

THE HALL OF USELESSNESS

Collected Essays

SIMON LEYS

NEW YORK REVIEW BOOKS



New York

THE CHINESE ATTITUDE TOWARDS THE PAST

Le Tibre seul, qui vers la mer s'enfuit,
Reste de Rome. O mondaine inconstance!
Ce qui est ferme, est par le temps détruit,
Et ce qui fuit, au temps fait résistance.

—JOACHIM DU BELLAY, *Les Antiquités de Rome* (1558)

CHINA is the oldest living civilisation on Earth.¹ Such a unique continuity naturally implies a very complex relation between a people and their past. It seems that there is a paradox at the heart of this remarkable cultural longevity: cultivation of the moral and spiritual values of the ancients appears to have most often combined with a curious neglect of, or indifference (even at times downright iconoclasm) towards, the material heritage of the past. (Whether the spiritual continuity was achieved in spite of, or *thanks to*, a partial destruction of the material expressions of tradition is itself another issue, which will only be briefly evoked later on.)

This essay attempts a preliminary exploration of the parallel phenomena of spiritual preservation and material destruction that can be observed in the history of Chinese culture. The topic being vast, I shall merely outline here some of the directions and themes which a fuller inquiry ought to pursue. At this stage, my intention is not to provide any answers, but simply to define the question.

SPIRITUAL PRESENCE AND PHYSICAL ABSENCE OF THE PAST IN CHINA

In his autobiography, Carl Gustav Jung described how, in his old age, he wished to go to Rome, which he had never visited before. He had always postponed this project, fearing that he might not be able to withstand the emotional impact of such an encounter with the living heart of Europe's ancient culture. Eventually, as he entered a travel agency in Zurich to buy his ticket, he fainted and remained unconscious for a short interval. After this experience, he wisely decided to abandon his plans—and he never saw Rome.² Most sinologists are not endowed with antennae as subtle as Jung's—and yet, even without being possessed of such sensitivity, it would be difficult for whoever studied classical China to approach the China of today and not to feel constantly touched, moved, overwhelmed by the extraordinary aura that seems to emanate everywhere from a land so suffused with history.

The presence of the past is constantly felt in China. Sometimes it is found in the most unexpected places, where it hits the visitor with added intensity: movie-theatre posters, advertisements for washing machines, televisions or toothpaste displayed along the streets are expressed in a written language that has remained practically unchanged for the last 2,000 years. In kindergartens, toddlers chant Tang poems that were written some 1,200 years ago. In railway stations, the mere consultation of a train timetable can be an intoxicating experience for any cultural historian: the imagination is stirred by these long lists of city names to which are still attached the vivid glories of past dynasties. Or again, in a typical and recent occurrence, archaeologists discovered in a 2,000-year-old tomb, among the foodstuff that had been buried with the deceased, *rawoli* which were in every respect identical to those that can be bought today in any street-corner shop. Similar examples could be multiplied endlessly.

Yet, at the same time, the paradox is that the very past which seems to penetrate everything, and to manifest itself with such surprising vigour, is also strangely evading our *physical* grasp. This same China which is loaded with so much history and so many memories is also oddly deprived of ancient monuments. In the Chinese landscape,

there is a *material* absence of the past that can be most disconcerting for cultivated Western travellers—especially if they approach China with the criteria and standards that are naturally developed in a European environment. In Europe, in spite of countless wars and destruction, every age has left a considerable amount of monumental landmarks: the ruins of classical Greece and Rome, and all the great medieval cathedrals, the churches and palaces of the Renaissance period, the monuments of the Baroque era—all these form an unbroken chain of architectural witnesses that perpetuate the memory of the past, right into the heart of our modern cities. In China, on the contrary, if we except a very small number of famous *ensembles* (the antiquity of which is quite relative), what strikes the educated visitor is the monumental absence of the past. Most Chinese cities—including and especially those which were ancient capital cities or prestigious cultural centres—present today an aspect that may not look exactly new or modern (for, if modernisation is a target which China has now set for itself, there is still a long way to go before it can be reached), yet they still appear strangely devoid of all traditional character. On the whole, they seem to be a product of late-nineteenth-century industrialisation. Thus, the past which continues to animate Chinese life in so many striking, unexpected or subtle ways seems to inhabit *the people* rather than the bricks and stones. The Chinese past is both spiritually active and physically invisible.

It should be noted that, when I mention this physical elimination of the past, I am not trying to refer once more to the widespread and systematic destruction perpetrated by the "Cultural Revolution." During the last years of the Maoist era, this destruction, it is true, literally resulted in a cultural desert—in some cities 95 to 100 per cent of historic and cultural relics were indeed lost forever. However, we must immediately point out that, in so many cities it was possible for mere gangs of schoolchildren to loot, burn and raze to the ground the near totality of the local antiquities, it was because in the first instance there had not been much left for them to destroy. Actually, very few monuments had survived earlier historical disasters and, in consequence, the Maoist vandals found only rare targets on which to expend their energy. In this perspective, it might even be a mistake to

look at the "Cultural Revolution" as if it was an accidental aberration. If we place it in a broader historical context, it may appear in fact as the latest expression of a very ancient phenomenon of massive iconoclasm, which was recurrent all through the ages. Without having to go very far back in time, the Taiping insurrection in the mid-nineteenth century produced a devastation that was far more radical than the "Cultural Revolution"—I shall come back later to this question of the periodic destruction of the material heritage of the past, which seems to have characterised Chinese history.

Thus, the disconcerting barrenness of the Chinese monumental landscape cannot be read simply as a consequence of the chaotic years of the Maoist period. It is a feature much more permanent and deep—and it had already struck Western travellers in the nineteenth and at the beginning of the twentieth century.

In this particular respect, I think it would be difficult to find a witness better qualified and more articulate than Victor Segalen (1878–1919), a remarkable poet who was also a sinologist and archaeologist of considerable achievement; he spent several years in China at the end of the empire, and led two long archaeological expeditions into the more remote provinces of the interior. In one prose poem, "Aux dix mille années"³ (1912), he memorably summarised the paradox which is, I think, at the root of the Chinese attitude towards the past. (My entire essay was originally triggered by this piece, and what I am trying to do here is merely to provide a comment to it.)

Segalen's poem is a meditation on the relation between Chinese culture and time. It starts from a comparative evocation of the architectural principles of the great civilisations of the past, and opposes them to the Chinese conception. The non-Chinese attitude—from ancient Egypt to the modern West—is essentially an active, aggressive attempt to challenge and overcome the erosion of time. Its ambition is to build for all eternity by adopting the strongest possible materials and using techniques that will ensure maximum resilience. Yet, by doing this, the builders are merely postponing their ineluctable defeat. The Chinese, on the contrary, have realised that—in Segalen's words—"nothing immobile can escape the hungry teeth of the ages." Thus, the Chinese constructors yielded to the onrush of time, the better to deflect it.

Segalen's reflection developed from technically accurate information: Chinese architecture is essentially made of perishable and fragile materials; it embodies a sort of "in-built obsolescence"; it decays rapidly and requires frequent rebuilding. From these practical observations, he drew a philosophical conclusion: the Chinese actually transferred the problem—eternity should not inhabit the building, it should inhabit the builder. The transient nature of the construction is like an offering to the voracity of time; for the price of such sacrifices, the constructors ensure the everlastingness of their spiritual designs.

LIMITS OF CHINESE ANTIQUARIANISM

Although, on the whole, it would not be wrong to say that the Chinese largely neglected to maintain and preserve the material expressions of their culture, such a statement would obviously require qualification.

Antiquarianism⁴ did develop in China and constitutes in itself a topic that would deserve a thorough study. Here I wish merely to emphasise its two major limitations: first, antiquarianism appeared very late in Chinese cultural history; secondly, it remained essentially restricted to a narrow category of objects.

On the first point: although some aspects of antiquarianism (mostly literary) had already appeared in late Tang (after the crisis of An Lushan's rebellion in 756), it essentially developed from the beginning of the Song (eleventh century)—in Western terms, this may seem quite ancient, but in Chinese history it is in fact rather late, as it represents the beginning of modern times. The Song displayed a passionate curiosity in antiquity, and this interest found many expressions: the first manifestations of scholarly archaeology, the study and collection of antique bronzes, the great systematic compilations of ancient epigraphs. More generally, Song tastes and fashions all began to reflect this new cult for the artistic forms of the past.

What is remarkable is that in China the development of antiquarianism actually reflected a highly abnormal situation. It resulted from

a spiritual crisis and represented a new desire to define and affirm a Chinese cultural identity. The Song empire was a menaced world, a mutilated empire. Not only had the Chinese territory dangerously shrunk, but for the first time the Chinese emperors had to deal not with mere nomadic raiders but with alien leaders ruling in their own right. China's aggressive neighbours now possessed set institutions and a fairly sophisticated culture; they directly challenged the Chinese traditional conception whereby China was the centre of the world. From the eleventh century, the Chinese faith in the universality of their world order seems to have been deeply shaken by the permanent politico-military crisis resulting from the foreign menace, and it is in this particular context that, for the first time in Chinese history, a massive cultural escape took place backwards in time: Chinese intellectuals effected a retreat into their glorious antiquity and undertook a systematic investigation of the splendours of their past. (Modern scholars have called this phenomenon "Chinese culturalism" and see in it a forerunner of the nationalism that was to develop many centuries later in reaction against the Manchu rule and Western aggressions.)

In this perspective, antiquarianism appears essentially as a search for spiritual shelter and moral comfort. Antiquarian pursuits were to provide Chinese intellectuals with much-needed reassurance at a time when they felt threatened in their cultural identity.

On the second point (the limited object of antiquarianism), traditionally Chinese aesthetes, connoisseurs and collectors were exclusively interested in calligraphy and painting; later on, their interest also extended to bronzes and to a few other categories of antiques. However, we must immediately observe that painting is in fact an extension of calligraphy—or at least, that it had first to adopt the instruments and techniques of calligraphy before it could attract the attention of the aesthetes. As to the bronzes, their value was directly dependent upon whether they carried epigraphs.⁵ In conclusion, it would not be an excessive simplification to state that, in China, the taste for antiques has always remained closely—if not exclusively—related to the prestige of the *written word*.

ART COLLECTIONS

A study of Chinese antiquarianism should naturally include a chapter on art collecting in China. On this important topic we must limit ourselves here to a few basic remarks.⁶

The earliest collections recorded in history were the imperial collections. The early collections of the archaic rulers were composed of symbolic objects, with magic and cosmological properties, the possession of which entailed possession of political power. Progressively, the magico-cosmological collections of "maps and documents" (*tuji* or *tushu*) evolved into art collections of "calligraphy and painting"—the transition took place around the end of the Han period. (Note the ambiguity of the word "tu" which means both *map* and *image*. Originally, to possess the map-image of a territory was to have control over that territory. In international relations in pre-imperial China, when a state yielded territory to another state, the transaction was effected by surrendering the map-image of that territory.)

It is interesting to observe that, even after the magico-cosmological collections turned into aesthetic collections, the memory of their original function never disappeared completely. For instance, a Tang emperor, who was a connoisseur and avid collector, having learned that one of his high officials had some very rare ancient paintings, "invited" him to present them to the imperial collections. Needless to say, this kind of "invitation" could not be declined, and the minister, heartbroken, complied immediately. The emperor personally acknowledged the gift, and in his letter took pains to emphasise that, in taking possession of these paintings, he was not pursuing an idle and frivolous private aesthetic curiosity but actually meant to assume fully his public responsibility as a ruler.⁷

In fact, the imperial collections never entirely lost their archaic role of legitimising political authority. It is remarkable to see how this function has actually survived until today. Chiang Kai-shek, who was never particularly noted for his artistic inclinations, diverted considerable resources and energy in a time of acute emergency in order to have the former imperial collections removed to Taiwan just before he

had to evacuate the mainland. By doing this, it was generally considered that he had secured a fairly substantial support for his claim that he still was the legitimate ruler of all China. At the time, Peking experienced this move as a bitter political setback, and the presence of the imperial collections in Taiwan has always remained a very sore point for the People's Republic. The Communist leaders too can hardly be suspected of much aesthetic indulgence—and yet, as soon as they assumed power, they immediately attempted to rebuild an “imperial” collection in Peking—partly by “inviting” private collectors to contribute their paintings (in a fashion quite similar to the Tang episode evoked earlier), and partly by buying back, at great cost, some ancient masterpieces of Chinese art on the international art market.⁸

All through history, imperial collections achieved an extraordinary concentration of ancient masterpieces, amounting at times to a virtual monopoly over the artistic heritage of the past. Two important consequences resulted from this situation.

1. Without access to the imperial collections—and only a very small number of high-ranking officials enjoyed such a privilege—it was practically impossible for most artists, aesthetes, connoisseurs and critics to acquire a full, first-hand knowledge of ancient art. On this subject, even historians were dealing mostly with abstract concepts, unverified stereotypes and literary information.⁹ Sifting through the vast literature of connoisseurs' notes, one is constantly struck by the fact that, when the writers refer to ancient paintings which they personally had the chance to examine, these works are seldom more than 200 years old. Moreover, it is not uncommon to come across influential critics and collectors who confess that they hardly ever saw any works by famous artists who lived barely one century before them.¹⁰ (This situation provided ideal conditions for a thriving industry of art forgery—another important topic that unfortunately cannot be covered here.¹¹)

2. It is mostly because each dynasty achieved a huge concentration of art treasures that China's heritage repeatedly suffered such massive losses. The fall of practically every dynasty entailed the looting and burning of the imperial palace, and each time, with one stroke, the cream of the artistic production of the preceding centuries would

vanish in smoke. The stunning extent of these recurrent disasters is documented in great detail by the historical records.¹²

Here, a side comment could be made. We must lament the grievous losses that were inflicted upon the cultural heritage of China—and of mankind—and yet, we may wonder if there was perhaps not *some* relation between the inexhaustible creativity displayed by Chinese culture through the ages and the periodic *tabula rasa* that prevented this culture from becoming clogged up, inhibited and crushed under the weight of the treasures accumulated by earlier ages. Like individuals, civilisations do need a certain amount of *creative forgetfulness*. Too many memories can hinder intellectual and spiritual activity, as it is suggested in a well-known tale by Jorge Luis Borges, describing the ordeal of a man who cannot forget anything. A total, perfect, infallible memory is a curse: the mind of Borges's character is turned into a huge garbage heap from which nothing can be subtracted, and where, as a result, no imaginative or thinking process can take place any more—for to think is to discard.

IDEOLOGICAL BACKGROUND: THE CULT OF THE PAST IN CHINESE THOUGHT

As we have just noted, Chinese antiquarianism remained limited both in time (it appeared late) and in scope (it was mostly concerned with the diverse manifestations of the written word).

These limitations may seem paradoxical when we consider that two important cultural factors ought apparently to have produced an environment particularly conducive to antiquarian pursuits. These factors are:

1. that China's dominant ideology—Confucianism—extolled the values of the past; and
2. that China from a very early age developed an extraordinary sense of history—it actually possesses the longest uninterrupted historiographical tradition.

On the question of the Confucian cult of the past,¹³ two significant qualifications should be made. First, in ancient Chinese thought, the

cult of the past was far from being a universal dogma. The quarrel between the "ancients" and the "moderns" occupied a considerable part of the philosophical debates in pre-imperial China—the most creative period in the history of Chinese thought. At the end of that period, the modern school gained the upper hand, thus providing the ideological framework for the establishment of the first Chinese empire. (In fact, the notorious initiative of the first emperor, who decided "to burn the books and bury the scholars alive," marked the gruesome climax of this movement to obliterate the past.) Shortly before, the last (and most agile) of the great exponents of Confucianism, Xun Zi, had come to terms with "modernism" and accommodated the Confucian tradition to the prevalent trends of the time.¹⁴

Secondly, it is true that Confucius considered antiquity as the repository of all human values. Therefore, according to him, the sage's mission was not to *create* anything anew but merely to *transmit* the heritage of the ancients. In actual fact, such a program was far less conservative than might first appear (Confucius himself played a revolutionary role in his time): the antiquity to which he referred was a *lost* antiquity, which the sage had to seek and practically to *reinvent*. Its actual contents were thus highly fluid and not susceptible to objective definition or circumscription by a specific historical tradition. Similarly, in later periods, nearly all the great Confucian reformers in Chinese history used to invoke the authority of the ancients to condemn modern practices—but what was meant by these semantic conventions practically amounted to the exact opposite: their so-called antiquity referred to a mythical Golden Age—actually their utopian vision of the *future*—whereas the so-called modern practices referred to the inheritance of the recent past; that is, in fact, the *real past*.

On the question of the great historiographical tradition of China and the unique awareness of history developed by Chinese culture, only one basic observation should be made here, in direct connection with our topic. It is true that China produced from a very early period a magnificent historiography. Two thousand years ago, Chinese historians already displayed methods that were remarkably modern and scientific; this, however, should not lead us to misunderstand their objective, which remained essentially philosophic and moral.

From a very early stage—well before Confucius—the Chinese evolved the notion that there could only be one form of immortality: the immortality conferred by history. In other words, life-after-life was not to be found in a supernature, nor could it rely upon artefacts: man only survives in man—which means, in practical terms, in the memory of posterity, through the medium of the written word.¹⁵

This brings us back to our starting point, Segalen's poetical intuition that Chinese everlastingness does not inhabit monuments, but people. Permanence does not negate change, it informs change. Continuity is not ensured by the immobility of inanimate objects, it is achieved through the fluidity of the successive generations.¹⁶

A CASE STUDY: THE "PREFACE TO THE ORCHID PAVILION"

After having dealt with theoretical notions, let us now conclude by examining one exemplary case—a concrete instance that illustrates the actual mechanisms of the relationship between a "spiritual" tradition and its material expression.

My example is taken from calligraphy, which—as I already pointed out—is considered in China as the supreme art. The particular piece I am going to present is itself traditionally considered as the absolute masterpiece of this supreme art. In the entire history of Chinese art there is probably no other individual work that could claim a similar prestige, or could have exerted as wide and lasting an influence. It became a cornerstone in the development of calligraphy. Practically all the major calligraphers of later centuries defined themselves in relation to this particular work.

This arch-famous work is called the *Lan ting xu*, or *Preface to the Orchid Pavilion*, by Wang Xizhi (307–365), the greatest calligrapher of all ages.¹⁷

First, a few words need to be said on the work itself and the circumstances of its creation. In 353, on the occasion of a spring ritual, a group of scholars went on an excursion to a beautiful spot called the Orchid Pavilion. It was a merry and refined gathering, dedicated to the enjoyment of friendship, poetry and wine. At the end of the day,

all the poems that had been improvised by the participants were collected, and Wang Xizhi wrote a preface to the collection. The preface itself is a short prose-essay in 320 words. On that day, Wang Xizhi was particularly inspired, and when he calligraphed his preface, he really surpassed himself. Later on, he repeatedly tried to recapture the unique quality of his original creation, and literally made hundreds of attempts to reduplicate his own masterpiece, but never succeeded in equalling the miraculous beauty of the *premier jet*.

How was this calligraphy handed down in history? Here the plot thickens and even acquires the bizarre and murky twists of a detective story.

After Wang Xizhi's death, the *Orchid Pavilion* was kept by his descendants and remained within the family. However, during the first 200 years of its existence, no mention was ever made of it; seemingly, no one had a chance to see it.

Two hundred and fifty years later, it came into the hands of a monk who made copies of it, had these distributed and thus laid the ground for Wang's subsequent artistic reputation.

Three hundred years later, Wang's calligraphic style aroused the enthusiasm of Emperor Tang Taizong. Taizong avidly hunted for his calligraphies and gathered the most exhaustive collection of his autographs (2,290 items—all to be eventually scattered). However, the crowning jewel, the *Orchid Pavilion*, was still missing from this collection. After devious manoeuvres, combining deception and violence, the emperor finally succeeded in securing possession of the masterpiece—at the cost of a human life.¹⁸ Taizong treasured the *Orchid Pavilion* and ordered copies to be made from it (both tracing copies and free-hand copies); these copies were then carved on stone and rubbings were taken from the stone tablets. Eventually the original stones were lost or destroyed, but new tablets were carved from the original rubbings. As the original rubbings themselves disappeared, new rubbings were taken from later engravings—and with the passing of time, the study of the pedigree of these copies of copies of copies, and the establishment of their genealogical tree, became a specialised discipline of mind-boggling complexity.

Meanwhile, Wang Xizhi's original manuscript had long ceased to

be available for reference. Tang Taizong, who died in 649, had demanded that the *Orchid Pavilion* be buried with him in his grave at Zhaoling—some 30 kilometres north of what is now Xi'an, where it should still be lying today (if the imperial records told us the truth).

Remarkable paradox: it was only *after* it finally disappeared forever in the imperial grave that this particular work (which very few calligraphers ever saw in its original form) began to exert its strongest influence, through various indirect and questionable copies. It eventually had its greatest impact at the beginning of the Song period (eleventh century)—700 years after Wang Xizhi's time. It was then popularised by a calligrapher of genius, Mi Fu, who, under the guise of propounding Wang's calligraphic style, displayed in fact his own personal creations. The educated public was unable to distinguish the Mi product from the Wang label, as, by this time, practically nothing remained of Wang Xizhi's original works, with the exception of a few very small, uncertain fragments. From then on, the prestige and influence of the *Orchid Pavilion* continued to grow steadily. As L. Ledderose neatly summarised it: "It seems somehow uncomfortably symptomatic that it was the lost *Orchid Pavilion* that was to emerge as the most celebrated work in the history of Chinese calligraphy... What is even more astonishing is that the *Orchid Pavilion* in addition to being glorified also became a stylistic model: it has been studied by calligraphers for centuries although nobody has ever seen the original!"¹⁹

Furthermore, there was a final, ironic twist to the story. In 1965, the famous scholar and archaeologist Guo Moruo ignited a bomb that threw the Chinese academic world into turmoil and initiated a heated and still unresolved debate. According to Guo's findings, not only is the calligraphy of the *Orchid Pavilion*, as we know it through its Tang and Song copies, from a much later date than Wang Xizhi, but even the text itself could not have been composed by him: in other words, Wang Xizhi neither wrote it nor calligraphed it. The sublime model which inspired the entire development of Chinese calligraphy, the aesthetic and technical cornerstone of this art, *may in fact never have existed!*

Whether or not this conclusion is accurate (there are some flaws in Guo's argumentation, but let us leave that aside), it can still provide us with an important clue to the broader issue we have attempted to

address: *the vital strength, the creativity, the seemingly unlimited capacity for metamorphosis and adaptation which the Chinese tradition displayed for 3,500 years may well derive from the fact that this tradition never let itself be trapped into set forms, static objects and things, where it would have run the risk of paralysis and death.*²⁰

In a sense, one of the best metaphors for this tradition could be provided by the description of a Chinese garden which a Ming scholar wrote in the sixteenth century. It was a fashion among intellectuals and artists to write records of beautiful gardens, but in the case of our writer, there was a new dimension added to the genre. The garden he described was called the Wuyou Garden—which means “The Garden-that-does-not-exist.” In his essay, the author observed that many famous gardens of the past have entirely disappeared and survive only on paper in literary descriptions. Hence, he wondered why it should be necessary for a garden to have first existed in reality. Why not skip the preliminary stage of actual existence and jump directly into the final state of literary existence which, after all, is the common end of all gardens? What difference is there between a famous garden which exists no more, and this particular garden which never existed at all, since in the end both the former and the latter are known only through the same medium of the written word?²¹

Western visitors in China seem to have been irritated to the point of obsession with what came to be called “Chinese lies” or the “Chinese art of stage-setting and make-believe.” Even intelligent and perceptive observers did not completely escape this trap; in a clever piece written a few years ago by a good scholar,²² I came across an anecdote which, I think, has a much deeper bearing than the author himself may have realised. A great Buddhist monastery near Nanking was famous for its purity and orthodoxy. The monks were following a rule that conformed strictly to the original tradition of the Indian monasteries: whereas, in other Chinese monasteries, an evening meal is served, in this particular monastery every evening the monks received only a bowl of tea. Foreign scholars who visited the monastery at the beginning of this century much admired the austerity of this custom. These visitors, however, were quite naïve. If they had had the curiosity actually to look into the bowls of the monks, they would have found

that what was served under the name of “tea” was in fact a fairly nourishing rice congee, similar in every respect to the food which is being provided at night in all other Chinese monasteries. Only in this particular monastery, out of respect for an ancient tradition, the rice congee was conventionally called “the bowl of tea.”

I wonder if, to some extent, Chinese tradition is not such a “bowl of tea,” which under a most ancient, venerable and constant name can in fact contain all sorts of things, and ultimately anything but tea. Its permanence is first and foremost a *permanence of names*, covering the endlessly changing and fluid nature of its actual contents.

If this observation is correct, it could also have interesting implications in other areas, and you would naturally be free, for instance, to read in it a forecast regarding the eventual fate of Marxism-Leninism and Mao Zedong Thought. This essay, however, was only concerned with China's past.

POSTSCRIPT

As this essay was going to the printers, I belatedly obtained a remarkable article by F. W. Mote, “A Millennium of Chinese Urban History: Form, Time and Space Concepts in Soochow.”²³ Reading some of the conclusions which Professor Mote drew fifteen years ago from a case study in Chinese urban history, one will realise that the ideas I ventured here are both less original and more sound than might have first appeared!

Having quoted a Western writer who observed at the beginning of the twentieth century that there were no ancient ruins in Suzhou, Mote comments:

His observation is largely correct. Is Soochow then a city of ancient monuments, or a city in which the awareness of antiquity comes from something else? In our tradition we tend to equate the antique presence with authentically ancient physical objects. China has no ruins comparable to the Roman Forum, or even to Angkor Wat, which is a thousand years younger. It has

no ancient buildings kept continually in use such as Rome's Pantheon and Istanbul's Hagia Sophia. It does not have those, not because of incapacity to build with "hewn stone, as in Athens and Rome" as du Bose suggests. It does not have those because of differences in attitude—a different attitude toward the way of making the monumental achievement, and a different attitude toward the ways of achieving the enduring monument.

More then illustrates his point by sketching the history of Suzhou's Great Pagoda—with a history going back to the third century AD, it was modified, destroyed and rebuilt many times during the ages, ending up as a twentieth-century construction:

This history is typical of China's ancient monuments. No building with such a pedigree would count for much as an authentic antiquity even in the United States, much less in Rome. It certainly would not count for much among Ruskin's Stones of Venice.

Mote concludes:

The point most emphatically is not that China was not obsessed with its past. It studied its past, and drew upon it, using it to design and to maintain its present as has no other civilization. But its ancient cities such as Soochow were "time free" as purely physical objects. They were repositories of the past in a very special way—they embodied or suggested associations whose value lay elsewhere. The past was a past of words not of stones. China kept the largest and longest-enduring of all mankind's documentations of the past. It constantly scrutinized that past as recorded in words, and caused it to function in the life of its present. But it built no Acropolis, it preserved no Roman Forum, and not because it lacked the materials or the techniques. Its enduring structures of cut stone in antiquity were most characteristically burial vaults secreted underground, and, in the later imperial era, were bridges. Those vaults and

bridges were called upon to serve a different level of utility; enduring public monuments to man's achievements did not call forth those means.

Chinese civilization did not lodge its history in buildings. Even its most grandiose palace and city complexes stressed grand layout, the employment of space, and not buildings, which were added as a relatively impermanent superstructure. Chinese civilization seems not to have regarded its history as violated or abused when the historic monuments collapsed or burned, as long as those could be replaced or restored, and their functions regained. *In short we can say that the real past of Soochow is a part of the mind, its imperishable elements are moments of human experience. The only truly enduring embodiments of the eternal human moments are the literary ones.* [My emphasis throughout.]

This final point is then illustrated by the concrete example of Soochow's Maple Bridge which became a poetical topic in literary history:

In all that psycho-historical material associated with the Maple Bridge, the bridge as an object is of little importance. . . . No single poem refers to its physical presence. The bridge as idea was an item in the consciousness of all Chinese . . . yet, its reality to them was not the stones forming its span so much as the imperishable associations with it; those eternal moments realized in words. The physical object is entirely secondary. Anyone planning to achieve immortality in the minds of his fellow men might well give a lower priority to building some great stone monument than to cultivating his human capacities so that he might express himself imperishably in words, or at least be alluded to in some enduring line by a poet or essayist of immortal achievement.