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腸攢非束竹，肱急是張弓。

晚樹迷新蝶，殘蛩憶斷虹。

古時嶼初靜，今日鑿空鳴。

繡沓褰長幔，紗幮結短封。

心搖如無鶴，骨出似飛龍。

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曲池眠乳鴨，小閣睡娃僮。

The Poetics of Decadence

Chinese Poetry of the
Southern Dynasties and Late
Tang Periods

Fusheng Wu

The Poetics of Decadence

*SUNY series in
Chinese Philosophy and Culture*

David L. Hall and Roger T. Ames, editors

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and Late Tang Periods*

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To Xiaolian, and our son, Jeremy Hao Wu

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Introduction

This book is an intertextual¹ study of decadent (*tuifei* 頹廢) poetry in the Chinese literary tradition. It considers specifically work from the periods of the Southern Dynasties and Late Tang,² when decadent poetry was produced in great quantity. It focuses on the works of four poets, namely, Xiao Gang 蕭綱 (503–51) or Emperor Jianwen of Liang dynasty 梁簡文帝 Li He 李賀 (790–816), Wen Tingyun 溫庭筠 (812?–66), and Li Shangyin 李商隱 (813–58). Its goal is to demonstrate that decadent poetry is among other things a poetic agenda that deliberately challenges and subverts the canonical concept and practice of poetry. It constituted a poetic genre with its own unique, complex, and self-reflexive verbal system. In taking such an intertextual approach I aim to demystify decadent poetry and disentangle it from its lurid overtones and sensational associations. By situating decadent poetry within the context of a conventional system of signs, we can for the first time use *tuifei* or decadence as a neutral critical term, rather than as a term of moral and political opprobrium, as it has been used in the Chinese tradition. Such an approach also provides us with an insight into the textual/intertextual nature of decadent poetry that traditional criticism, with its exclusive emphasis on subject matter, tends to neglect.

Indeed, the word *decadence* has evoked lurid associations. In the context of English and French literature:

The word “decadence” is at once a sobriquet for the historian, a reproach for the moralist, a condemnation for the literary purist. There immediately emerges the cliché of the superannuated aesthete, the dandy twirling his gold-headed cane, as he leers over his absinthe at a voluptuous woman strolling down the boulevard. Hence in the popular mind the literature of the decadence, exuding decay, is superficially preoccupied with the exotic and the erotic.³

In the Chinese literary tradition the mention of *tuifei* 頹廢, the closest Chinese equivalent of decadent, calls to mind the night-long drinking party of Chen Houzhu 陳後主 (553–604), the last emperor of Chen dynasty. Drunken and surrounded by singing girls, the emperor and his court poets composed one erotic poem after another even as his enemies were on the verge of capturing the city.⁴ Or the term suggests the poet/dandy Wen Tingyun, who, after dissipating all his financial resources and his official career while visiting brothels, then gets into a brawl with the police and receives a sound beating.⁵ The association is so strong that it has become a powerful myth, a myth that not only lends an aura of sensationalism to decadent literature, but has also generated a particular scholarly approach.

This approach is often marked by a tendency to take the part for the whole and to see all decadent literature as a single cultural and ideological entity, thus overlooking its textual and artistic richness and diversity. For instance, the erotic poetry of Xiao Gang and other court poets is often used to represent all Palace Style poetry, and Late Tang poetry is not infrequently typed as being preoccupied with the subtle, feminine mentality of disillusioned and delicate literati in an age of decline.⁶ This is compounded by the fact that in the Chinese literary tradition ideology and morality are often adopted as the standards of judgment. Specific literary analysis is frequently sacrificed for the coherence of a general intellectual picture. The following chapters will show that this approach often blinds us to other features—especially textual and generic features—that reveal the true nature of decadent poetry.

To achieve a more balanced understanding of decadent poetry we must first distance ourselves from the myth surrounding it. We begin by examining the original meanings of *tuifei* 頹廢 and its Western counterpart, *decadence*. Although they belong to two otherwise very

different cultures, the meaning and evolution of these two terms are strikingly similar. Despite its sensational associations, the Chinese compound *tuifei* was first employed by the historian Fan Ye 范曄 (398–444) in a very concrete sense, to refer to the decay of school buildings.⁷ Similarly in the West “decadence” (*decadentia*) was first defined by Peter Du Cange (1610–88), the lexicographer of late Latin, to describe farms and hills that had fallen into ruin.⁸ As time went on both *tuifei* and *decadence* came more and more to describe a moral, spiritual, and political state, such that their original association with material breakdown was completely obliterated by the newer metaphorical application. By now a *tuifei* or decadent building is a totally incomprehensible concept. The origins of the two phrases are lost.

Based on the etymology of “decadence,” the *New Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics* defines decadent literature to be “a ‘falling away’ (L.: *de-cadere*) from previously recognized conditions or standards of excellence.”⁹ This definition evokes the most important aspects of the original meaning of decadence, namely, the inevitable physical breakdown of farms, slopes, school buildings, and other objects.¹⁰ Decadence in literature is also envisaged as an inexorable and hence “natural” process in the development of literary history. Literature inevitably becomes decadent at some stage, precisely as nature and human construction are bound to decay with the passage of time. For a physical object decadence is a falling away from its solid foundation and construction. For literature decadence is a falling away from “previously *recognized* conditions or standards of excellence” (my emphasis) which, because of their “recognized” status, have been conventionalized or upheld as canonical.

I will problematize this definition through a close examination of theoretical and poetic texts from the Chinese tradition in the following chapters. First, to use the literary works of a certain age, however revered they are by later writers, as the ultimate criterion against which all subsequent writings are judged is essentially ahistorical, although ironically decadence makes sense only in a historical context. Moreover, decadent poetry in the Chinese tradition sets out to challenge the canon; it is a deliberate deviation from the norm. To be a “falling away” constitutes its very locus of significance. Thus, it is by no means natural or inevitable.

To begin, I delineate how what is not decadent, or what is healthy in literature, is dependent upon a set of conventional presumptions

as to what literature is or ought to be. These presumptions are the background against which decadent literature operates. A deviation like decadent literature can therefore only be understood fairly by relating it to the norm and the canon from which it is considered as to have fallen away.

This is where the first chapter of this work begins. It will establish a theoretical framework for the following four chapters, which are devoted to close textual and intertextual analysis of the works of the four aforementioned poets. It aims to define for the first time the concept of decadence in the Chinese literary tradition. I begin with the fundamental principle that “poetry expresses one’s will” (*shi yanzhi* 詩言志) and try to demonstrate through a close analysis of this maxim and other related documents from the classical tradition that this canonical principle, with its emphasis on spontaneity, naturalness, transparency of expression, and sociopolitical responsibility and moral seriousness of content, actually condemns any subsequent development of Chinese poetry to a state of decadence.

These canonical standards simply cannot accommodate the work of later poets who are more concerned with the artfulness of their works or who view poetic production not simply as a means to express one’s feelings and thoughts but also as a craft that can be learned through repeated, sometimes mechanical, practice. The poets in the Southern Dynasties court, for example, did not write their poetry to express their will; for them poetic production was a public game in which each poet was merely a player. Therefore they did not need a straightforward, transparent verbal medium as demanded by the above maxim and the Great Preface to *The Book of Songs*. Instead, they needed a highly sophisticated and artificial style that could make their game technically challenging and entertaining. But since the standards spelled out by these two documents had become ultimate values in the Chinese tradition, deviation from them is inevitably viewed as decadent.

Xiao Gang and Palace Style poetry (*gongtishi* 宮體詩), which are considered in the second chapter, illustrate the point. The project of Palace Style poetry is a deliberate attempt to undermine the canonical concept of poetry by carefully separating the aesthetic quality and concerns of poetry from its social and political obligations. In turning poetry into clever verbal play, it removes it from its exalted position as a state instrument for administering its people. Palace Style poetry

attends to artfulness of expression at the expense of depth of meaning, and thus has been considered as anathema in the Chinese tradition, having violated both the Confucian concept of literature and the Daoist idea of language. Confucianism regards social and political values of poetry as indispensable, and Daoism valorizes the function of language to communicate a profound meaning, rather than to ignore such communication by foregrounding itself, as Palace Style poetry does. But the significance of Palace Style poetry is not merely negative, because it demonstrates by its own practice the vulnerability of many presumptions in the Chinese tradition. For instance, before the Southern Dynasties period the dominant view of poetry had been the rigid Confucian notion that the sole function of poetry was to serve the state. The Daoist concept of language as a fishnet to be discarded as soon as the fish is caught was given new emphasis in the *xuanxue* 玄學 (dark and subtle learning) discussions of the Wei and Jin eras.¹¹ Had these principles actually held sway, the development of Chinese poetry would have been hindered. In particular, the structurally complex and technically demanding poetry of the Tang period would have been an impossibility. Consider, as an example, regulated verse (*lǜshi* 律詩), which is regarded by many as the tour de force of Tang poetry. This highly sophisticated and technical poetry would have been unthinkable if poetry were intended solely to “express one’s will” or if poets disdained their poetic language. Tang poetry, by contrast, employs complicated metrical patterns and formal rules that suggest the poet’s fascination and even obsession with the formal quality of his work, and this quality often tends to overwhelm the expressive function of poetry. One readily finds such instances in the works of Li He and Li Shangyin, and they even exist in the oeuvre of Du Fu. Palace Style poetry, in experimenting with tonal patterns, laid the groundwork for regulated verse. In challenging the fundamental assumptions of the Chinese literary tradition, such as the overemphasis on poetry’s sociopolitical role and the refusal to regard it as a complex linguistic craft, it broadened the view of literature and language, and made possible the emergence of a more imaginative and sophisticated poetry.

The next three chapters deal with three Late Tang poets whose poetry shows a noticeable continuity from the Palace Style convention. One of the clichés in the history of Chinese poetry is that the vitality of the Chinese poetic tradition (as represented by *The Book of Songs* and the poetry of the Han, Wei, and Jin periods) was lost in the

frivolous and artificially ornate works of the Southern Dynasties poets. But such vitality was regained on an even higher level during the High Tang period, only to be lost again in the Mid and Late Tang eras, when Chinese poetry was once more haunted by the ghost of the decadent Southern Dynasties poetry.¹² Li He, Wen Tingyun, and Li Shangyin are usually regarded as the most prominent representatives of this reassertion of the values and characteristics of the Southern Dynasties poetry, particularly the Palace Style poetry.¹³ I debunk these clichés surrounding Late Tang poetry. Through a careful reading of their poetic works, I will show that they all to a great extent transformed the impersonal, rigid, and superficial Palace Style poetry and formed their own distinctive characteristics. This is so even though the three self-consciously wrote in the Palace Style convention, which itself signifies a defiance of the canonical tradition because by Late Tang, Palace Style poetry had already become an archetype of decadence, and even though Southern Dynasties poetry often served as historical and artistic image for them to meditate upon. In each case—the baffling complexity of Li He, the tantalizing elusiveness of Li Shangyin, and the sensual indulgence of Wen Tingyun—the poet has transcended Palace Style poetry. One might still call their works “decadent,” but in this context the word no longer designates a single writing style applied to the works of poets who are little more than a group of interchangeable names. Rather, it has acquired new qualities and connotations that vary with the poet.

Decadence as a poetics in Chinese poetry has never been studied, certainly not thoroughly and systematically, and not by scholars inside China nor by those outside China. Recently works on the poets referred to above all concentrate on the poetry of individual poets, rather than considering them together under a unifying subject. The present study—the first attempt to define “decadence” systematically in the Chinese poetic tradition—will provide a much needed critical apparatus for a neglected yet important subject. By relating an often condemned poetic genre to the canonical tradition for the first time, I demonstrate that the so-called decadent poetry is a critique of the canon and convention. Removed from its sensational associations, it is better understood as an attempt on the part of a group of poets to find their own places in an already well established literary convention. The often violent denunciations hurled at them by traditional

criticism and the pervasive influences of decadent poetry on Chinese poetry suggest that they have achieved their goal.

As I stated at the beginning of the introduction, the main thesis of this study is that Chinese decadent poetry challenges the canonical tradition. It is pointless to argue now whether the poets actually "intended" this challenge. The best way to avoid this fallacy of intentionality is to look closely at what is in the text and see what it evokes in certain historical and cultural contexts. The context that I try to establish is that of the canonical tradition, particularly the canonical tradition vis-à-vis decadent poetry. Apart from examining theoretical documents such as the Great Preface to *The Book of Songs*, the most effective way to do this, I believe, is by investigating how decadent poetry was received during the various stages of the classical tradition. Thus, in conducting this intertextual analysis, I have studied readings and commentaries on decadent poetry by critics of different periods, particularly the critics of the Qing dynasty. While by no means do I regard the traditional poetic theory and criticism as a seamless whole, I have chosen to emphasize Qing criticism in establishing this context, for two reasons. First, we simply do not possess detailed contemporary readings and commentaries of the poetic texts used in this study. And second, the readings and commentaries by Qing critics are not only the most detailed, the most systematic, and the most sophisticated in the classical tradition, they are also the ones most helpful to our understanding the traditional exegetical convention because many of them were closely guided by the canonical views of poetry. As a contemporary Chinese scholar pointed out, Qing studies of poetry represent the most mature stage of poetry criticism in the classical tradition. They compensate for their lack of innovation by their exhaustive inclusion of nearly every aspect of the Chinese canon.¹⁴ Therefore, it is justifiable to use them as illustrations of canonical theory and criticism of poetry.¹⁵

Finally, I should point out that while this study touches upon some general cultural issues, these are treated mainly within the framework of literature in the sense of belles lettres. It will therefore tend to ignore some larger issues such as the sociopolitical history and significance of decadent poetry, although passing remarks on these issues will be made. The very breadth of decadence as a topic makes it

possible and almost necessary to study it from many different approaches. One can trace the evolution of the word, as Richard Gilman did in his *Decadence, The Strange Life of an Epithet*. One can study the topic from a philosophical point of view, as C. E. M. Joad's *Decadence: A Philosophical Enquiry*.¹⁶ One can investigate the intellectual and cultural history of a period in which decadent literature is produced in abundance, as in A. E. Carter's *The Idea of Decadence in French Literature 1830–1900* and Holbrook Jackson's *The Eighteen Nineties: A Review of Art and Ideas at the Close of Nineteenth Century*.¹⁷ The researcher on any topic must focus on those aspects that suit his or her interests and ability best, but in doing so he or she necessarily sacrifices features that would look essential to someone else. This cannot be avoided, and in our age of specialization this is a lesser sin than it might have been in an age like the Renaissance, when the scholar seemed able to master all human knowledge available to him. That time is gone forever—we have “fallen away” too far from that golden era. Living in a decadent age, I can proceed with peace of mind on a decadent study of a decadent topic.

Defining Decadence in the Chinese Poetic Tradition

As has been indicated in the Introduction, the concept of decadent literature as a “falling away” from “previously recognized” conditions and standards of excellence is predicated upon a set of conventional presumptions about the nature of “canon”¹ in a literary tradition. The canon is the background against which decadent literature operates. Therefore, let us begin our discussion with the canonical concept of literature. Such a concept was formed very early in the Chinese tradition, and the single most important statement about the nature of poetry² is the one recorded in *Shang shu* 尚書 (*The book of historical documents*):

Poetry expresses one's will; song prolongs one's words; sounds correspond to melody; instruments accord with sounds; when the eight tones are all balanced and do not encroach upon one another, spirits and human beings will be in harmony.

詩言志，歌永言，聲依永，律和聲，八音克諧，無相奪倫，神人以和。³

Unlike Aristotle's mimetic theory, which locates poetry at an external source,⁴ this expressive theory defines poetry as a movement from the internal to the external. Its origin is unequivocally located in the poet's heart or mind (*xin* 心).⁵ It also establishes the important

role that poetry is expected to play in regulating human affairs, hence the close link between the quality of poetry and certain social conditions. This view of poetry is further elaborated by another key document, the Great Preface to *The Book of Songs* (詩大序):

Poetry is where one's will goes. In mind [or heart] it is will; coming out in language, it is poetry. The emotions are stirred within and take on form in words. When words alone are inadequate, we speak them out in sighs. When sighing is inadequate, we sing them. When singing them is inadequate, unconsciously our hands dance them and our feet tap them.

詩者，志之所之也，在心爲志，發言爲詩。情動於中而形于言，言之不足故嗟嘆之，嗟嘆之不足故永歌之，永歌之不足，不知手之舞之，足之蹈之也。⁶

The assumption is that poetry flows from one's inner response to an external stimulus. It is a "natural"—that is, automatic—product of the stimulus-response process. Poetry is conceived as a psychobiological need of the human being, essential for maintaining the balance and health of mind and body. Not only does this formulation imply that spontaneity and sincerity are the most essential qualities in poetry, since any response that is forced or faked is not natural and hence cannot bring about the desired therapeutic result (of physical or mental health). It also implicitly mandates the linguistic style best equipped to fulfill such a task. Only the most straightforward, the most transparent, verbal medium can articulate one's feelings and thoughts effectively and spontaneously unleash one's mental and physical tensions. The complete absence of any discussion on technical aspects of poetic production in this preface⁷ indicates that poetry is not viewed as a craft to be mechanically pursued. To the contrary, tinkering with and polishing the product can only betray insincerity on the part of the poet, impede the process of communication, and deny the *raison d'être* of poetry. But as we will see later, it is precisely with such tinkering and polishing that decadent poetry is associated.

This view echoes Confucius's distrust of sophisticated speech. A passage in the *Analects* records that when someone criticized one of his students as being "truly virtuous, but not ready with his tongue," Confucius defended him with the following words:

What is the good of being ready with tongue? They who argue in sophisticated speech only make themselves despised. I do not know whether he is virtuous, but why should he show readiness of the tongue?

焉用佞？禦人以口給，屢憎於人。不知其仁，焉用佞？⁸

Confucius seems to be suggesting that sophisticated speech is incompatible with a virtuous personality. Similarly, the Great Preface indicates that in poetry an artificial and intricate verbal medium obstructs rather than enhances the communication of heartfelt thoughts and emotions. That is, only a spontaneous verbal medium can express a spontaneous reaction.

In the previously quoted passage from *Shang shu* there is another element that enormously influenced the Chinese attitude toward poetry—the belief that poetry can and should play a role in maintaining harmony between humankind and spirits or nature. Later, when Chinese society had evolved from its primitive state, when the functions of gods and spirits had been replaced by civil government, this semireligious mandate to maintain a harmony between humankind and spirits was transformed into a political mandate: poetry must help government to administer its people. It must help society to maintain order. It must, as Confucius says, serve to “stimulate [the will] (*xing* 興), observe [social customs] (*guan* 觀), hold together [members in a community] (*qun* 群), and voice grievance [about social injustice] (*yuan* 怨).”⁹ The Great Preface misses no opportunity to elaborate this concept:

Feelings are expressed in sounds; when sounds form in pattern, it is music. The music of a peaceful world is leisurely and happy, its politics is in order; the music of a disordered world is full of grievance and anger, its politics is in chaos. The music of a defeated country is sad, and its people are in trouble. Therefore, to uphold what is just, to correct what is wrong, to move heaven and earth, to reach the gods and spirits, nothing comes close to poetry. This is why the ancient kings use it to regulate husband and wife, to establish filial piety among people, to make their morality honest, to make their customs beautiful, and to improve the milieu in society.

情發於聲，聲成文謂之音。治世之音安以樂，其政和；亂世之音怨以怒，其政乖；亡國之音哀以思，其民困。故正得失，動天地，感鬼神，莫近於詩。先王以是經夫婦，成孝敬，厚人倫，美教化，移風俗。¹⁰

Throughout history the consensus has been that the texts we have been considering so far lay the foundation of the canon in the Chinese literary tradition. Xu Shen 許慎 (30–124), the author of the first Chinese dictionary, *Shuowen jiezi* 說文解字, takes poetry (*shi* 詩) and will (*zhi* 志) to be synonyms because “poetry is the will expressed in words”.¹¹ Zhu Ziqing 朱自清 refers to the statement that “poetry expresses one’s will” as “the founding principle of Chinese poetic theory.”¹² Stephen Owen regards the Great Preface to be:

the most authoritative statement on the nature and function of poetry in traditional China. Not only was it to be the beginning of every student’s study of the *The Book of Songs* from the Eastern Han through the Sung, its concerns and terminology became essential part of writing about poetry and learning about poetry. It was the one text on the nature of poetry that everyone knew from the end of Han on, and even when the Great Preface came under harsh attack in later ages, many positions in it remained almost universally accepted.¹³

Perhaps no one will dispute that any subsequent development in Chinese literature had to take into account of the two “recognized” conditions and standards of excellence advanced by these texts: (1) the spontaneity, sincerity, and naturalness of expression, and (2) “political correctness” of content. Together they constitute the cornerstone of Confucian poetic theory. However, in Confucius’s own or putative works we find some tensions that undermine this theory and its implied criteria.

It is clear that Confucius emphasizes the subject matter and practical function of poetry; for him poetry is an important means of achieving his social and political ideal. He once says that if one cannot use poetry in diplomatic missions—even though one could recite *The Book of Songs* in its entirety—there was no point in learning it.¹⁴ But in fact Confucius is never totally pragmatic, as evidenced by the tremendous emphasis he lays on the role and aesthetic appeal of ritual.

Ritual keeps social regulations from becoming tyrannical because it encourages people to act spontaneously and willingly. When filial piety becomes a ritual act, for instance, the son acts not only out of a sense of obligation and responsibility but also out of a sense of personal satisfaction, because the aesthetic elements of ritual transform the very act into artistic play.¹⁵ This is why Confucius expressed distaste for any "substance without form": "When substance (*zhi* 質) overwhelms the form (*wen* 文, or pattern), it is vulgar; when form overwhelms substance, it is extravagant. Only when one can achieve a balance between form and substance can one become a gentleman."¹⁶ Besides abhorring its vulgarity, Confucius also disliked the naked expression of content because it could never achieve effectively the goal it aims at. In another often cited remark he says "words without *wen* do not go very far."¹⁷

These words in praise of embellished linguistic expression seem to contradict the condemnation of sophisticated speech uttered by a ready-tongued person; or at least the difference between embellished words and sophisticated speech is not obvious. Moreover, the balance between form and content that Confucius seems to advocate is a delicate one, because compared with content, form is of a much more unstable nature. One can try to establish authority over the content of writing by relating it to the statement of one's intentions. In the Chinese tradition this endeavor carries enormous weight because of the *zhiren lunshi* 知人論世 exegetical habit that was implied in the canonical concept of poetry¹⁸ and elevated to a principle by Mencius. It stipulates specifically that to understand the meaning of a text, one must explore the author's life and his time.¹⁹ But this is not easy to accomplish since one must work with impersonal linguistic signifiers that operate in a context extending far beyond the control of their user. Form, therefore, can easily elude the attempt at containment by its specific user and acquire a meaning that often undermines and even contradicts the author's intentions.

This is exactly what happens to Confucius with regard to his view of poetry. The delicate equilibrium he sets up between the sociopolitical function of poetry as a sheer instrument of social and political purpose and its formal aesthetic appeal as the artistic expression of the rectifying political will can be upset. Because the canon of Chinese poetry is based essentially on the presumed but precarious balance between the two aspects of this tension, although different periods seem to

have emphasized one or the other,²⁰ it is highly unstable. As we shall see, any later developments in Chinese poetry or literature are inevitably attempts to redefine or redraw this subtle equilibrium. The moralists advocate the overriding importance of content and try to contain poetry as an instrument of their political agenda. Artistically minded writers, however, aim to give form a larger role in their literary production. The so-called decadent poetry in Chinese tradition is nothing but such an effort on the part of a group of poets to rethink and redefine the poet's relationship to this canon. And thus the emphasis on the aesthetic appeal of form can be seen as a self-conscious critique and reshaping of an orthodox principle.

The Great Preface sows other seeds of potential disruption of the Confucian canon that it upholds because it considers the process of decline as ineluctable. The poems in *The Book of Songs* were considered to be the ultimate examples of Chinese poetry, yet as the Great Preface would have it, even in these poems—said to have been selected by Confucius himself—such a process of decline had already begun:

When the kingly way declined rites and moral principles were abandoned; the government lost its power to instruct; the political structure of the states changed; the customs of the family were altered: at this point the mutated poems were written.

至於王道衰，禮義廢，政教失，國異政，家殊俗，而變風、變雅作矣。²¹

The decline of poetry, then, is seen as the necessary result of the decline of a political and social reality, because, in this view, poetry is inherently connected to the quality of society. Of course, when belief in the inherent connection between poetry and sociopolitical life is shattered in later ages, the basis for the belief in the decline of poetry is undermined as well.²² Zhu Ziqing points out that the word *bian* 變 (to change, changed, or “mutated” as in Owen's rendering), can have two very different connotations, depending on the context. In political and social history, it is a negative term, indicative of a deviation from a norm. In philosophy, particularly the cosmological philosophy established in *The Book of Changes*, it represents a vital force in the movement of the universe and hence is a positive word.²³ The Great

Preface seemed to have used it exclusively in its moral and historical sense. Still, it considers the mutated poems in *The Book of Songs* to be the proper models because in any event they are thought to have “emerged from feelings and stopped at rites and morality.”²⁴ In other words, as long as poetry expresses what is deeply felt and conforms to the moral and political principles of government, it is good poetry. But there is a subtle contradiction in this phrasing, because “emerging from feelings” (*fahu qing* 發乎情) implies a spontaneity and naturalness that are undercut by “stop at rites and morality” (*zhihu liyi* 止乎禮義), which suggests a deliberate, artificial imposition of controls. Therefore, the canonical notion of poetry is problematic because these two basic demands are potentially irreconcilable, and the balance between them is at best precarious.

As we will see throughout the following chapters, artistic control is a prominent feature of Chinese decadent poetry. However, such control is not exercised for moral and political reasons as is demanded by the Great Preface. Instead, it has been radically transformed into something purely aesthetic.

We might call this way of thinking “a decline mentality.” Confucius himself is the earliest authority of such a mentality.²⁵ He is obsessed with the notion that he lives in an era of decadence, a time that has fallen from the old glory of the Western Zhou dynasty (1045–711 B.C.). He looks back nostalgically to that lost golden age: “How beautiful [are the ways of Zhou]; I am a follower of Zhou!”²⁶ He laments the loss of political and cultural unity and the invasion of barbarian culture. He instructs his students to “abandon the music of Zheng (*zhengsheng* 鄭聲), distance themselves from villains; for the music of Zheng is lascivious, and villains are dangerous.”²⁷ But in Confucius’s strongest lament about the decline of his age, he metaphorically fuses his own personal decline and historical decadence: “How far I have declined (*shuai* 衰); it has been a long time since I dreamed of the Duke of Zhou!”²⁸ This touching statement will bear heavily upon the minds of Chinese literati as it comes to be linked to the fate of culture and literature. Not just politically and socially is their age a decadent one, but their writing too represents a decline from the achievement of our ancestors. Although some writers did try to discredit this self-effacing mentality, it remained influential throughout Chinese classical tradition.²⁹

On the significance of the Great Preface, especially the part on “mutated poems” (*bianfeng bianya* 變風變雅) in *The Book of Songs*, Stephen Owen comments:

Chinese literary historical process was often described in terms of movement between “proper” (*zheng* 正) and “mutated” (*bian* 變). These terms are replete with value judgment and in this context are firmly linked to issues of moral history. *Zheng* describes the stability of a government and society functioning properly, a stability that is manifest in the “tone” of poems of the age. *Bian* appears in this context as a falling away, a “devolution,” in which the growing imbalances in society manifest themselves in poetry. These terms never became entirely free of value judgments that were ultimately rooted in moral history; in later ages, however, there was some attempt to use them in a purely literary sense. In this context *zheng* might represent the norm of some genre, the *bian* would be a falling away from that norm; these processes of attaining a norm and subsequent devolution might operate independently from the moral history of dynasties.³⁰

We may of course argue that the very separation of literature from its moral and sociopolitical environment represents a decadent step on the part of later writers and critics, a *bian*, falling away, from *zheng*, the proper, the norm.³¹

In Chinese tradition the theoretical model for decadence is provided not only by Confucius and the Great Preface, but also by the reputed founder of Daoism, Laozi 老子. He situates his Dao (道 the Way) in a state of utter innocence in which there is no differentiation, no language; all is in an organic harmony:

Dao is eternal, nameless. Though the uncarved block seems small, it may be subordinated to nothing in the world. If kings and barons can preserve it, all creation would of itself pay homage, heaven and earth would unite to send sweet dew, and people would of themselves achieve peace and harmony.

Once the block is cut, names appear. When names begin to appear, know then that there is a time to stop. It is by this knowledge that danger may be avoided.

道常無名，樸。雖小，天下莫能臣。侯王若能守之，萬物將自賓。天地相和，以降甘露，民莫之令而自均。

始制有名，名亦既有，夫亦將知止，知止可以不殆。³²

Laozi describes Dao as an “uncarved block”—a metaphor of profound and rich implications. In his writings it represents an ideal state that incorporates all elements, human and nonhuman, into an organic harmony through its negative quality. Because it is *not* carved, it paradoxically remains open to everything and can include everything. The values implied by the metaphor of the uncarved block are opposed to craftsmanship and any connections with craftsmanship. Naturalness is the ideal, so is simplicity as opposed to artificiality and elaboration. The Great Preface dooms Chinese poetry to perpetual decline by claiming that the process is already evident even in the very book that it sets up as the canon. But the author of the Great Preface saw the reasons for such decline as social and political, and somehow manageable, at least theoretically under enlightened rulers. Nevertheless, neither Confucius nor the author of the Great Preface seem to have felt much real optimism. Laozi is more unrelenting. For him, any effort at shaping human life is tantamount to carving the uncarved block, and therefore decadent. And this refers not just to literature, but to the whole of human culture.

However, it is precisely with the metaphor of carving that literature is later associated. The Eastern Han philosopher Yang Xiong 揚雄 (53 B.C.–A.D.18) gave up his career as a writer of rhyme-prose (*fu* 賦) because he regarded it contemptuously as “a petty skill of insect carving” and therefore is not worthy of a gentleman.³³ As Yang Xiong lived in a time when Confucius’s thought had recently been made into an orthodoxy and thus still held sway over people’s thinking,³⁴ it is not surprising that he abandoned his rhyme-prose writing on Confucian grounds. He thought it did not have a moral and political function. Later, in the Southern Dynasties period, when orthodox Confucianism suffered a major decline in almost every aspect of Chinese culture,³⁵ the values implied by the metaphor of carving changed dramatically. The Southern Dynasties critic Liu Xie 劉勰 (c. 465–520) incorporated the metaphor into the title of his monumental work on literary theory and criticism: *Wenxin diaolong* 文心雕龍 (*The literary mind and the carving of dragons*).³⁶ Although the image of carving remains the same, the object of carving has been changed.

Laozi's uncarved block symbolizes the undifferentiated state of harmony between humankind and its world. In Yang Xiong the insect speaks for itself as trivial; but in Liu Xie what is carved is the fanciful, extravagant dragon, which, with its rich associations of grandeur and power in Chinese culture,³⁷ evokes feelings of awe and respect. No longer condemned as by Laozi and Yang Xiong, carving for Liu Xie is to be celebrated. The *Literary mind and the carving of dragons* is an important part of a critique of the established views of literature since Confucius's age, a critique that is reflected in numerous writings of the Southern Dynasties period. In many ways Liu Xie's work sums up the thinking and rethinking of the issues related to literature, its values, functions, and characteristics; hence it deserves a closer look.

I will touch on only those parts of Liu Xie's huge and complicated book that are directly relevant to our study of decadent poetry. First, in using the metaphor of carving in the title of his work, Liu Xie affirms the value of craftsmanship in literature (*wen* 文).³⁸ As has been shown, spontaneity and naturalness had always been highly prized in the writings of earlier periods. Confucianism and Daoism, however much they differ on other matters, converge on this. Confucian poetic theory disdains craftsmanship. It views the nature of poetry as a spontaneous, sincere response to an external event. Therefore, any attempt to polish the product betrays an insincerity in motivation and results in artificiality in style. The Daoist rejection of craftsmanship stems from a worldview that only the pristine state is able to retain the healthy harmony that civilization, with its differentiation and division, inevitably destroys. In this system craftsmanship is the typical evil of civilization. By contrast, there is Liu Xie, who in Stephen Owen's view, is trying to "dissociate his idea of craft from the pejorative associations that hover around all terms for craft in Chinese."³⁹ It seems that Liu Xie wants more than just a dissociation; rather, he actually rejects those pejorative associations.

Certainly there are many passages in Liu Xie's book that seem to support orthodox views of literature. In the first three chapters—entitled "Yuandao" 原道 ("On the origin of the way [of literature]"), "Zhengsheng" 徵聖 ("On following the ancient sages"), and "Zongjing" 宗經 ("On following the classics")—he systematically recounts the Confucian poetic theory. But even in these passages Liu Xie struggles, as Confucius had done before, to strike a balance between the content of literature and its form:

Yan He wrongly thought that Confucius painted on the already colorful feathers of birds and that he vainly used florid language. But his accusation against the Sage missed its point. The patterned writings [*wen*] of the Sage are full of elegance, but their beauty is accompanied by solid substance. Although the Way of Heaven is hard to know, we still try to investigate it. The beautiful patterns of literary works [*wenzhang* 文章]⁴⁰ are not hidden from us; how can we afford not to think about them?

顏闔以爲：“仲尼飾羽而畫，徒事華辭。”雖欲譬聖，弗可得已。然則聖文之雅麗，固銜華而配實者也。天道難聞，猶或鑽仰；文章可見，胡寧勿思。⁴¹

In this passage Liu Xie rebuts the accusation against Confucius using the Confucian argument that “words without *wen* (form or pattern) do not go very far” and therefore cannot carry out their mission, which is the expression of the author’s will. But like Confucius, in giving so much weight to the function of *wen* in fulfilling a sociopolitical task, Liu Xie inevitably slants toward one pole of the Confucian golden mean and consequently risks disrupting it. This tendency is further illustrated by the following paragraph on “Verbal Parallelism” (“*lici*” 麗辭):

Therefore the beauty in verbal parallelism lies in artistry and cleverness; but in factual parallelism appropriateness is the most important. If in a couplet the two paralleled events are of unequal qualities, it is like using a steed to pull the left of a carriage while using a nag on its right. If an event is left alone unmatched it is like the one-legged monster *kui* that hobbles and limps. If [a literary work] does not have a unique spirit, or if its patterns [*wen*] lack outstanding colors, then even if it uses parallelism its dullness can only make us drowsy. The important thing is to make one’s thinking coherent and the factual parallelism complexly pertinent, and to make the colors of the paired jade match. One should alternate single and coupled elements, and harmonize the brilliance [of the writing] by adopting various kinds of pendants: this is the most important. If one ponders hard along this line, the secret [of verbal parallelism] will be shown of itself.