Subaltern or Rusticated Chinese Literary Cultures - A Survey

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"The carved buildings and jade ornaments should still be there,
except the faces will have changed."

- *When will Spring Flowers and Autumn Moons End*, Li Yu

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Unknown artist. *Portrait of Qu Yuan*, from
Collection of the National Palace Museum
(Taiwan)

To examine the literature of the subaltern we must first consider the offerings on the metaphorical altar, or the division between the "proper" and the "improper". Considering the long history of the Chinese court system, it would be foolish to attempt to summarise millenia of complexity within a short article. However, for us to understand the subject of this discussion, some necessary background context must be shared.

In the broadest of terms, the division between philosopher, poet, and official was extremely blurred in the context of the Chinese court system. The ***Ke Ju*** (科舉) examination system[1] tested students on knowledge of Chinese classics (both political, philosophical, and literary) and included, at various times, components requiring students to compose poetry or verse. Noblemen were expected to learn the "six arts"[2] - Etiquette, Performance, Archery, Charioteering, Literature, and Mathematics. In short, much of Chinese literary culture is built around, and designed to support, the court system, and many of the most literate people of the time either served in the court or around it.

This in itself is not surprising - the Seven Sages of the Bamboo Forest[3] and other intentional hermitages aside, it is hard to cultivate a literary culture amongst farming peasants. Yet the cumulative effect of literature within Chinese court culture cannot be discounted as a mere offshoot of concentrating education and literacy within noble or courtly populations. The rich implications of poetry and performance, besides being used as tools to convince, plead with, or cajole emperors, were also just as often used as

political tools to suggest impropriety, rebellion, or subversion of the state, and those so accused subjected to exile (流放)[4]. The famous case of the Deer-as-horse display in the Qin dynasty[5] shows the power of political pageantry masquerading as ceremony and art, and the apocryphal Five-step poem from the Three Kingdoms Period[6] the capacity for poetry to be both intensely personal and political.

Do not, however, mistake these exiled poets as the jester-like, marginal figures one might find in the courts of Henry VIII[7] - they are no Skeltons, but rather figures as serious as the greatest of any emperor's favourites. Amongst their ranks are such perennial names as Qu Yuan, Du Fu, and (in an interesting case of a warrior-poet being recalled from his duty rather than exiled) Yue Fei. Many of these poets retained a deep love of, if not the court or state apparatus that deported them, the nation itself and its people. Even in exile to Huazhou, Du Fu cheers on the supposed victory of the emperor's armies against the rebels in the An Shi Rebellion -

> 我軍取相州，日夕望其平。
> *My forces take Shangzhou, at sunset I hope for peace.*
>
> 〈新安吏〉 杜甫 *(Xin An Shi, Du Fu)*

Here "my forces" does not reference imaginary armies led by the poet, but rather the armies on "his" side, the forcibly drafted forces that he still sees himself as owing loyalty to, even as he is being rusticated. And, of course, Qu Yuan throws himself into a river out of sorrow for his nation, supposedly inspiring the mid-autumn festival for ages to come.

Then, of course, we come across figures that, instead of seeking employment at court, reject it. In the aprocryphal time of the five Sage Emperors Xu You washes his ears after the emperor personally offers him a post[8], he has no wish to be involved with the "dirt-world" of the court and it's associated politics (塵世, a buddhist term that literally means "dirty or dusty world", carries many meanings, but most often derogatory ones). Another figure we might wish to consider is closer, perhaps, to modern times, writing during the last years of the Qing dynasty in 1890-1900 CE (In the Chinese calendar, starting from the 19th year of Guangxu under Emperor Zaitian).

Zheng Tse (his name styled after famous historical philsophers, but adopted as a pseudonym rather a than posthumous adornment), is primarily known today for his collection of fifty verses, dialogues, epitaphs, and speeches known as the *Songs of Yesteryear*[9]. Despite the title, the writings within are written in a combination of archaic literary and modern vernacular Chinese, and illustrated with a variety of diagrams, sketches, and comics composed likely by the author themselves. In the very first verse he lays out a sort of *raison d'etre* for the work, writing:

> 我欲瓊樓玉宇，又恐乘風歸來，高處不勝寒。
> *I desire carved towers and jade flats, but I fear returning riding the wind, unable to withstand the cold in high places.*
>
> 〈往年高歌．卷一〉正子 *(Section 1, Zheng Tse)*

To understand this quotation, one must first read a similar, but slightly different, quotation from the famous poem *When will the Bright Moon Come* by Su Shi:

> 我欲乘風歸去，又恐瓊樓玉宇，高處不勝寒。
> *I desire to return riding the wind, but I fear the carved towers and jade flats. It is hard to withstand the cold in high places.*
>
> 〈水調歌頭．明月幾時有〉蘇軾 *(When will Bright Moons Come, Su Shi)*

By inverting the two first clauses, of course, Zheng Tse also inverts the meaning of Su Shi's original poem (which, coincidentally, was written also in quasi-exile and rustication in Mizhou). He expresses a desire to be in court and enjoy the power and privilege it brings, but fears being forced to return in shame, fleeing the politics and mercurial favours of emperors. Hence, he writes, "問君前途何意向，側看雲霄大笑停未了" - *Ask me where the future leads, I look askance at the sky and laugh unstoppably*. One must imagine the laughter to be, if not bitter, at least slightly ironic.

The rest of the content of *Songs* is similar - deeply sardonic, mixing criticism, existentialist musings, and references to historical works of Chinese literature. Section 32 contains an early attempt to develop a compact transcription notation for the game of Go without the inclusion of the full grid, mixed with political commentary. Section 50, the final section, includes an early version of *baihua* or pure vernacular literature (白話文), something that would be expanded and eventually become the dominant way to read and write Chinese after the May Fourth Movement[10]. What makes the text itself notable is its embrace of Montaigne-like experimentation, featuring almost every possible format from dialogue to script to short-form narrative. Sections range from some 200 characters to over 1000, and deal with topics as complex as astronomy and land rights. As the critic Guan Lianming writes, "within *Songs* one can find a snapshot of the turn of the century, captured in a unique and captivating style by an author we know almost nothing about." The only time the manuscript has been officially published (until its recent rediscovery, translation, and popularisation in the West through the international Comorant Publishing house) was in 1910, when it was submitted anonymously to a small printing house. All records have since been lost.

Moving to consider other, more prominent instances of marginal literature, it