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21 August, 2007

Evaluation of the Doctoral Thesis submitted by Zornica Kirkova

Disertační práce - posudek. Evid. číslo: 298 /ODV.

Zornica Kirkova: "Roaming into the Beyond: The Theme of Immortality in Early Medieval Chinese Verse", Charles University Prague, 2007 (290 pp.).

The doctoral thesis submitted by Mrs. Zornica Kirkova is an exceptionally bright, intelligently organized, and well-researched piece of scholarly research. On reading it, one gets the impression of listening to a truly professional piano player performing with passion and assurance; the latter growing from precision and gentle insistence on following along the chosen lines of interpretation from beginning to end. The thesis is in a form which makes its swift publication highly recommendable.

The thesis is aimed to trace the rise and development of the poetic current thematically focused on the "roaming into immortality" (*youxian shi*) in Chinese early medieval poetry (Han and Wei-Jin Nanbeichao period, ca. 2nd cent. BC – AD 6th cent.), to elucidate its major themes and motifs, and to analyze its transformation in terms of vocabulary, imagery, and poetic conventions. The primary sources of this study comprise a wide range of verse treating the immortality theme in the period under consideration, in particular ca. fifty poems or fragments of poems which bear the title of "roaming to

immortality"; a much larger number of *shi* and *yuefu* poems which, however, are traditionally classified under different thematic categories such as "Beckoning the recluse" (*zhaoyin shi*) and "Sightseeing" (*youlan shi*), just to name the two most important ones in the context of the thesis; poems on "roaming into immortality" connected with the poetic tradition of the *Chuci* and the *sao* ("elegy") and *fu* ("rhapsody") poetry; poems on immortality from the Daoist revelation scriptures; panegyrics such as *zan* ("encomia") and *song* ("eulogies"), which are traditionally categorized as prose writings (*wen*). All these poems are conveniently listed by their titles under the names of their authors (pp. 267-275). Besides, the thesis makes ample use of Daoist texts or texts which have a certain affinity with Daoism: *Laozi*, *Zhuangzi*, *Huainanzi*, *Taiping jing*, *Baopuzi*, and hagiographical writings such as *Liexian zhuan* and *Shenxian zhuan*.

Mrs. Kirkova's grasp of all these materials, most of which are extremely demanding in terms of vocabulary and embellished language, is impeccable. Here is the key for the success of the ambitious undertaking, on which Mrs. K. sets out in her thesis – to validate what she specifies as its two major "premises" (p. 27): Firstly, that verse on immortality is a literary phenomenon by its own right and a much broader poetic current than as traditionally understood, and secondly, that by studying its themes, motifs, and imagery in relationship to religious beliefs, especially Daoist beliefs and cults, paired with Daoist religious verse and hagiography, we can make a decisive step further beyond previous studies on poetry on immortality.¹

In my view, the second "premise" is especially well-taken. It resonates with recent approaches in other fields of Han and post-Han literature such as, e.g., historiography.² The focus on the religious aspect is apt to make up for the notorious neglect of Chinese twentieth-century scholarship which has so profoundly been shaped by the May Fourth habit of mind. – In this context, I want to draw attention to the aspect of two different orders of time, "outer" and "inner time", which are thought to be recreated in Daoist

¹ In the introductory section (pp. 24-27), there is an illuminating survey of the literary criticism concerning *youxian shi* throughout the ages, including a survey of modern research.

² Cf. Michael Nylan's interpretation of Sima Qian's *Shi ji*: M.N., "Sima Qian: A True Historian?", in: *Early China* 23/24 (1998/99), 203-246.

ritual;³ for moving from "outer" to "inner time" at any desired moment was considered as the basis of such wondrous abilities as covering huge distances in seconds, which often are depicted in *youxian shi*.

Measured against its aforementioned aims – valedation of the two aforementioned "premises" – the thesis succeeds roundly. In particular worth noting are here the numerous exquisite translations of poems throughout the thesis, which are cited to illustrate certain points under discussion or to develop the line of argument. To be sure, there occasionally occurs an expression or a line where one is inclined to suggest an alternative translation, yet without being able to claim that any of these translations would in any way be superior to Mrs. K.'s translations since the poems often tend to be opaque and open to varied meanings and interpretations.

This evaluation could well end on this note if the thesis would not offer much more than what is somewhat modestly outlined as its aims. As noted above, the thesis intends to trace the development and transformation of the theme of immortality in Chinese early Medieval poetry. It therefore sets out with a clarification of the notion of "immortality" and a survey of the rise of the ideal of *xian*-ship, the immortality cult, and the ways how transition to immortality was envisioned.

In the thesis, centerstage is given to four lengthy and carefully conducted inquiries into four major themes of the verse on immortality: (1) The *xian*-immortals; (2) the world of the immortals; (3) the way into immortality; and (4) relations between the human world and the world beyond.

At the core of these four inquiries lies an elucidating periodization scheme which divides the development of Chinese early medieval verse on immortality into three more or less distinct stages: (1) from the second century BC until the third century AD (Western/Eastern Han, 206 BC – AD 220); (2) from the late Eastern Han to the Eastern Jin (ca. 180-420); and (3) from the fifth to the late sixth centuries. It is by applying this periodization scheme throughout the four inquiries that Mrs. K. can show, and this very convincingly, how the *youxian shi* developed from poetry inspired by early religious

³ See Kristofer Schipper / Hsiu-huei Wang, "Progressive and Regressive Time Cycles in Taoist Ritual," in: Julius Thomas Fraser / Nathaniel Lawrence / Francis C. Haber (eds.), *Time, Science, and Society in China and the West*, Amherst 1986, 185-205.

beliefs and themes such as the magic flight across the skies in a chariot drawn by flying dragons or a phoenix; to a subjective poetry, accompanied by a "naturalisation" of the fantastic and an increasing "daoisation" in terms of consumption of drugs and elixirs of immortality and practices of the higher art of alchemy; and, finally, to a court poetry in which spiritual aspects recede into the background to give way to aesthetic pursuits and an aesthetisation of the "otherworldly".

All scholars on Chinese medieval poetry will have to deal with this truly insightful analysis of the sub-genre of *youxian shi*. I do not want to distract from the high quality of Mrs. K.'s explorations, yet would like to add four further remarks.

First, one would have wished to know the quantities of poems which support the results yielded from the analyses for each major theme and each period. How does the distribution of *youxian shi* on the time-scale of the proposed periodization scheme look like? Of course, this implies the question to which extent the traditional author ascriptions are really reliable? Could it be that a good deal of the poems on immortality were *retrospectively* attributed to certain poets just because they stand for a certain epoch and the poem under consideration was thought to fit the *Zeitgeist* of this particular epoch? – Moreover, Mrs. K. rejects traditional time indications such as "Jian'an (196-220) period" as too narrow; yet by so doing she discards valuable information about how a particular poem was being read and understood at an early age since all these epochs were conceived as webs of significance; an example being the Zhengshi era (240-249), which is known as the period in which *Xuanxue* Learning reached its first high, before falling off official favor until the late third century.

Second, the picture that Mrs. K. draws of the development of Chinese early medieval verse on immortality is rich, but not complete. One reason of why Mrs. K. discards the traditional time indications is that they serve as a main avenue for interpreting poems on immortality as political statements or self-assertions in a certain political context.

Though Mrs. K.'s noble attempt to step beyond this traditional frame of interpretation, it still would be interesting to know more about the way in which the imaginary landscapes evoked in *youxian shi* correspond to the imagined or 'hypothetical' dialogues cast in

rhymed parallel prose (*shelun*), which rose against the political background of the decline and demise of the Han empire.⁴

Third, there are a few hints as to the situational contexts within which poems on immortality were created (e.g. on the occasion of consuming a drug or being presented with a drug). However, we are hardly anything told about its audiences and readerships, real and imagined. In the case of the third period, which was dominated by the literary salons in close vicinity to the literary scene at the court at Nanjing,⁵ things are relatively clear, but less so for the first two periods.

Fourth, the thesis mentions the existence of numerous pictorial representations of immortals from Han and post-Han times. What is striking on these pictures is that immortals are often shown as playing music instruments.⁶ This suggests that music might be a similarly important trope of *youxian shi* like, e.g., precious stones (cf. p. 35: "flutes and pipes"; p. 41: "mouth organ", etc.). This brings me to the question of the 'music' in the poems themselves. Was it possible to "hear" it when certain themes or images such as e.g. the *tristitia* motif was invoked? In short, one craves for more information on the prosody of *youxian shi*.

I am keenly aware that, if one would have expanded the thesis into some directions indicated by the foregoing remarks, it might have lost of its impressive lucidity which is its hallmark. Moreover, I hasten to emphasize that the above remarks are not intended to, indeed cannot detract from the richness of the thesis' contribution to a new understanding of the poetry of "roaming into immortality". It will no doubt prove to be a milestone in the study of Chinese early medieval poetry. Without hesitation I therefore suggest to evaluate Mrs. K.'s thesis as

"summa cum laude".

⁴ See the fine study of the *shelun* sub-genre by Dominique Declercq: *Writing Against the State: Political Rhetorics in Third and Fourth Century China*, Leiden: Brill, 1998.

⁵ Cf. Thomas Jansen, *Höfische Öffentlichkeit im frühmittelalterlichen China: Debatten im Salon des Prinzen Xiao Ziliang*, Freiburg i.Br.: Rombach, 2000.

⁶ Käte Finsterbusch, "Darstellungen von Musikern auf Reliefs und Wandmalereien in Gräbern der Han- bis Sui-Zeit", in: *Chinablätter* 18 (1991), 3-64.

I have gleaned here and there a few misspellings and some other corrigenda/addenda which I mention not out of petty fastidiousness, but in view of the thesis' publication:

p. 2, fn. 4, 3rd line: primodial → primordial.

p. 4: Han Wudi (r. 140-87 BC) → **141-87**.

pp. 4, 12: To my best knowledge, *fangshi* do not occupy a specially prominent place in *Shi ji*.

p. 18, fn. 46: By referring from Jin to Sui as the "Six Dynasties", Lu Kanru is only following a particular convention (also followed by Yan Kejun in his *Quan Shanggu Sandai Qin Han Sanguo Liuchao wen*).

p. 25, 2nd line from bottom: Guo Pu'a → Guo Pu's.

p. 41: King Ling of Zhou (r. 571-545 BC) → King Ling of **Chu**.

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Laozi zan → character for "zan" missing.

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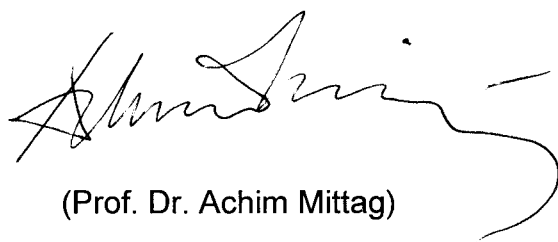
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Zhu Hongjiao → more common is the transcription "Hongjie".

For an extensive study of the *Shanhai jing* and the question of the accompanying *tu*, see Vera V. Dorofeeva-Lichtmann, "Text as a Device for Mapping a Sacred Space: A Case of the *Wu Zang Shan Jing* ('Five Treasuries: The Itineraries of Mountains')", *Göttinger Beiträge zur Asienforschung*, 2/3 (2003), 147-210.



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