

Linking Ancient and Contemporary

Continuities and Discontinuities in Chinese Literature

edited by Tiziana Lippiello, Chen Yuehong 陈跃红 and Maddalena Barenghi

Poetic Taste and Tasting Poetry

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Abstract ‘Taste’ is one of the most essential features of the theory of ancient Chinese poetry. Starting from the Six Dynasties and continuing till the late Qing Dynasty, describing a poem with ‘taste’ has a prominent theoretical significance. First of all, ‘taste’ not only represents the deep relationship between the aesthetic experience and the material life, but also shows that artistic enjoyment can transcend material satisfaction. Second, having a dual compatibility, ‘taste’ can interpenetrate the fields of the theory of poetic works and the theory of poetry reading. A masterpiece of poetry has its own ‘taste’, so it must be read by ‘tasting’ it. More importantly, the ‘taste’ and ‘tasting’ disclose the poem’s aesthetic characteristics in an effective manner. The present article tries to explain and describe ‘taste’ with regard to its characteristics, so as to grasp completely the significance of ‘taste’.

Summary 1 Introduction. – 2 The Notion of Taste in the Chinese Classics. – 3 Taste in Chinese Poetic Theory.

Keywords Wei. Taste. Chinese poetry. Poetic taste.

1 Introduction

In ancient Chinese poetic theory the concept of taste is one of the most distinctive.¹

‘Taste’ (*wei* 味) refers to both the palate and the sense of smell, but the concept of taste in ancient Chinese poetics corresponds to the former rather than the latter.²

Taste as a specific criterion for the appreciation of poetry appeared during the Six Dynasties and continued until the Late Qing Dynasty and it still echoes in more recent times. Over time, this concept has acquired a richer and deeper significance.

As a specific criterion of the appreciation of poetry, taste has a profound

1 I wish to thank Wang Qian for the translation work.

2 Admittedly, the ancient poetics involved the sense of smell, too. For instance, Qian Qianyi 钱谦益 (1582-1664) proposed the theory of ‘Scent Meditation’, but it had few echoes and did not become an influential movement.

cultural significance and an important theoretical value. An exploration of its meaning not only helps one appreciate the cultural characteristics of traditional Chinese poetry, but also helps one grasp the unique contribution of traditional Chinese poetics in revealing the laws of poetry.

2 The Notion of Taste in the Chinese Classics

The use of the notion of taste in the study of poetry reflects the peculiar spirit of Chinese culture that has been handed down uninterrupted since ancient times.

Taste has its origins in people's diet. Among the relatively basic material needs of early humankind, food was the most essential. The realization that, as the Chinese saying goes, «People regard food as heaven» (*min yi shi wei tian* 民以食為天, *Hanshu* 1962, p. 2108), has been around since ancient times. The earliest fishing, hunting and farming activities were all directly related to securing food provisions.

Over the course of history, human demands have gradually grown, spiritual boundaries have constantly expanded, and social structures have become multi-layered. However, even during periods of unparalleled cultural prosperity, such as the Spring and Autumn and Warring States period (770-221 BC), politics, philosophy and art were latently lead and deeply influenced by basic material needs. The particular concern for taste is a reflection of that influence.

The Pre-Qin period was an important juncture in the establishment of both the imperial system and the political ideas of ancient China. Reportedly, the early state authority was symbolized by the nine tripod cauldrons (*jiu ding* 九鼎):

Formerly, when the Xia dynasty had reached the height of its virtue, [people in] the [nine] distant regions made pictures of the strange beings [in their respective areas] and presented metal as tribute to the nine governors. With the metal, [the rule of Yu] caused cauldrons to be cast on which these beings were represented; [images of] the hundred strange beings were prepared. In this way people were made to recognize [all] spirits and evil influences, so that, when they traveled over rivers and marshes and through mountains and forests, they would encounter no adversities, and spirits such as the *chi* 魑, the *mei* 魅, and the *wangliang* 魍魎 could not bother them. By these means concord reigned between those above and those below, and the people received the favor of Heaven. (*Shisan jing zhushu* 1980, p. 1868; Campany 1996, p. 103)

In the three successive dynasties of Xia 夏 (ca. 2070-1600 BCE), Shang 商 (ca. 1600-1046 BC) and Zhou 周 (1046-221 BC), the *ding* played the most

important role among the sacrificial vessels. However, the original usage of the *ding* was that of a kitchen utensil. *The Book of Rites* (*Liji* 禮記) states: «In the beginning the rites had a close relationship with diet» (*Shisan jing zhushu* 十三經注疏 1980, p. 1415). Furthermore, in the discussion on the philosophy of good government and ruling methods, food metaphors were used, such as «to govern the state is like cooking food» (*tiaoding* 調鼎) or «mixing diverse ingredients to season a soup» (*he geng* 和羹). Other famous instances are that of Yi Yin 伊尹 (1649-1549 BCE) who «persuaded Tang 湯 (King of Shang) with the most delicious arguments (*zhi wei* 至味)» (*Lüshi chunqiu jiaoshi* 呂氏春秋校釋 1984, p. 740), and that of Yanzi who replied to Marquis Qi with ‘soup’ (*geng* 羹; «Zhao gong ershi nian» 昭公二十年, *Zuozhuan, Shisan jing zhushu* 1980, pp. 2093-2094).

The Pre-Qin period is the formative age of Chinese philosophy which suddenly emerged and acquired its essential characteristics. A hundred schools of thought, as «different roads that lead to the same goal» (*Yizhuan* 易傳, *Xici* 繫辭, *Shisan jing zhushu* 1980, p. 87) conducted philosophical speculation and exploration from different levels and angles; they debated intensely and learned from one another. Finally, through their spiritual achievements, they created an ideological model that has continued for over two thousand years. However, during this very fruitful process of growth, taste served as a special reference system and played an irreplaceable role throughout. Harmony (*he* 和) is one of the ideas most valuable to and most esteemed by pre-Qin Confucians. By emphasizing *he*, the Confucians successfully linked social ethics with philosophy. *He* differs from uniformity (*tong* 同), as is evident in the saying «The gentleman aims at harmony, not at uniformity, while the villain aims at uniformity, not at harmony» («*Zilu*» 子路, *Lunyu, Shisan jing zhushu* 1980, p. 2508). *Tong* is monotony, it signifies ossification. On the contrary, *he* indicates the well-balanced coexistence of different and complementary elements that interact and combine, thus forming a new unity at a higher level. «Harmony is fecund, uniformity is barren. To complement one thing with a different thing is called harmony, with which things flourish and join each other; yet to strengthen one thing by adding the same thing (which is called uniformity), brings an end to everything» (*Guoyu* 國語 1978, p. 515; Zhang Yanhua 2007, p. 51). The notion of *he* that Confucians hold in high regard embodies a deep knowledge of society; however, at the level of physical experience, *he* can define the final sublimation of food processing. According to *Zuozhuan*, Yanzi’s 晏子 argument for the distinction between *he* and *tong* was based upon the image of soup cooking:

Harmony can be compared to a stew. Water, fire, vinegar, mince meat, salt and plums, with which to cook the fish and the meat. It is brought to boil with firewood. Next the cook blends (*he*) the ingredients, equalizing the stew by means of seasonings, adding whatever is deficient and car-

rying off whatever is in excess. Then his Lord eats it and thus brings his heart at ease». (*Shisan jing zhushu* 1980, p. 2093; Sterckx 2011, p. 61)

One could say that without a subtle experience of food tasting it would have been difficult to generate the Confucian consciousness of 'harmony'. Pre-Qin Taoists regarded the Way (*dao* 道) as the fundament of all. The *dao*, in the eyes of the Taoist, is metaphysical, and itself means non-existent (*wu* 無); precisely because of its not existing, the *dao* is able to govern all that which is existent (*wan you* 萬有). The Taoist drew from the notion of taste in their elucidation of the *dao*. In fact, *Laozi* took a stand against taste, according to him «The five flavors dull the palate» (*Laozi*, chapter 12, *Laozi xinyi* 1978, p. 84). However, he did not reject defining the *dao* from the point of view of taste. Originally, the *dao* is non-existent (*wu* 無), therefore, the *dao* not only has no sound, no shape, no name, but also «has no flavor and seems insipid» (*Laozi*, chapter 35, *Laozi xinyi* 1978, p. 136). Subsequently, *Laozi* put forward the doctrine of «tasting the flavorless» (*Laozi*, chapter 63, *Laozi xinyi* 1978). The flavorless (*wuwei* 無味) is not considered one of the five flavors, but is rather the supreme flavor that outshines the other five, i.e. it is the *dao*. Each of the five flavors has its own distinctive savor, yet at the same time each has its flaws. Hence, only «tasting without discerning any flavor» can remove all limitations and include all flavors. Undoubtedly, this intuition is best expressed by Su Zhe 蘇轍 (1039-1112) when, in his *Laozi jie* 老子解 (Explanation of the *Daodejing*), writes: «Find taste in the flavorless and you will experience all flavors» (*Laozi jie* 老子解 1959, p. 54).

In the Pre-Qin period, ancient Chinese art achieved a certain degree of development. Art generates from man's emotions and thus its origins have a subtle connection with taste, which is also based on sensations. Mentions of vision and hearing along with taste appear frequently in Pre-Qin literature. For instance, in *Guoyu* 國語 (Discourses of the States) it is stated: «There is no music in a single note, no decoration in a single item, no relish in a single taste» («Zhengyu» 鄭語, *Guoyu* 1978, p. 516). In *The Mencius* one reads «I saw the mouths have the same preferences in flavors, ears have the same preferences in sounds, eyes have the same preferences in attractiveness» («Gaozi» 告子, *Mengzi*, *Shisan jing zhushu* 1980, p. 2749; Norden 2008, p. 151). Among the arts, music once occupied the central position of social culture for its direct connection with social rites (*li* 禮). Moreover, music maintained a strikingly close relation to taste. An example of this relation is the frequent assertion that «musical sound is also like taste», which derives from Yanzi's statement: «Musical sound is also like taste. [Music] is made up of the combination of one air (*yi qi* 一氣), two bodies (*er ti* 二體), three genres (*san lei* 三類), four materials (*si wu* 四物), five sounds (*wu sheng* 五聲), six pitch pipes (*liu lv* 六律), seven notes (*qi yin* 七音), eight winds (*ba feng* 八風), and the nine songs (*jiu ge*

九歌). Music is the fine blend of clear and turbid, small and big, short and long, fast and slow, sad and happy, strong and soft, late and quick, high and low, out and in, dense and scanty. The gentlemen listen to it to keep their minds tranquil». («Zhao gong ershi nian» 昭公二十年, *Zuozhuan, Shisan jing zhushu* 1980, pp. 2093-2094). Apparently, for Yanzi the relation between the elements which, combined and integrated, make up music is completely identical to that harmonious blend of ingredients that produces taste. Another example in which a correspondence between *yue* 樂 (music) and *wei* 味 (taste) is established can be seen in the *Liji* 禮記 (Book of Rites): «Hence the greatest achievements of music were not in the perfection of the airs; the (efficacy) of the ceremonies in the sacrificial offerings was not in the exquisiteness of the flavours. In the lute's for the Qing Miao 清廟 the strings were of red (boiled) silk, and the holes were wide apart; one lute began, and (only) three others joined it; there was much melody not brought out. In the ceremonies of the great sacrifices, the dark-coloured liquor took precedence, and on the stands were uncooked fish, while the grand soup had no condiments: there was much flavour left undeveloped». («Yueji» 樂記, *Liji, Shisanjing zhushu* 1980, p. 1528; Legge 1990, pp. 95-96). It goes without saying that art is one of the highest forms of expression created by the human spirit and in the end its taste belongs to a different realm compared with that of food. Aesthetic enjoyment transcends the level of tasting food, a fact clearly recognized already in the Pre-Qin period. Confucius, who «did not dislike to have his rice finely cleaned, or to have his meat minced» («Xiangdang» 鄉黨, *Lunyu, Shisan jing zhushu* 1980, p. 2495) was a typical gourmet. However, he was even more an expert in music. According to the *Lunyu*, «when the Master [Confucius] was in the state of Qi, he heard the melody of *Shao* 韶, and for three months he was not aware of the taste of the meat he ate. He said, 'I never dreamt that the joys of music could reach such heights'» («Shu er» 述而, *Lunyu, Shisan jing zhushu* 1980, p. 2482).

To conclude, since the Pre-Qin period, a cultural tradition with a strong emphasis on taste developed, a tradition that formed a powerful link between the construction of a spiritual culture and the gratification of material needs. It is this cultural tradition that provided the fertile soil for the growth of the notion of taste in poetic theory.

3 Taste in Chinese Poetic Theory

Reference to the category of taste in the appreciation of poems effectively unveils the artistic rules at the heart of poetry.

The notion of taste stems from human culinary experience, to which value judgment was gradually attributed. On the one hand, taste is one of the characteristics of food itself; on the other hand, taste is dependent

on human palate. Taste implies a relationship between human beings and food. It indicates that food not only provides the nourishment that sustains and gives continuity to human life, but also stimulates human senses. The experience of taste cannot be separated from the satisfaction of physiological demands; at the same time, taste has already penetrated and affected our sensory judgments on what is appropriate for humans.

The formation of aesthetic perception was, in its early stage, subtly interlocked with taste. Xu Shen 許慎 (ca. 58-147), in his *Shuowen jiezi* 說文解字 (Explaining Graphs and Analyzing Characters), writes: «The written word *mei* 美, 'beauty', means sweet. It is a combination of the characters *yang* 羊, 'sheep', and *da* 大, 'big'. Among the six domestic animals, the sheep was raised primarily for its tasty meat» (*Shuowen jiezi* 說文解字 1963, p. 78). In Xu Shen's view, the earliest concept of beauty was related to tasty mutton, while the aesthetic sense of beauty rested on the satisfaction derived from eating mutton. The etymological interpretation of the Chinese character obviously discloses significant cultural information.

Taste, as related to humans' sense of taste, has the following two characteristics: first, the differences and variations of taste itself are always very subtle and delicate, and therefore hard to grasp and express precisely. This is what the ancients meant by saying: «The variations within the *ding* are so delicate and subtle that they defy words and conceptualization» («Ben wei» 本味, *Lüshi chunqiu jiaoshi* 呂氏春秋校釋 1984, p. 740). Second, taste is gradually released from food after its chemical decomposition in one's mouth; the manner in which taste surfaces is slow and extended over time, while gradually intensifying. These two features coincide both with the aesthetic characteristics of poetic works and with their appreciation.

As a consequence, when applying the concept of taste in the discussion of poems, ancient Chinese poetic theory did not run the risk of being rigid and forcing texts, rather it encompassed a deep understanding of poetic rules and opened a window that reveals typically oriental features to one's view.

Most noticeably, in the history of ancient Chinese literary studies, taste, with its peculiar bipolarity, links both the theory of poetic works and the theory of the reading of poetry. Indeed, excellent poems have taste, whereas the reading of excellent poems implies an exercise in taste. One could say that the concept of taste stimulated an intensification of both the writing of poetry and the reading of poetry. On the one hand, taste is a common feature of all excellent poems.

The Six Dynasties was a period of splendid accomplishments in poetic theory; it was also a period when the notion of taste was formally introduced and subsequently exerted a powerful impact on poetics. On the initiative of Liu Xie 劉勰 (ca. 467-522) and Zhong Rong 鐘嶸 (468- 518 AD) the concept of taste stood out as one of the primary criteria for judging whether a poem had aesthetic appeal. Liu Xie, in his book *Wenxin diao-*

long 文心雕龍 (The Literary Mind and the Carving of Dragons), a work notable for its «breadth and clarity» (Zhang Xuecheng, *Wenshi tongyi jiaozhu* 1985, p. 559), employs on different occasions the idea of taste to discuss poetry. In particular, he employs taste in alternative to or overlapping with the key notions of ‘invisible elegance’ (*yinxiu* 隱秀) and ‘natural scenery’ (*wuse* 物色), which are used to describe the lingering aesthetic effect of poems. For instance, the expression ‘implied aftertastes’ (*Yuwei Qubao* 餘味曲包) (*Wenxin diaolong zhu* 文心雕龍注 1958, p. 633) is used to qualify a poem that accords with the category ‘invisible elegance’ (*yinxiu* 隱秀); the expression «a taste of exhilarating lightness that refreshes and kindles the emotions» 味飄飄而輕舉，情晔晔而更新 (1958, p. 694) conveys approval for that kind of pastoral poem which, following a tradition dating back to the *xing* 興 poems in the *Book of Songs*, transforms ‘natural scenery’ into poetic images that enhance their aesthetic effect. *Shipin* 詩品 (Gradations of Poets) by Zhong Rong is a special treatise on the composition of five-character poems. According to Zhong Rong, taste is the watershed between good and bad poetry. The main reason Zhong Rong rejected four-character poems and opted for five-character poems is that «the five-character poems occupy the leading position in literature», «expound the truth and create images, express emotions thoroughly and describe natural scenery, are the most detailed and aptly worded», and «are the tastiest among all works» (*Shipin zhu* 詩品注 1961, p. 4). Metaphysical poetry (*xuanyan shi* 玄言詩) was once popular during the Jin Dynasty, but failed to grow as a mature poetic genre. The reason for this failure is thus described in the Preface: «During the Yongjia period, Huang-Lao was revered; empty talk was valued to some extent. The verses of that time, more philosophical than literary, are tasteless» (1961, p. 3). A careful review shows that, although at an initial stage, Liu Xie and Zhong Rong already described taste in poetic works as something generated from true emotions and vivid images.

Tang dynasty poems attained the acme of perfection by harmoniously blending depictions of scenery with the manifestations of emotions. Thereupon, the discussion of poetic taste became closely associated with the interaction of emotions and natural sceneries. The *Bunkyo hifuron* 文鏡秘府論 (Secret Treasury of the Mirror of Letters), compiled by the Japanese Buddhist monk Bianzhao Jingang 遍照金剛 (Henzō Kinkō) known as Kūkai 空海, preserves some Tang Dynasty materials of literary criticism on poetry from the perspective of taste. Some examples are statements like: «Poetry should not value only the philosophical content; it should rather be concerned with the scenery, for then the verses will have delicate taste [...]; if scenery and philosophy do not blend together, words will sound reasonable but (be) tasteless» («Shiqi shi», Seventeen Types of Momentum of Poetry; *Wenjing mifu lun* 1975, p. 43), or «If words merely describe natural scenery, they may be fine yet without taste» (see «Lun wen yi» 論文意, Discus-

sions on the Artistic Conceptions of Poetry; *Wenjing mifu lun* 1975, p. 131). Evidently, in these texts the blending into one of emotions and scenery is considered the source of poetic taste. The doctrine of 'Meaning Behind Taste' by late Tang Dynasty poet Sikong Tu 司空圖 (837-908) represented a further step forward for the theory of poetic taste. In «Yu Li Sheng lun shi shu» 與李生論詩書 (Letter to Mr. Li on Poetry), he writes:

In my opinion, distinguishing one's tastes is a precondition to any discussion of poetry. South of the Yangtze River and of the Five Ridges, the condiments are very strong, for example vinegar is not used to add a sour flavor to food, but to make it completely acidic; similarly, salt is not used to add a salty flavor, but to make food completely salty. People of the Central Plains only use these ingredients to alleviate their hunger, when they lack delicious tastes, but they know other tastes besides acidic and salty [...] Now your poems, contemporary poets truly feel difficult (to match them), if you pay more attention to the perfection (of the language and taste), (you) will acquire the spirit out of taste. (*Sikong biaosheng wenji* 司空表聖文集 1994, pp. 24, 26)

Hence, Sikong Tu regards 'distinguishing tastes' as the prerequisite of commenting on poems, and highlights 'meaning behind taste' to stress the fact that the most brilliant works of poetry should have that 'mellow taste' (*chunmei* 醇美) which stands beyond concrete tastes such as salty, acidic, etc. Here it is clear how the Taoists' use of the category 'Tasteless' (*wuwei* 無味) to discuss the *dao* exerted a far reaching influence. Indeed, what the Taoists call '*wuwei*' (tasteless) is nothing but '*the*' taste beyond taste.

During the Song, Yuan, Ming and Qing Dynasties, applying the notion of taste to the appreciation of poetry became very common. Thus, Song Dynasty poet Ouyang Xiu 歐陽修 (1007-1072) in «Shuigu Yexing» 水穀夜行 (Traveling at Night in Shuigu) says in praise of the poems by Mei Yaochen 梅堯臣 (1002-1060): «[Reading them] is like eating olives, their taste lasts for long» (*Ouyang Xiu quanji* 歐陽修全集 2001, p. 29). Another Song Dynasty author, Wei Tai 魏泰 (11th-12th century) in «Lin Han Yinju Shihua» 臨漢隱居詩話 (Remarks on poetry in my hermitage by the Han River), deemed that: «Any poem is like a good wine that brings unending taste, like an inexhaustible spring; no matter how long you chew it, the taste continues to grow. As for Yongshu 永叔 (Ouyang Xiu)'s poems, they show talent and consummate skill, his verses are fresh and vigorous, but unfortunately have little taste» (*Lidai shihua* 歷代詩話 1981, p. 323). In *Sui Han Tang shihua* 歲寒堂詩話 (Remarks on Poetry from the Hall for Cold Season by Zhang Jie 張戒 (ca. 12th century) one finds these comments:

[Consider these verses by Tao] Yuanming 淵明: 'Deep in an alley a dog barks, a cock crows at the top of a mulberry tree' and 'While picking

chrysanthemums under the Eastern fence, my gaze upon the Southern mountain rests'. Although these sceneries are revealed before one's eyes, it's impossible to see them without a relaxed and peaceful mind. (Yuanming's) poetic taste is beyond reach». (*Lidai shihua xubian* 歷代詩話續編 1983, p. 453)

Chen Shan 陈善 (11th-12th century): when reading Yuanming's poems for the first time they seem dull, however by reading them over and again, they will relieve they flavour.

Finally, Yang Wanli 楊萬裡 (1127-1206 AD) observes that «poems whose words come to an end but whose taste lingers on are the best ones» (*Chengzhai shihua* 誠齋詩話 in *Lidai shihua xubian* 1983, p. 137).

During the Yuan Dynasty (1271-1368 AD), Jie Xisi 揭傒斯 (1274-1344) proposed «seeking the true taste from the insipid». In his opinion:

Sikong Tu of the Tang Dynasty taught people how to write poems, (emphasizing that one) should recognize the taste beyond taste. Po Gong 坡公 [Su Dongpo 蘇東坡, 1037-1101] thought highly of these words [...] People take food for its taste; if it were tasteless, who would eat it? The ancients were committed to it (i.e. the taste beyond taste). [In the opinion of the ancients, poems] should have few words but much meaning, and when approaching the end, they should give the impression to suddenly reveal another meaning. While excellent poems are endowed with evocations and implications, their delicate taste is beyond spicy, sweet, sour and salty, and it (taste) lasts longer on the tongue [...]. If one learns from Tao (Tao Yuanmin 陶淵明, ca. 365-427), Wang (Wang Wei 王維, ca.701-761), Wei (Wei Yingwu 韋應物, 737-792) Liu (Liu Zongyuan 柳宗元, 773-819) and other poets, he should seek the true taste from the insipid. At first sight one cannot sense it, but the longer one gazes the harder it is to forget it. Just like Lu Hongjian 陸鴻漸 (Lu Yu 陸羽, 733-804) who tasted all the springs under heaven and realized that Yangzi Zhongling 揚子中靈³ was the best: the taste of its water was light but not bland, in fact it was the best taste in the world, and the taste of food could not match it. But people who clearly know the taste of food are rare, there are fewer who know the taste of springs». (*Yuandai shi fajiao kao* 2001, p. 321)

In the Ming Dynasty, Lu Shiyong 陸時雍 (17th century) in his *Shijing* 詩鏡 (Poetry Mirror) argued that «the ancients were skilled in expressing emotions and transferring images into abstraction, thereby (making the

3 Yangzi Zhongling, alternatively called Yangzi Zhongling 揚子中冷, is the name of a famous spring in the middle course of the Yangzi River.

reader) feel the long-lasting taste and beautiful words of their works» («Shijing zonglun» 詩鏡總論, *Lidai shihua xubian* 1983, p. 1403). Another Ming Dynasty author, Li Kaixian 李開先 (1502-1568), in «Xiye Chunyou Ci Xu» 西野春遊詞序 (Preface of the Spring Outing by Xiye) emphasized that «it is better for poems to be enduring and have an aftertaste» (*Li Kaixian quanji* 李開先全集 2014, p. 596). In the Qing Dynasty, He Yisun 賀貽孫 (1605-1688) wrote that «With regards to the poems of Li [Li Bai 李白, 701-762] and Du [Du Fu 杜甫, 712-770], and the prose of Han [Han Yu 韓愈, 768-824] and Su [Su Dongpo 蘇東坡, 1037-1101], when one reads one or two [of them] he feels he can learn and be capable of equaling them. [If he] tries to read tens [of them], then he can find that they are appealing. [If he] reads all the works, the more [he reads], the more amazement he will find. By repeatedly reciting them up to tens of times, his mouth will start drooling [for] the wonderful lingering flavor» (*Shifa* 詩筏, *Qing shihua xubian* 清詩話續編 1983, p. 135). Wu Leifa 吳雷發 (17th-18th century) in his *Humble opinions on poetry* (*Shuoshi Guankuai* 說詩管蒯) is of the opinion that poems with «taste beyond taste, stand out from the rest» (*Qing shihua* 清詩話 1963, p. 905). Shen Deqian 沈德潛 (1673-1769), who held in high consideration the seven-character quatrains of Li Bai 李白 (701-762), wrote that «the seven-character quatrains should be close to words but far from emotions, about to speak out but then hold back. These poems seem only to describe a visible scenery with spoken words, but there are overtones and the taste beyond tastes, (which make) people feel far away. Tai Bai 太白 [Li Bai] could accomplish it» (*Shuoshi Zuiyu* 說詩碎語. *Qing shihua* 清詩話 1963, p. 542). Liu Tiren 劉體仁 (1624-1684) drew support from the organization of Tang poems into early, flourishing, middle and late periods to discuss the *ci* 詞 (song lyric) genre. He thought that «the *ci* of early Ming paralleled the poems of late Tang». He thus praised the *ci*: «The fantastic taste of the *ci*, one could not even dream about it» (*Qisong tang Ciyi* 七頌堂詞繹, *Cihua congbian* 詞話叢編 1986, p. 618). Chen Tingchuo 陳廷焯 (1853-1892) in his *Baiyuzhai Cihua* 白雨齋詞話 (Song-Lyric Talks from the White Rain Studio) commented on the *ci* poems of Zhou Bangyan 周邦彥 (1056-1121), writing: «Their exquisiteness suggests while saying nothing, therefore their taste endures». He also valued Xin Qiji's 辛棄疾 *ci* poems: «Some of Jiakuan's (Xin Qiji, 1140-1207) *ci* are simple and unadorned, however have an endless aftertaste» (*Cihua congbian* 詞話叢編 1986, pp. 3787, 3911).

In more than one thousand years of literature, it is possible to find either the single word taste (*wei* 味), or compound terms such as 'flavor' (*ziwei* 滋味), 'true taste' (*zhenwei* 真味), 'excellent taste' (*zhiwei* 至味), 'overtone, flavour' (*yiwei* 意味), 'sentiment' (*qingwei* 情味), 'lingering taste' (*yunwei* 韻味), 'divine flavor' (*shenwei* 神味), 'remaining taste' (*yiwei* 遺味), 'aftertaste' (*yuwei* 餘味), 'beyond tastes' (*wei wai wei* 味外味) [...] Taste was considered one of the elementary standards for judging the quality of poetic works:

excellent poems leave the reader with an endless aftertaste, and tasteless poems belonged to an inferior quality.

Ancient Chinese poems stem from emotions, rely on the use of images and pursue the creation of an artistic conception which «displays indescribable sceneries as if they were in front of one's eyes, containing endless meanings beyond words» (Ouyang Xiu, *Liuyi shihua* 六一詩話, *Lidaishihua* 歷代詩話 1981, p. 267). The touching, delicate and long-lasting aesthetic effect of classical poems is expressed through the concept of taste, which does not adhere to old literary conventions but precisely points out the pertinent gist of poetry with simple expression. On the other hand, it is necessary to read poetry from the perspective of tasting. Wei, as a noun, means flavor; as a verb, it indicates the sensorial process of gustation, i.e. tasting. The two meanings are interrelated: in order to distinguish a flavor it is necessary to taste, while to taste is the only way to experience a flavor.

Laozi's doctrine of 'tasting the flavorless', a notion that goes beyond the experience of food, provides the earliest instance of the use of *wei* (taste) as a verb. Thereafter, more common examples are expressions such as «tasting the Confucian Classics» 含味經籍郎顛傳 *Hou Han shu* 後漢書 80.1070), «clarifying the mind to taste the images» 澄懷味象宗炳畫山水序 *Quan Song wen* 64.2545), and so on.

Almost at the same time that the notion of taste was adopted to illustrate the aesthetic features of poetic works, the verb 'taste' entered into the field of poetic theory as the most suitable way of appreciating poems.

In the Southern Dynasties, Liu Xie and Zhong Rong while arguing that poems of high quality should have taste, advocated tasting as the best method for reading poetry. The earliest discussion on tasting poems is seen in the chapter entitled «Ming shi» 明詩 (Elucidating Poetry), in the *Wenxin diaolong*, which reads: «Zhang Heng's 張衡 (78-139) elegy, pure and elegant, is worth tasting» (*Wenxin diaolong zhu* 1958, p. 66). In this passage, the notion of *wei* is not only used to explain the profound nature of poetry, but is also transferred to the act of reading to epitomize the attitudes to be adopted in the appreciation of poetry. In another chapter of the *Wenxin diaolong*, «*Qing Cai*» 情采 (Emotion and Literary Expression), one reads that «the silk from Wu easily fades, and the blossoms of the Shun tree are beautiful to no good purpose. As for flowery rhetoric lacking genuine feeling, (one) tastes it and feels dull» (p. 539). Although these arguments are specular, both emphasize the need to taste poetry. Zhong Rong maintained a position consistent with that of Liu Xie's. After having briefly expounded the meaning of the expressive forms of analogy (*xing* 興), metaphor (*bi* 比) and description (*fu* 賦) derived from *Book of Songs* (*Shijing* 詩經), Zhong Rong stresses that one must «combine the three forms [*xing*, *bi* and *fu*], compose with vigor, then embellish [the composition] with flowery language, as well as make it enjoyable and deeply moving, [so as] to achieve the best result» (*Shipin zhu* 1961, p. 4). The reader of

poetry is defined as ‘the one who tastes it’ (*weizhi zhe* 味之者). The *Shipin* has recorded such a comment on Zhang Xie 張協 (?-307)’s poems having ornate rhetoric and sonorous rhyme, so that «those who taste them feel tireless» (使人味之，亶亶不倦). Reading poems was thus regarded as ‘tasting poems’ (*Shipin zhu* 詩品注 1961, p. 18).

Liu Xie and Zhong Rong had several followers throughout history. Moreover, the concepts of ‘detailed tasting’ (*xiangwei* 詳味), ‘carefully tasting’ (*shuwei* 熟味), ‘learned tasting’ (*wanwei* 玩味), ‘savoring’ (*pinwei* 品味), ‘recalling tasting’ (*huiwei* 回味), ‘deep tasting’ (*shenwei* 深味), ‘loud tasting’ (*fengwei* 諷味), ‘pondered tasting’ (*xiwei* 細味), ‘contemplative tasting’ (*xunwei* 尋味), ‘declamatory tasting’ (*songwei* 誦味), ‘mull over tasting’ (*juwei* 咀味) and so on, gradually evolved. For instance, the Buddhist monk Jiaoran 皎然 (730-799) of the mid-Tang Dynasty in his monograph *Shishi* 詩式 (Statutes of Poetry) illustrated how to read poetry through the notion of ‘detailed tasting.’ Another poet, Buddhist monk Huihong 惠洪 (1071-1128) of the Song Dynasty, in his book *Lengzhai yehua* 冷齋夜話 (Nighttime Chats in Cold Studio), reports this critique of the poem «Yu Weng» 漁翁 (An old Fisherman) by Liu Zongyuan 柳宗元 (773-819): «Liu Zihou’s 柳子厚 [Liu Zongyuan] poem reads: ‘At night beside the western cliff, he sleeps in his lean-to; at dawn he drinks the bright clear Xiang, burns the bamboos of Chu. The smoke is gone, the sun comes out, by now he is unseen: in crags and waters green. Far down the middle reaches he turns back and sees the view, empty of mind, and above the cliffs, the idle clouds pursue.’ (Li and Samei 2010, pp. 179-180). [Su] Dongpo [蘇] 蘇東坡東坡 (1037-1101) said that ‘poetry treasures something of peculiar interest (*qiqū* 奇趣); something of interest (*qū* 趣) may be unusual but reasonable. Carefully tasting it (*shuwei* 熟味), this poem has ‘peculiar interest’. However, the last two verses seem unnecessary» (*Lengzhai Yehua* 冷齋夜話 1988, pp. 43-44). Whether the last two sentences of Liu’s poem were redundant or not, it is a matter of preference. However, in the mind of Huihong, ‘carefully tasting’ a poem is the correct way of reading. Zhang Jie in the *Suihantang Shihua* expressed his admiration for Du Fu’s poetry, saying that «only he appreciated Confucius’ original intention in deleting the songs». He thought that «if the readers could leave his words aside, seek the implied meaning and linger over his poems, then they will experience Zi Mei’s emotions» (*Lidai shihua xubian* 1983, p. 470). In *Yougu tang shihua* 優古堂詩話 (Yougu Tang Remarks on Poetry), Wu Jian 吳升 (1097-1132 ca.), while discussing Wang Anshi 王安石 (1021-1086), observed that «as for Jinggong’s 荆公 (Wang Anshi) poems, if one «tastes them» accurately, then he can seize the sense of leisure and carefreeness» (*Lidai shihua xubian* 1983, p. 266). During the Yuan Dynasty, Yang Zai 楊載 (1271-1323) discusses the old five-character verse (*wuyan gushi* 五言古詩) and writes «observing the ancient poems of the Han and Wei dynasties, one can feel something appealing and inspiring. For instance, *Gushi shijiu shou* 古詩十九首 (Nineteen Old Poems),

should be recited and pondered over and over, then the *qu* 趣 (interest and charm) will appear» (*Shifa Jiashu* 詩法家數, *Lidai shihua* 1981, p. 731). By the Ming Dynasty, Li Dongyang 李東陽 (1447-1516) manifests in *Lutang shihua* 麓堂詩話 (Remarks on Poetry From the Hall at the Foot of the Mountain) his veiled criticism of the move to restore blindly the ancient literary conventions and writes:

Lin Ziyu's (14th century) 林子羽 [Lin Hong] *Mingsheng ji* 鳴盛集 (The Tenor of Poetry at its Best) simply stuck to the form of the Tang, and Yuan Kai's 袁凱 (14th century) *Zaiye ji* 在野集 only learned from Du [Fu]; they tried their best to imitate the words, the syntax, as well as the titles. At a first glance the works resemble the old versions. However, if one tastes their poems carefully, and wants to find outstanding poems with emotions that come from the heart, he will count very few of them. (*Lidai shihua xubian* 1983, p. 1374)

What Li Dongyang calls 'pondered tasting' is intended as the opposite of a sudden view (*zhoushi* 驟視), which represented a more detailed and deeper reading of poetry. In his *Shijing* (Poetry Mirror), Lu Shiyong selected Du Fu's seven character *lushi* 律詩, which well exemplify Du's profound and forceful poetic style, and commented: «Shaoling's (Du Fu) seven-character *lushi* are very cultured and refined. Their words resonate without saying everything, while the feelings are plentiful; emotions are projected into sceneries and sceneries contain feelings: one recitation, three sighing pauses, and an infinite aftertaste» (*Lidai shihua xubian* 1983, p. 1416). In the Qing Dynasty, Mao Xianshu 毛先舒 (1620-1688) in *Shibian di* 詩辯坻 (Discernment on Poetry) selected some famous verses that «since antiquity have been in circulation among the connoisseurs», such as «The great river flows day and night», «Clear water is like white silk», «Spring grasses come to life beside the pond», and «Swallows drop bits of mud from the desolate beams» and so on, and states: «Just tasting a few words of the verses, one can be enlightened» (*Qing shihua xubian* 清詩話續編 1983, pp. 35-36). He Shang 賀裳 (ca.1681) discusses most of the Tang and Song Dynasties poets in *Zaijiuyuan Shihua* 載酒園詩話 (Remarks on Poetry from the Carrying Wine Garden) and affirms that the poems by Liu Xiyi 劉希夷 (651-679) «leave an unsatisfied ruminative taste (*xunwei wujin* 尋味無盡)». One also has to mention poems such as *Jiuwei Shengjin* 久味生津 (With Good Relish) by Wang Changling 王昌齡 (698-756) and *Juanyong Kewei* 雋永可味 (Meaningful) by Wang Yucheng 王禹偁 (954-1001) Shen Deqian 沈德潛 (1673-1769), in the introductory notes to the *Tangshi Biecai* 唐詩別裁 (Anthology of Tang poetry) writes: «What is valued in poems is depth and what is formed by the spirit (*qi* 氣); at a first glance it seems without quality, but after tasting it for a long time, it feels permeated with charm. This type of poems belongs with the superior ones» (*Tangshi biecaiji* 唐詩

別裁集 1975, p. 5). Pan Deyu 潘德輿 (1785-1839) thought that the beautiful lines of the five-character verses of the prosperous Tang Dynasty «are all leisure and delight, every time one recites and tastes them, all melancholy disappears» (*Qing shihua xubian* 清詩話續編 1983, pp. 2127-2128). Obviously, the only way to grasp the meaning of superior poetic works is to taste them. Qian Peizhong 錢裴仲 (17th-18th century) further advocated tasting as the 'method for reading *ci* poetry' in *Yuhua'an Cihua* 雨華庵詞話 (Song Lyric Talks from the Rain Flower Hut). He emphasized: «The method of reading *ci* is to read it carefully and sensibly. First of all, one should eliminate all distractions and then devote one's heart and soul to it; stare at it, scrutinize it and taste it, and then one will appreciate the ingenuity of the ancients» (*Cihua congbian* 詞話叢編 1986, p. 3012).

Through a long accumulation of theoretic reflection, ancient Chinese poetics has established such a consensus: the finest way of reading poetry is to taste it. First, taste is feeling rather than understanding, in other words, tasting poetry is to experience it, not to analyze it rationally. In the Ming Dynasty, Xie Zhen 謝榛 (1495-1575) mentioned that «as for the poems, some are comprehensible, some are subtle, and some others do not need to be understood, like the reflection of the moon in the water and of the flowers in a mirror, which do not leave tangible traces» (*Lidai shihua xubian* 1983, p. 1137). As for poetic works, the part that «can be explained» (*kejie* 可解) is an addition; while the part that «cannot be explained and does not need to be explained» (*bu kejie* 不可解, *bu bi jie* 不必解) is the real nature. To insist on explanation brings one to interpret and read information that is not there. This is the case, for instance, Wang Wei's 王維 (699-759) poem *Guan lie* 觀獵 (Watching a Hunt), in which «Eagle's eyes scan swiftly through withered grass. Horse runs with lighter hoofs when snow thaws» 草枯鷹眼疾, 雪盡馬蹄輕 (Owen 1997, p. 386) is a metaphor indicating Sovereign and Minister in harmony. Obviously, this is a far cry from the correct reading of poetry. Second, to taste is to feel and to experience cautiously what can be understood but difficult to express exactly in words. The climax of poetic works are those in which emotions and images combine harmoniously «like the antelope that hangs by its horns leaving no traces to be followed» 羚羊掛角, 無跡可求, «a limpid and sparkling quality that can never quite be fixed» 透徹玲瓏, 不可湊泊, and «like tones in the empty air, or color in a face, or moonlight in the water, or an image in a mirror» 如空中之音, 相中之色, 水中之月, 鏡中之象, 言有盡而意無窮 («*Canglang shihua*» 滄浪詩話, *Lidai shihua* 1981, p. 688). This is what is meant by «it can be experienced, but it cannot be put in words» 可以意會, 不可以言宣 (Shen Yu 神彘 *Shige* 詩格, *Quantang wudai shige jiaokao* 全唐五代詩格校考 1996, p. 467). When reading poems, one can catch the nuances and the tacit sense but «cannot explain the beauty to others» 妙處難與君說. Third, to taste poetry is a gradual deepening process. Chinese poetry has invariably insisted on the paramount value of evoca-

tion, something which has been gaining strength since the *bi* and *xing* genres that stemmed from the *Shijing* 詩經 (*Book of Poetry*). Li Dongyang in his book *Lutang shihua* writes: «*Bi* and *xing* use objects to express emotions, since direct statements about emotions have limitations and cannot express them in depth. Only through objects – by describing and chanting them – one can express one’s inspiration: although one’s words will come to an end, the meaning is endless» (*Lidai shihua xubian* 1983, pp. 1374-1375). Li Chonghua 李重華 (1682-1755) in *Zhenyizhai shishuo* 貞一齋詩說 (Remarks on Poetry from Zhenyi Studio) also said: «The *xing* style provides much help to the poets. Suddenly they talk about plants and animals; they do not name the season but allude to it; they do not describe the scenery but hint at it; they do not speak about worldly matters but let them emerge. Therefore, the *xing* bequeaths poetry with both spirit and truth» (*Qing shihua* 清詩話 1963, p. 930). To appreciate verses that are permeated by the quintessence of *bi* 比 and *xing* 興, it is necessary to savor slowly so as to proceed from the exterior to the interior and from the shallow to the deep, rather than trying to cover too much with only a simple glance. Fourth, tasting has a character of distinct individuality. Everyone has his/her own taste and different persons may have diverse feelings about the same food; this is consistent with poetry appreciation. Reading poems means the mutual acceptance and communion between the readers and the works of poetry. At this point, the personality of the reader has been fully respected, and opinions are allowed free rein. Wang Fuzhi 王夫之 (1619-1692) in *Jiangzhai shihua* 薑齋詩話 (Remarks on Poetry from Ginger Studio) affirmed the right of readers to «search for what they wish from the starting point of their emotions» 讀者各以其情而自得 (*Qing shihua* 清詩話 1963, p. 3). Shen Deqian 沈德潛 (1673-1769), in the introduction to *Tangshi biecai ji* 唐詩別裁集 (A Collection of Tang Poetry Specially Compiled) talked about the endless meaning of the ancients’ words, which, when read by later people may be «appreciated according to each reader’s different temperament and understanding» 隨其性情淺深高下, 各有會心 (*Tangshi biecai ji* 1975, p. 5).

Adopting the concept of taste to comment on poetry is not only beneficial to the conceptualization of the characteristics of poetry and poetry reading, but also enlightens us on the fact that when we study poetry, the distinction between literary theory and the theory of reading is relative. Pondering over reading poetry cannot ignore the peculiarity of poetic works; on the other hand, when confronting poetic works, one should also pay attention to the requisites for poetry reading. To keep to one side inevitably leads to stereotypes. It is essential to link up the two positions, which in turn will lead to one’s acquiring a broader field of vision.

The concept of taste in ancient Chinese poetic theory cannot be understood as a scientific notion, as in terms of Western science, for it defies

precise definitions. However, the simple word 'taste' reflects the unique features of traditional Chinese culture and well represents the essence of ancient Chinese poetic theory.

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