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Response Paper One

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“A Discourse on Society and Culture beyond the Qin Dynasty”

The Qin dynasty was a most fleeting period in China’s history. It was fraught with turmoil, unrest, and fierce stirring debate. The Qin period of Chinese history lasted a mere fifteen years, from 221 BC to 207 BC, but that isn’t to say it was in any way forgotten or unimportant. This powerful dynasty gave rise to many wonderful things and defined much of the Chinese culture we see today. The name China is derived from “Qin”; During that short time, the Qin implemented a rigid law system, standardized the measurements of length, width, modernized roads, dismantled the feudal privilege system, and most importantly standardized the Chinese writing writing system. Although this dynasty quickly collapsed due the overbearing pressure (taxes) it placed on the citizens, they are responsible for one of the most amazing of human achievements of all time, the great wall of China.

It’s disappointing little artwork or literature survived this period of time, but that does not diminish the impact this brilliant dynasty had on the world as whole. Their intellectual approach toward simplification of philosophy, government, and language made a lasting impact on later dynasties and changed the trajectory of China forever.

From this point on, individual merit would be awarded based on artistic and intellectual ability. The following dynasty, the Hans, in part thanks to the Qin, are known for their meticulous dedication to recording history and producing great works of art. For this reaction, we will analyze a Post-Qin dynasty writing known as “Liu Zhen, d217” and examine how the discourse of the Chinese shifted from less sophisticated argument to more complex recordings rich with academic meaning and heavy with scientific burden. It should be noted with my limited understanding of Chinese literature it was difficult to find a poem within Stephen Owens works that captures the true argument I am making.

Due to the short nature of the poem, we will analyze the length of it line by line. Brevity is the wit of soul and it’s my interpretation that Stepehen Owens introduces what’s best in the shortest. The poem is written as follows:

Liu Zhen (d. 217)

The work in my office keeps piling up,

with documents scattered everywhere,

My writing brush speeds, no chance to eat,

into late afternoon I have no rest,

I am lost among records and registers,

my head whirling in confusion,

I get away, go west of the walls,

climb the heights and let my gaze roam.

There, a square pool with silvery water,

and in it are ducks and wild geese.

O to have such fleet feathers

and to bob in the waves along with you.

With little symbolism left to be interpreted, the wheels of China’s intellectual powerhouse have begun to turn. It should be noted that because of the Qin’s strict decree unifying language has allowed for special bureau’s to be created for musical purposes, like the Yue-Fu, so poems like this could be recorded. “In 120 B.C., a special bureau was established in the Han government to provide music and songs for state rituals and imperial entertainments. A handful of Western han lyrics still survive that probably came from the original institution, the Han “Music Bureau”. (Owen, 1). Beginning on line one, we discover 2-2 line style of poetry has been broken, and instead it is replaced with a literal description of the writers state of affairs. Often times symbolism is superior to literal description, but here this poem speaks volumes about the state of affairs in China during the writers time. The pressure of the writers works is evident; he cannot pause to replenish his energy for fear of failing. From lines 5-8, it becomes clear the writer is not capable of maintaining any amount of forward progress and must escape. The writer must retreat to a healing state of mind and find sanctuary within the surrounding nature. Finally, the writer laments about the simplicity the birds nature, of having a carefree nature unburdened by the complexities of living within a complex society. The meaning of this poem is deep which allows every modern citizen to relate to.

Works Cited

1. Owen, Stephen. An Anthology of Chinese Literature: Beginnings to 1911. W.W. Norton, 1997.