding Yi" 贈丁儀), in which details that apparently pertain to the poet's immediate experience are taken as omens of the state:[46]

At the beginning of autumn, the cold air comes;
the trees of the courtyard subtly wither and let fall.

[Commentary:] This refers to the *dao* of petty people growing; it begins from subtlety.

44. Fang Xuanling et al., *Jin shu*, 28.848.

45. These techniques have been cataloged in several places, including Bolianzi, *Gudai yuyan quanshu*, 190–256, which provides useful examples of each. For a less systematic but usefully illustrated account of such techniques, see Z. Lu, *Power of the Words*, 116–41.

46. In particular, they take the poem as a whole as criticizing "Emperor Wen's having enough furs and cloaks for himself and not thinking of people below him" 文帝衣裘自足而不念下人之無衣也. If the use of the title "Emperor Wen" is supposed to denote that Cao Pi 曹丕 (187–226) was emperor at the time this poem was written, the interpretation is impossible, since one of Cao Pi's first acts as emperor was the execution of Ding Yi (d. 220) and his family. For the interpretation to be even remotely plausible, the poem would have had to have been written after 217, when Cao Pi was created crown prince, but before his accession in 220.

Congealing frost lies on the jade stairs;
a cool breeze buffets the soaring pavilions.

[Commentary:] [Cao and Ding] are treading on congealing frost that will ultimately turn to hard ice: this refers to secret plots achieving success. "A cool breeze buffets the soaring pavilions" hints that orders are coming from below to those above.

"初秋涼氣發, 庭樹微銷落": 喻小人道長, 從微起也. "凝霜依玉除, 清風飄飛閣": 履凝霜至於堅冰, 謂陰謀漸長也. "清風飄飛閣" 喻教令自下而上也.[47]

Although this interpretation has obvious roots in the Mao commentary concepts of stimulus-image (*xing* 興) and comparison (*bi* 比) as well as in the development of those concepts in Wang Yi's 王逸 (ca. 89–158) commentary to the *Verses of Chu* (*Chu ci* 楚辭), it is more flamboyantly interpretative than either. Comparison with Li Shan's 李善 (d. 689) commentary on the same poem suggests that the connections between these images and their ostensible political import were not so conventional as to be assumed by Tang readers; instead, the Wuchen commentators, who are critical of Li's interpretative reticence, are clearly offering a hermeneutical coup in divining the coming of governmental disorder in what might seem to be mere observations of autumn weather.[48] By emphasizing that their commentary derives from "mysterious understanding" (*you shi* 幽識), in other words, the Wuchen commentators position themselves in roughly the role of the "someone of understanding" (*shizhe* 識者) who appears so regularly in anecdotes concerning poetic omens. In this respect, their work is more distinct from earlier hermeneutics than has often been claimed. Their rebus-like reconstructions of the historical contexts behind poems should be seen as a phenomenon proper to the Tang, when poetic omens with political implications had begun being ascribed to literati.

Further development along these lines can be discerned in the "Poetry Standards" (*shige* 詩格, brief treatises containing poetic pedagogy and exemplary criticism) of the late eighth through tenth centuries, at least a few of which implicitly or explicitly compare poetry to omens. The clear-

47. Xiao Tong, *Xinjiaoding Liujia zhu Wen xuan*, 3:24.1493.

48. For their criticism of Li Shan, see Lü Yanzuo, "Jin jizhu *Wen xuan* biao," in Dong Gao et al., *Quan Tang wen*, 300.3042b.

est example can be found in *The Secret Meanings of the* Classic of Poetry (*Ernan mizhi* 二南密旨), a ninth-century *shige* attributed to Jia Dao 賈島 (779–843).[49] This text—whose title, incidentally, offers further evidence of the Tang connection between the *Shi jing* and poetic omens—provides its readers a long list of poetic images and topics that can serve as "omens" (*zhao* 兆) of state situations. "Late autumn," for example, "is an omen that the ruler is getting more benighted" 殘秋君加昏亂之兆也, whereas "late winter is an omen that cruelty is coming to an end and enlightenment beginning" 殘冬酷虐欲消向明之兆也.[50] This language of omens also features in its readings of individual poems.

> A poem by Li Duan [d. ca. 784] goes: "From circling in the clouds, a pair of cranes descends; / across the water, a single cicada cries." This is an omen that the careers of worthy people will advance.
>
> 李端詩: "盤雲雙鶴下, 隔水一蟬鳴." 此賢人趨進兆也.[51]

As in the Wuchen commentary, this comment should probably be understood as an ostentatious interpretative leap, revealing the "secret meanings" of poetry that will not be accessible to any but the most adept "people of understanding." Other *shige* make this feature of their interpretative practice even clearer. As *Shiping* 詩評 (*Poems Evaluated*) puts it, "If you had all those throughout the world who do not understand poetry look at a poem until the end of time, they would only see its words, not its meaning: this is poetry's wondrousness" 使天下人不知詩者, 視至灰劫, 但見其言, 不見其意, 斯爲妙也.[52] Going a step further, *Essential Standards of the Airs and Sao* (*Fengsao yaoshi* 風騷要式), a tenth-century *shige* that shows the influence of the *Ernan mizhi*, suggests that many of the meanings its interpretations uncover were probably not intended by the poets. Instead, poets "often criticize the state spontaneously, without

49. The attribution has been questioned, but since the poetry discussed in the text is largely from the poets of the Dali 大歷 reign (766–779), it is thought to have been put together during or shortly after Jia's time. See Zhang Bowei, *Quan Tang Wudai shige*, 371.

50. Zhang Bowei, *Quan Tang Wudai shige*, 378.

51. Zhang Bowei, *Quan Tang Wudai shige*, 381.

52. Zhang Bowei, *Quan Tang Wudai shige*, 501.

realizing it" 往往自諷自刺而不能覺.[53] This statement cannot help but remind us of those Tang *yaochen* that were obscure even to their authors.

Over the course of the eleventh and twelfth centuries, the *shige* genre declined and was replaced by more discursive forms of poetry criticism, such as "poetry chats" (*shihua* 詩話) and *biji*. These genres represent the main venues for the preservation of *shichen* anecdotes, a fact that rather changes the nature of the relationship between poetic omens and poetic thought. If we previously had to be sensitive to instances wherein criticism of elite poetry drew more or less subtly on contemporary ideas about poetic omens, by the Song, poetic omens have become normalized as explicit instances of such criticism. Instead of asking, therefore, whether and how an awareness of poetic omens might help us better understand the poetics that prevailed in this period, we might better ask what aspects of those paradigms are crystalized in *shichen* anecdotes.[54] In the space that remains, I want to point out two such aspects.

The first has to do with the increasing domestication of the futures foretold by poetic omens. Previously, poetic omens had dealt almost exclusively with affairs of state, the dignity and importance of which might have made them seem a realm more propitious to the eruption of the darker strata of reality than were the vicissitudes of literati experience. In their form, however, *shichen* anecdotes suggest that the personal histories of the literati are no less tied to these darker strata than are the grander vistas of state history. In this context, it is worth noting that the Song rise of *shichen* was roughly contemporaneous with the invention of new critical genres like the year-chart (*nianpu* 年譜) and the chronologically organized (*biannian* 編年) collection, which also work to ground poetry in narratives of poets' individual experiences rather than those state-level processes to which it was primarily tied by Tang works like the Wuchen

53. Zhang Bowei, *Quan Tang Wudai shige*, 451.

54. This question has been discussed by several scholars. See Zou Zhiyong, *Songdai biji shixue*, 44–73; and Wang Dianyin, "Shichen, you yiwei." These discussions are too complicated to fully summarize here, but both are particularly useful in linking the phenomenon of *shichen* to what they consider a general predilection of premodern Chinese readers to take the biographical and historical lives of poets as inextricably central to their poems. As should be clear, I think this predilection was more historically variable than it is often assumed to have been.

commentary and the "Poetry Standards."[55] Rather than suggesting, therefore, that poetry was "not historical" and that its "true significance may lie on another order of experience from that of daily life"—as Pauline Yu worried—we might speculate that the increasing incorporation of poetic omens into elite literary discourse in the Song was part of the process by which poetry became understood as properly focused on the literati's daily lives and by which their daily lives attained to the level of history.

This elevation of literati lives was, however, only an equivocal gain, as can be seen in the second way *shichen* crystallize larger tendencies of Song dynasty poetic culture. Late Tang and Song *shichen* anecdotes suggest that as poetic omens became less alien to the literati, their own poetry sometimes took on the uncanniness that had previously been characteristic only of the poetry of the folk and religious adepts. We find, for instance, numerous stories in these periods of writers who were horrified by the mantic significance of the poems they produced. In the ninth-century *New Accounts of the Great Tang* (*Da Tang xinyu* 大唐新語), we read of Liu Xiyi 劉希夷 (651?–680?) revising a line he recognizes as inauspicious, only to produce an even more obvious omen of his impending death.[56] A later anecdote from the *Fenmen gujin leishi* similarly describes the last ruler of the Southern Tang, Li Yu 李煜 (ca. 937–978), devastated to find that during a night of blackout drinking he had written a poem portending his and his polity's demise.[57] It was also possible in some cases for literati to write poems that inadvertently cursed their audience. Pang Yuanying's 龐元英 (fl. 1082) *Collection of Chats* (*Tansou* 談藪), for example, records a story of a man doomed by the unintended resonances of his friend's poem about a puppet, and Zhou Zizhi's 周紫芝 (1082–1155) *Poetry Chats from Bamboo Slope* (*Zhupo shihua* 竹坡詩話) tells of a poet whose ill-considered verse, ostensibly in the voice of the sort of imaginary abandoned woman commonly found in pre-Tang and Tang ballads, condemned his host's wife to death a few days later.[58] *Zhupo shihua* also records another case in

55. For a useful discussion of these topics, see Asami Yōji, *Chūgoku no shigaku ninshiki*, 385–459. For *shichen* as a species of historical contextualization, see Asami, *Chūgoku no shigaku ninshiki*, 460–82.

56. See Liu Su, *Da Tang xinyu*, 8.128.

57. Weixinzi, *Xinbian Fenmen gujin leishi*, 13.198.

58. See Pang Yuanying, *Tansou*, 200; and Zhou Zizhi, *Zhupo shihua*, 16a–b.

which it was not so much the content of the poem that was inauspicious as its quality. In this anecdote, the poet Guo Xiangzheng 郭祥正 (1035–1113) recognized he was soon to die because a couplet better than any he had ever written before came to him in a dream.[59] In all such instances, poetry became a space wherein literati increasingly had to worry about saying the wrong thing (or sometimes even the right thing). If Song poetry, therefore, tends toward the cheerful and bland in comparison with the more marked extremes of Tang verse, *shichen* anecdotes suggest that this may sometimes have been a cheeriness under compulsion.[60]

Conclusion

To summarize, the history of poetic omens tracks two shifts in literary thought: first, the development, in the late Six Dynasties and Tang, of what we might call an esoteric account of poetic production, and second, the dissolution of this esotericism in the Song and late imperial periods. In the Han, only the folk could access those obscure mechanisms of the cosmos that foretold the future, and then only inadvertently; literati were supposed to speak to politics through a more secular form of learning. In the Six Dynasties, however, peripheral members of the literati class began to draw on these mysteries to produce versified prophecy, and in the Tang, not only did it become a commonplace notion that the general poetic mores of the literati offered omens of dynastic fortune, but individual literati poems began to be interpreted as drawing arcane political lessons from mysterious insight. Finally, the Song witnessed the devaluation of this sort of insight as the sources of omens became so broadly accessible to literati poets that self-cursing became an occupational hazard and as the content of the portents they produced ceased to apply primarily to

59. Zhou Zizhi, *Zhupo shihua*, 16b.

60. This point is well illustrated by Song attitudes toward the Tang poet Meng Jiao 孟郊 (751–814). After he was mocked by Su Shi 蘇軾 (1037–1101), criticism of what was perceived as Meng Jiao's overwrought poetry became a veritable Song pastime. For a discussion of Meng Jiao's dramatic overreactions to failing (and later passing) the official examination as *shichen* foretelling his failure as an official, see Jiang Shaoyu 江少虞 (*jinshi* 1118), *Songchao shishi leiyuan*, 46.613.

state-level history. By this point, poetic omens no longer represented the sort of aspirational paradigm they had in the Tang but became instead a mark of the literati's increasingly inescapable historical consciousness.

One of the suggestions of this chapter is that these shifts in literary thought can be understood in more than one way. In previous work, I have seen them as epistemic ruptures (to use the Foucauldian terminology invoked by Fuller in the preceding chapter), fundamental reorientations of the models a culture uses to conceptualize itself and its world.[61] Though this chapter partly supports those arguments, it has also endeavored to provide an alternate account of this history, by which the development of poetic omens can be seen as largely continuous, with the steadily increasing propinquity of literati poetry and poetic omens over the course of a millennium contributing to the production of new and apparently opposed poetic paradigms. Several conclusions might be drawn from the fact that both perspectives offer a degree of insight. We might, for instance, question whether continuity and rupture, as models of literary history, are quite as mutually exclusive as some have recently suggested.[62] More to the point here, however, is the possibility that apparently vertiginous epistemic changes in some particular domain, such as medieval Chinese "literature," may in some cases result partly from the concatenation of more comprehensible cultural trajectories that are exiled beyond the margins of the subject by their treatment in special histories.

If the story traced here illustrates a theoretical point about literary history, in other words, it is that the core matter of the field will often fail to manifest a self-contained developmental logic, especially when it comes to cultures historically distant from the present scholarly culture that defines what "literary history" includes and excludes. In such historically distant cultures, phenomena that seem to lie on or beyond the borderlands of what we consider the "literary" may sometimes become

61. See Bender, *Du Fu Transforms*, and "Against the Monist Model."

62. For recent scholarship that draws a sharp division between literary histories that emphasize rupture and those that emphasize continuity, see Underwood, *Why Literary Periods Mattered*. Underwood's survey of the historical development of periodization in English literary studies does, however, provide useful insights into why different eras and academic cultures might incline to one model or the other, insights that might be applicable, mutatis mutandis, to Chinese literary studies as well.

part of its emic understanding, indexing and explaining epistemic shifts whose profundity would be alternately masked or inexplicable were we to look only at literature per se. For this reason, "the [special] historian's conception of his subject matter" cannot continue indefinitely dictating the inclusion and exclusion of materials in the literary history of such a historically distant cultural world. Instead, we must allow ourselves to be surprised by the diversity over time of the cultural formations that fit, nowadays, under the heading of "literature."