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Disappearing Objects/Elusive Subjects: Writing Mirrors in Early and Medieval China

Introduction

When is a traditional Chinese "poem on things" (*yongwu shi*) not a poem on "things"? When the perceived and, eventually, constructed nature of the particular thing being described is at odds with, or somehow exceeds, its prescribed function as a discrete object of perception. One such object is the mirror, which appears in some of the earliest Chinese historical and philosophical documents in our possession, before entering the lexicon of classical poetic expression some time around the third century —at the very moment when the tradition of individual lyric expression as such was beginning to take shape. At that point, although it carried with it centuries of discourse relating vision to questions of knowledge of self and others, its capacity for creating meaning would soon exceed anything that could rightly be called symbolic or even metaphorical. The mirror would become one salient thing that would reflect and shape changes in the very notion of the lyric subject over time.

True, no poetic "thing"—whether it be the wind, a mountain, a cicada, or a fan—is ever simply a thing, but is always invoked to mean something else; and, traditional Chinese theory holds that that "something else" is, often as not, something crucial to the inner life of the poet. Still, hovering at the edges of recognized modes of poetic discourse lie some objects that seem particularly apt to breach, and thereby draw attention to, the very boundaries that determine their status as objects; and, depending on their material

ABSTRACT This paper examines changes in the philosophical and literary representations of mirrors—and mirroring—in a foundational period of Chinese history beginning with the pre-classical period and ending in the medieval Tang Dynasty. Inspired by the peculiarity of this object, which acts upon subjects at least as much as it is acted upon by them, this study of the literary mirror, of reflection and reflexivity, provides a glimpse into the larger issue of the construction of subjectivity in premodern China. Through the examination of each stage of the literary mirror's gradual transformation from metaphor, to lyrical stimulus, and ultimately to its subsumption as an evocative predicate, it is possible to observe concomitant shifts in the construction of the literary subject as it displays increasing—but never absolute —degrees of specificity, distinctness, and autonomy. Representations 124. Fall 2013 ISSN 0734-6018, electronic ISSN 1533-855X, pages 96–124. DOI: 10.1525/rep.2013.124.4.96.

FIGURE 1. Mirror (back), Western Han Dynasty (206 BCE–9 CE), approx. 50 BCE–9 CE. China. Bronze. The Avery Brundage Collection, B6OB542. © Asian Art Museum, San Francisco. Used by permission.

specificity and cultural valence, they invite questions regarding the relative nature of the subject marshaling them into service.[1]

In the case of early and medieval China (and here I refer specifically to the period from roughly the fifth century BCE to the tenth century CE), when Confucian, Daoist, and, ultimately, Buddhist systems of thought were competing for the allegiance of the literati), it is especially difficult to locate any shared understanding of what we might want to call a "subject." But rather than allow this fact to steer us away from this line of inquiry, we might fruitfully experiment with the inadvertent signifying powers of the mirror to see what such a contested subject looks like. The particular confluence of etymological history, physical properties, and politico-historical associations contributes to the Chinese mirror's tendency to dissolve the boundaries of its own thingness and to reconfigure the boundaries of subjects that use it. As an object of perception that doubles as a medium of perception, it has accrued a particular valence in a poetic culture that prizes a poet's ability to make readers *see* what he feels, to elicit in them a shared experience of subjectivity by having them look with him at the same "thing."

Mirrors Disappear

While in his late forties and in exile, the great political thinker, writer, painter, calligrapher and—not incidentally—outspokenly ambivalent connoisseur and collector Su Shi 蘇軾 (1037–1101) came into possession of an ancient mirror.[2] This happy acquisition inspired him to write this meticulous, if brief, note, "Written upon the Acquisition of an Ancient Bronze Mirror:"[3]

In the first month of the fourth year of Yuanfeng (1082), I was heading back from Qi'an to Qiting, returning there by boat. On the way, I passed through ancient Huangzhou. There, I obtained a mirror, the circumference of which was one *chi* and two *cun* [approximately 14 inches]. On its back, there was this inscription:

"During the Han [206 BCE–220 CE] the best bronze was produced in Baiyang; when [this bronze was] used in the making of mirrors, they were so clear as to seem to glow." On the left, a dragon, and on the right, a tiger [embellished] it. The characters were the size of small peas, and indiscriminately employed both the seal and clerical styles of writing. As for "Baiyang," I believe that it refers to the western bank of the White Water River in Nanyang.[4] The bronze of this mirror is [now] black as lacquer, while its back is like carved jade. Its shine had been such that it reflected people in miniature.[5] I have long heard that ancient mirrors are all just like this; this is because they constituted the method by which adepts of the Daoist arts would "coalesce form."[6]

Chinese bronze mirrors have always had two faces: on the front, a reflective surface and, on the back, a modeled ornamental one, which, beginning in the Han Dynasty, was often inscribed with writing. Over time, with technological advances in metallurgy, the shiny surface of mirrors grew in their capacity to clearly reflect the objects placed before them.[7] By the third century CE, after the fall of the Han, mirrors had definitively spread beyond the confines of the ritual hall and tomb, where their reflective powers were more ritualistic than real, to the boudoir, where they became an indispensable furnishing for ladies' toilette. At the same time, technological advances also made possible a greater degree of detail and variety in the ornamentation of mirror backs and stands, as we see them evolve from abstract, if ritually significant, patterns to, in some cases, complex narrative tableaus.[8]

Historians of Chinese art and society have long focused their attention almost exclusively on the backs of these mirrors, analyzing their intricate patterns and pithy inscriptions in search of clues that might shed light on everything from technological advances to religious beliefs and practices. Yet, the fronts of these mirrors, blank and mute as they appear today—and rarely, if ever, visible in museum displays—once bore images as well, albeit images of different kinds displayed in markedly different ways.

The binary structure implicit in the mirror's two sides would provide rich fodder for philosophers and poets alike, suggesting such ontological dualities as chaos and order; appearance and substance; illusion and reality; and, of course, ephemerality and permanence—as we note in Su Shi's remarks.[9] But, latecomer that he is, Su Shi apparently does not, at least in this instance, feel compelled to expound on any philosophical thoughts that this chance acquisition might have inspired. He simply notes that, while the back side, inscribed with words and decorated with the symbolic figures of dragons and tigers, had remained true to its original form ("like carved jade"), its "shiny" side, which once "reflected people," is now so tarnished that it has all but lost its ability to reflect anything at all.

For all the reticence of these remarks, one may still perceive in them a certain wry tone, as Su takes note of the ephemerality of what seems fundamental (in this case, the mirror's defining capacity to reflect) and the endurance of

what appears to be contingent or secondary (that is, the mirror's decorative support). Ironically, perhaps, what survived of this ancient mirror was not its defining, much-vaunted reflective powers, but the signs and symbols that vaunted them. The mediated mirror-as-ancient-artifact (or, the mirror-as-history) endures, even as the mirror-as-mirror has effectively disappeared—along with the many faces that, once upon a lost time, had been reflected in it. It is the "disappearing" nature of Chinese mirrors that will concern us here, and not just that provoked by the inexorable effects of time and chemistry; rather, we will consider how that quality became central to the invocation of mirrors and mirroring in ancient Chinese lyrical expression.

From a purely phenomenological standpoint, we might observe that (museum curators' preferences notwithstanding) when mirrors circulated in the world fulfilling their intended use, the reflective side competed with—and even eclipsed—its decorative backing just by virtue of its plain old functionality. But even then, precisely at the moment when the front, reflective side becomes the object of someone's gaze, it is rendered invisible, effaced by the face of the subject it is reflecting.

This elusiveness or "disappearing" quality of mirrors is never more evident than it is in the hands of the writers who incorporate them into their texts. As I hope to show in what follows, for the greater part of its history in early and medieval China, the literary mirror functions as a particular kind of object, qualifying or activating the subjects who use them, rather than being themselves qualified or acted upon. The viewer is inevitably transformed in some way (if not in his or her own eyes, then in those of other implied spectators) by the image the mirror reflects back. That writers have consistently and for so long seized upon and exploited the mirror's transformative dynamism sets it apart from the other boudoir furnishings among which Chinese classical catalogers and encyclopedists have traditionally included it.[10]

In what follows, I focus on how the figure of the mirror during this period embraces—but goes beyond—the commonplace use of revealing the "true nature" of the objects it reflects.[11] I hope to show how its varied uses tend to make manifest the unstable nature of the boundary between the viewing subject and the viewed (that is, the reflected) object.[12] Limiting my selection to the literary mirrors in circulation from the preclassical period up through the Tang (618–907), I undertake this inquiry with an eye to the possibility that changes in the philosophical and literary representations of mirrors—and mirroring—provide a glimpse into the larger question of how the construction of subjectivity evolved over the course of this period.[13] Far from offering an exhaustive cataloging and analysis of the Chinese literary mirror, then, I attempt here a kind of minihistory of reflection and reflexivity.

At the risk of appearing overly simplistic, I propose a schema in which the mirror's gift for disappearing undergoes three stages, each with its own implications for contemporaneous subject-object relationships:

1. The "metaphorical stage" during the Warring States (475–221 BCE) and Han Dynasties, when the fabrication and ritualistic uses of the material mirror were informed by its figuration as a tool for self-inspection in philosophical and historiographical texts.
2. The "lyrical stage" during the Six Dynasties (220–589), when the material mirror was invoked in poetic writing only to be subsumed by its role as a stimulus (*xing*) or trigger of the viewer's inward reverie.
3. The "predication" of the mirror—when, in the most enduring and stirring poems, the *mirror* gave way to *mirroring*: when its usage shifted from noun to verb, from invoking an object to describing an action. This phenomenon becomes most salient during the Tang Dynasty, when, perhaps not coincidentally, mirror technology reaches its premodern apex.

With each stage of the literary mirror's progressive disappearance, the concomitant construction of the literary subject displays an increasing degree of specificity, distinctness, and autonomy vis-à-vis other subjects. Still, this tendency never quite coalesces into the formulation of an autonomous subjectivity. Instead, throughout the course of these changes, what persists is a subject defined by its shimmering, rather than stable, boundaries. A momentarily clear but ultimately fungible entity, this mirrored and mirroring subject is delineated by boundaries that simultaneously fix and mitigate its separateness from the world and from the other subjects who might be looking in.

Polish and Shine: Mirrors and Metaphor in Early China

Three ancient graphs are consistently used in early texts to signify "mirror": 監, 鑒 (which are both pronounced in modern Chinese as *jian*), and 鏡 (*jing*). The first, which depicts a man kneeling down by a basin and gazing into it, finds its earliest definition in the oldest extant comprehensive dictionary, *Shuowen jiezi* [Explanation of logographs and analysis of compounds], which was completed in 100 CE: "to look down into/upon." A multiplicity of meanings would gradually converge around this logograph, including, simply, "to look at," "to inspect," "to warn," and "to illuminate." But early on, the graph *jian* 監 became interchangeable with *jian* 鑒, which the Qing Dynasty (1644–1912) philologist, Duan Yucai 段玉裁 (1735–1815), glosses as meaning "a large basin for the storage of ice or water." By the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the famous writer Guo Moruo 郭沫若 (1892–1978), taking into account the adoption of both graphs to signify

simultaneously the action of looking at one's reflection and the physical object that facilitates it, fleshes out and narrows down the meaning thus: "to look into a basin of water in order to adjust one's appearance; the vessel used to store water for adjusting one's appearance."[14]

Guo Moruo's gloss is consistent with the *Shuowen* definition in suggesting that the primary sense of the word is verbal rather than nominal; and he is especially perceptive when he integrates, as he does here, the purpose of the action into his gloss of that verb. As he notes, one looks at one's reflection with the express goal of "adjusting one's appearance," an act of self-correction—or, as helpfully emended by Michael Nylan, of the "alignment" of one's appearance (and, by extension, comportment) with norms that are understood as being correct.[15]

An early, oft-cited passage in that most ancient compilation of historical documents, the *Shangshu* (Venerated documents), attests to the entry of "mirroring" into the lexicon of politico-moral rhetoric: "The ancients have said, 'Let men not look only into water; let them look into the mirror of other people. Now that the kingdom of Yin has lost its mandate, how can we not look to it as our great mirror, by means of which we might learn to steady our kingdom in our time?'"[16] Here, even the reflective surface of the water disappears and only the motive of self-reflection remains, as a ruler recognizes his obligation to use the (bad) behavior of past rulers as a tool of self-examination. From there, it is but a short leap to the regular invocation of the mirror as a metaphor for history itself, known ever after as "the mirror of Yin." History-as-mirror became a commonplace, which, even 1500 years later, could still be invoked with great earnestness; Emperor Taizong (r. 627–650), the second emperor of the Tang Dynasty, for example, is quoted in the official histories as having said to his ministers:

> If you use bronze as a mirror, you can adjust your robes and cap; if you take the ancients as a mirror, you can understand the mechanisms of rise and fall; if you take other people as a mirror, you can discern the mechanisms of success and failure. I always keep these three mirrors in order to avoid erring.[17]

The third logograph meaning "mirror" in the *Shuowen*, *jing* 鏡, is distinct from *jian* primarily because in its usage it more narrowly refers to those made of bronze (and, later, bronze-tin-silver amalgams). The definition offered by that dictionary's author, Xu Shen 許慎 (d. ca. 120), is the homophone *jing* 景, which means sunlight.[18] Approximately one hundred years later, in the dictionary known as the *Guangya* 廣雅, we find a gloss for *jian* that unites both logographs for "mirror" around the notion of light: "'Mirrors' [*jian*] are called 'mirrors' [*jing*] . . . because [the latter is homophonous with] *jing* 景 [sunlight]; that is, because they themselves possess the quality of light."[19]

There is some evidence that this use of homophony to gloss an ancient graph is not just rhetorically persuasive but also etymologically sound.[20] In any case, it does indicate that by the third century (when the *Guangya* was compiled), mirrors are already characterized as repositories—or even confections—of light. Indeed, already beginning as early as the Han Dynasty, the most common adjective applied to them was "bright" (*ming* 明); the binome *mingjing* (literally, "bright mirror") is so common, in fact, that in many cases the semantic weight of "bright" is quite negligible.[21] This should not, however, negate the fact that *ming* began its life as an especially potent modifier, and continued to be so in other contexts and combinations, when it is frequently used to bestow subjective moral qualities (such as "discernment," "clear-sightedness," or "enlightenment") on the noun it modifies.[22]

The fascination with light in general, and optics in particular, manifests itself early and often in China; and by the time of the Han Dynasty, practitioners of the mystical arts were waxing poetic about the powers of these light-collecting and -diffusing objects. By the fourth century, tales of "strange" events would record all manner of the mirror's magical attributes, from the ability to forecast the future to the promise of revealing the true nature of shape-shifting demons and ghosts, and from facilitating exorcisms to achieving immortality.[23] But, not surprisingly, in philosophical texts both Confucian and Daoist, the mirror's radiance, or *ming*, and its purported optical advantages were thought to endow it with an analogous moral utility (thereby, perhaps, reinstating or emphasizing the *ming*'s polysemic resonance in certain cases). In other words, the mirror's luminescence, along with its capacity to multiply the perspectives available to the viewer, were invoked in a variety of writings to compensate for man's notoriously poor "vision"—writings that evince a concerted effort to establish equivalency between strictly perceptual and moral vision. The third-century BCE philosopher Hanfeizi opens his essay "On Observing Behavior" by singling out mirrors as a necessary aid for correcting man's naturally limited vision:

> The eyes of the ancients were inadequate for [the purpose of] seeing themselves, and so they used mirrors to examine their own faces; their wisdom was inadequate for self-knowledge, and so they used the Way to right themselves. Mirrors are blameless for the flaws they reveal, and the Way is innocent of the transgressions it *brings to light* (*ming*). Without mirrors, the eyes have no means to [show one how to] groom [i.e., "align"] whiskers and brows; without the Way, a person has no means of knowing where he has erred.[24]

In this quote, grammatical parallelism is the dominant rhetorical structure, suggesting semantic equivalency between the "eyes" and "wisdom," and "mirrors" and the "Way." These implicit equations reinforce the ideal, longed-for parity between outer and inner, surface and content—a preoccupation of the

age. This rhetorical device may rightly be termed, in the language of traditional Chinese literary theory, an example of *bi* 比, which one scholar helpfully translates literally as "apposition."[25] Surely no rhetorical device could have asserted the parity between inner and outer more economically or more forcefully. As is typical of the rhetorical device of *bi*, both sides of the equation maintain their respective shares of substantive presence and deictic, figurative potential; the hierarchical structure of metaphor—of vehicle and tenor—does not strictly apply.[26] This implied parity of the material and figural means that the substantive existence of the "real" mirror invoked in such equations is not diminished, let alone effaced, by its comparison to something as weighty and infinite as the Way (as it might have been in a metaphor, wherein the mirror would have played a mere handy "vehicle" to the "tenor" of the ineffable Dao). To the contrary, the material mirror can be thought of as simply assuming the numinous and moral qualities of the ineffable force to which it is compared, even as the Way is made tangible (if fleetingly so) by its embodiment in the mirror. One need only think of the frequent use of mirrors in Han burials to recognize the extent to which the metaphorical powers of the mirror had infiltrated their material use.

A survey of textual references to mirrors during the classical period allows us to examine in detail the textured constellation of idealized characteristics that accrued to them. As it is not possible here to review all of the relevant passages, I offer instead a proximate, if somewhat mechanical, list of the qualities most frequently cited by the wide variety of texts of this period (I invite the reader to consult the endnotes for selected textual examples).

1. Stability: the ability to absorb, contain, and record qualities without being effected by those qualities.[27]
2. Impartiality: the ability to reflect qualities without distorting them.[28]
3. Fidelity: the ability to be "true," if not always to the object being reflected, then to the capacities—and limitations—of the mirror-gazer and his vision. By implication, the mirror-gazer is transformed into a more-or-less dependable "mirror" for those who would rely on him.[29]
4. Vision enhancement: the ability to enable the viewer to transcend the immediate limits of his position in space. In some anecdotes and tales of strange happenings recounted, for example, in the fourth-century CE compilations, *Baopuzi* [The master who embraces simplicity] and the *Soushenji* [In search of the spirits], vision enhancement is even extended to the realm of the supernatural, where it enables the viewer to see the future or to perceive the "true nature" of shape-shifting ghosts and spirits reflected therein—and, in the process, to discover their own blindness.[30]
5. Receptivity to—indeed, the requirement of—constant attention and upkeep: the need for polishing.[31]
6. Irreplaceability: the belief that no one, not even the sages of antiquity, was naturally endowed with the capacity to see both accurately and reflexively; perfection of one's role in the world depends on the possession of a good mirror and the ability to use it.

This list makes it possible to discern two separate but related profiles of the literary mirror of this early period. The first and most obvious presents the mirror as the perfect, necessary tool for self-correction. When wielded by a viewing subject, it incites that subject to change. In doing so, it embodies a paradox: that of what we might call the efficacious object, which, acting upon its subject, effectively—if momentarily—trades places with it. Nor does the process of reversal end there; in order for the subject's transformation to take effect, the mirror must ultimately "disappear" and return agency to the subject, because only the subject is endowed with the capacity to effect the change that the mirror first inspired.

At this point, it might seem, then, that the ultimate consequence of the disappearance of the mirror as enacted by these texts is the autonomy of the subject, but the reverse is closer to the truth. For, as the preceding quotations demonstrate, the ultimate use of the mirror is the realignment of the reflecting (and reflected) subject with the underlying order of the known world. In short, the mirror isolates the subject by establishing both its boundaries and its agency, but it only does so long enough to compel that subject to submerge itself in the all-encompassing, unifying standards of the Way.[32]

This ideal process of momentary separation ending in perfect union with the Way finds perfect expression, not just in the literary figuration of the mirror, but also in the rhetorical structure of this figuration. Through their reliance on apposition, or *bi*, the texts cited earlier first establish and then elide the distinction between the concrete mirror and the figurative one; and this is not so different from the mirror's effect of establishing the subject's autonomy only to reverse it.

The mirror that emerges from this list of features is something much more potent than any mere measuring tool or gauge. This untrammeled, radiant, impartial, far-seeing, reliable, and necessary object itself becomes nothing less than a model of the ideal subject—or, simply put, the sage: an assemblage of the very traits that those viewing subjects, reflecting themselves upon its surface, aspire to obtain. The mirror's traits, in other words, are indistinguishable from those that belong to that ideal subject: the sage. A famous passage of the *Zhuangzi*, that authority on epistemological relativity, expresses this relationship:

> The perfected man employs his mind like a mirror. [The mirror] neither deploys [things] nor resists them. It responds to things without harboring them. That is why it can bear [the weight of] objects without being harmed.[33]

Considering the mirror from this perspective, the ideal viewing subject is one who values neither the mirror's integrity nor his or her own; rather, the subject emulates the mirror so perfectly that the distinction between them—and by extension, between subject and object—is finally effaced. Tranquilly

accepting and returning the image-shadows of the myriad things of the world, the sage's mirror-mind unites with the all-encompassing Dao, perhaps paradoxically, by remaining in a state of aloofness. The mirror that is imagined in this and many other of these early writings isolates the features of its reflected and reflecting subject only to align that subject with all things, thereby dissolving whatever boundary the mirror's frame happened to outline. "Mirroring" itself in the textual mirrors—and mirroring texts—of the time, the early Chinese viewing subject ideally strives to align itself in such a way as to make his or her own boundaries disappear. This remains so even in the case of the sagely mind, which, in its supreme isolation, never allows itself to intervene in or be effected by the objects whose images skim across its mirrorlike surface.

The Occluding Reflection: Lyrical Mirrors of the Early Medieval Period

Philosophy and history were not the only genres that contributed to the construction of the subject, nor would they long remain the only genres in which writers played with mirrors; poetry, too, especially as it evolved into a lyric mode, figured in this development. The earliest extant poem that takes the mirror as its theme is a *fu* 賦, or "epideictic rhapsody."[34]

The epideictic rhapsody, a genre of poetic writing that emerged during the Western Han Dynasty, might be thought of as a kind of textual mirror in its own right—especially if we consider the type that would later come to be designated as "rhapsody on objects." This form strives to replicate in language, as closely as possible, its selected object, usually through the amplification and categorization of that object's qualities. Consequently, such poems tend to be relatively long, dense, rhythmic, and sonorous lists of attributes, structured in the form of an imaginary dialogue between an interlocutor who asks for a description and a narrator who provides it.[35]

Given the object-centered aims of this type of poem, it does not seem a promising place to search for signs of poetic subjectivity. But, as early as the fifth century CE, Liu Xie 劉協 (ca. 465–ca. 522), who lays out the parameters of the *fu*-rhapsody in a dedicated chapter of his monumental work of literary criticism, the *Wenxin diaolong* 文心雕龍 (Literary mind carves dragons), seems to open the door to doing precisely that. In a statement that is as prescriptive as it is descriptive, Liu defines *fu* as a genre that "renders objects and [thereby] *expresses* [the subject's] *intent*," reflecting the view of the time that in good writing, description cannot be an end in itself.[36] And indeed, toward the end of the Han Dynasty, the *fu* had already begun to take on many of the characteristics that were already being associated with the burgeoning form

of lyric poetry. Most germane to our purposes, the range of themes—and objects—treated in the *fu* expanded considerably.[37] Scholars have rightly associated the rise of poetic self-expression during this period with what the historian Ying-shih Yu once famously characterized as a period of increased self-awareness, of an intellectual and spiritual "inward turn": a move away from defining the self in terms of familial, social, and political roles and toward the exploration of the significance and modalities of subjective experience.[38] It is perhaps no coincidence that the earliest known *fu* written on the topic of mirrors, by the Western Jin writer Fu Xian 傅咸(239–294), dates from early in this period.[39] As mirrors begin to acquire an increasingly complex poetic valence, at least one Six Dynasties poet—Liu Huan 劉緩 (fl. 540) of the Liang Dynasty (502–557)—joined the reflective properties of the mirror with those of the *fu* in a way that provides us with a glimpse into the complex construction of subjectivity typical of this time.

One thing that will immediately strike any reader of Six Dynasties poems on mirrors is the dominance of pieces that were composed during the Liang Dynasty. Perhaps this is no coincidence and may be explained, at least in part, by what Xiaofei Tian has recently described as this period's fascination with the question, formed under the strong influence of Buddhist belief in the impermanence and unreality of all things, of the complexities of "how to see."[40] These poets pay close attention, not to the mirror's promise of clear, unrestricted vision that so captivated the philosophers of earlier times, but to the limits—the finiteness—that the mirror inevitably reveals, both in itself and in the mirror-gazer.

Sometimes (and this would become an especially common theme later, among Tang poets such as Zhang Jiuling 張九齡 [678–740] and Wang Jian 王建 [fl. 775]), this finiteness takes the form of the poet's (or speaker's) reflected white hair and aging face, those unimpeachable reminders of mortality. More often during this period, finiteness would be ascribed to the mirror itself, in poems that bemoan the mirror's restricted ability to "illuminate" only surfaces. Beautiful maidens are depicted sitting in front of the mirror, lamenting its utter inability to bring to light what lies hidden within—the heart, or *xin*.[41] Two poems, both recorded in the early seventh-century encyclopedia *Yiwen leiju* (Collection of literature arranged by categories) and both titled quite simply, "On Mirrors" (*yong jing* 詠鏡), stand as ready examples. The first is by one Zhu Chaodao 朱超道 (n.d.):

> If you pluck a flower, you must yourself slip it into your hair—
> No need to pause and look into the pond;
> For, there you would still encounter that charming face,
> So frankly fit for mirrors.
> As you set your hairpin, its solitary bell tinkles,
> As you comb your sidecurls, both your sleeves sway.

All that's missing from this picture is the resentment in your heart:
Never to be discerned in your image.[42]

The other was written by Wang Xiaoli 王孝禮:

It is a pity that we do not recognize ourselves,
And, in the end, rely on what is in the mirror.
Delineating eyebrows in the same tone of green,
Facing a face that is rosy on both sides.
When you turn your body, it is the first to see you move,
When you smile your half-smile, it returns the same.
Still, you are disturbed by the swift passage of what is in the mirror—
Though those looking on can hardly tell.[43]

Both of these examples seem slightly ironic because allusions to different third-party viewers provoke collisions between truth and illusion; in Wang's poem in particular, it is difficult to determine just who the mirror is seducing. But the greatest irony comes into play when the mirror is made to stand in for an absent companion—when the mirror is presented, albeit tongue in cheek, as a subject. Liang Emperor Jianwen's (503–551) exquisitely and deceptively simple "On a Melancholy Maiden Reflecting in the Mirror" (*Chou gui zhao jing* 愁閨照鏡) does precisely that:

Since we parted, long have I languished;
Others wonder at my pallor.
There is only the mirror in its case—
That makes sure I still recognize myself.[44]

Clearly, the days of sanguine comparisons likening the mirror to the all-seeing, infallible sage are long gone. But, this is not to say that earlier mirror-gazers were unaware of the potential discordance between what the mirror shows and what different viewers see. We have already seen how some pre-Han and Han texts assert that a mirror's efficacy ultimately depends on the viewer's discernment. The Western Jin writer Fu Xuan 傅玄 (217–278) is merely continuing in this vein when he admonishes in his "Inscription on a Mirror": "It is a pity that common people look in mirrors and see only their form; for, in mirrors one can see one's true nature."[45] I would argue, however, that such remarks were relatively rare, and it was the ideal mirror that dominated. Later poets, by contrast, gave freer play to the complex and productive tension between the mirror's capacities and limitations.

The question arises: what does this "free play" mean for the construction of poetic subjectivity in these texts? At first glance, the poems cited earlier seem to foreground, quite straightforwardly, the isolation of the mirror-gazer, thereby suggesting both the ineffability and impenetrability of subjective experience and the existence of a discrete, autonomous subject. Indeed,

the long-standing notion that the mirror's reliability and efficacy depended on the discernment—the "luminosity" or *ming*—of the person who looked into it only serves to substantiate the importance of the independent subject position.

It would seem, then, that the potential for the construction of an independent subject was always there; it was just a matter of determining the nature of who was looking into that mirror. In a public-oriented Confucian age such as the Han, the mirror's efficacy was realized by the discerning vision of the sage (who, as mentioned earlier, shared—or mirrored—the mirror's qualities). The sage's unifying nature, however, arguably precluded the formation of that subject, irresistibly drawing all of the kingdom's inhabitants into a smoothly functioning politico-moral system. In the inward-oriented era that would follow, mirrors migrated from politico-philosophical texts into the burgeoning world of poetic expression. With this change, the responsibility of activating the mirror's potential naturally fell to the lyric poet, whose role was to observe and articulate experience rather than to observe and regulate the populace of the kingdom.

Given this change, it might seem surprising that the poems cited earlier do not produce a fully autonomous subject. Rather, their seamless interweaving of the mirror's powers and limitations, and their concomitant blending of the viewers' discernment and myopia, convey instead that the boundaries of the subject are not fast, but permeable. Here, as in earlier times, the mirror disappears: not into the realm of metaphor, but into the objectifying, and at times typifying, gaze of other subjects.

The inscription of the unforgiving and superficial gaze of others into lyric poems on mirrors will create a tension between surface and depth, between the public and the private, which highlights the permeable, unstable nature of the lyric subject at this time. In one example, Liu Huan's "*Fu* on Mirrors," this is especially evident. Here, the mirror ensures that sensuality and substance, ephemerality and permanence, come together and even do battle over the boundaries of the subject. Indeed, the title alone signals that what is primary here is not the mirror itself, central as its appearance is in the narrative, but the multiple instances of "illuminating," "shining," and "reflecting" that take place throughout.

Rhapsody on Reflecting in the Mirror

The nighttime talleys[46] have already run out,
Dawn chimes are about to cease.
From outside the window brightness comes,
Vanquishing the shadows inside the curtains.

Prince Jing[47] is about to rise,
His concubine must to her quarters return.
In the Front Halls decorum reigns,

While in the Inner Pavilions regulations are discarded.
An open screen may be easy to fold;
But curtains, once rolled up, are difficult to unfurl.

She uses a comb to tame her sidecurls,
And a hairpin to entwine a chignon.
Near the steps, she approaches the water,
Reflecting light in a bowl.

She is surprised that last night's powder is still in place,
And smiles, seeing her ornaments awry.
About to open her powder-case to retouch her makeup,
She sits before the window and takes out her mirror.

Its stand was originally that of Madame Wen, the palace maid,
And on its back, an inscription suitable for her descendants:
"On all four sides, swirling wind like flowing water,
The balustrade encloses like a city gate."

So clear, as though without obstruction—
Before this image, she is all the more alluring.
So recently she was not even allowed rouge—
Yet now her lovely brows are as if dusted black.

In the world, there are naturally few who love mirrors—
I have only heard of one, who compares to Chang'E.
Jade maidens have gazed at their reflections therein,
And frequently are they polished by Transcendents.

When considering Time: do not become attached to provisional things;
To the essentials of Dharma: one must accommodate oneself.
In summer, golden are the river's ripples;
In autumn, jewel-like are the dogwood trees.
Silver threads are my demon-suppressing mantra,
Iridescent blue is my protective amulet.
The Formless Realm is what we must copy—
It is not that one should fear hairpin and comb.

This poem begins like many poems depicting the imminent separation of two lovers at the end of a night together: with a description of the ominous signs, both man-made and natural, of dawn. Lines 5–6 predictably remind the reader that duty calls, and the concubine must leave the prince to his responsibilities. The story is a familiar one, drawn from the Han Dynasty tradition of literary folksongs; but the mirror named in the title, and ostensibly the topic of the poem, is yet to appear. Instead, it is prefaced by a hint at its own significance in the next four lines (ll. 7–10):

> In the Front Halls decorum reigns,
> While in the Inner Pavilions regulations are discarded.
> An open screen may be easy to fold;
> But curtains, once rolled up, are difficult to unfurl.

Linked by a shared ending rhyme to the prince's awakening and the concubine's departure, these aphoristic lines function both as an admonitory commentary on the illicitness and inherent dangers of these events and, more subtly, as an introduction to the theme of (in)visibility—which, as we have seen, lies at the heart of much contemporary mirror imagery. Things once revealed, we are told, cannot easily be hidden again; and this reminder retroactively lends new meaning to the earlier, opening image of the sun's rays penetrating past the curtains (l. 4), replacing "shadows" (*ying* 影—the same word used to refer to the "reflection" that the woman will soon see in the mirror) with light (*ming* 明—the same that is used to indicate discernment and understanding). The significance of time's passage, which was also introduced in the opening, is hereby revived, and even highlighted, by this suggestion of the inexorability and irreversibility of unfolding events.

Yet, what follows is not a narration of the events fatefully taking place in the outside world, where, tradition tells us, the consequences of the prince's unobserved profligacy will play out. Such consequences cannot be seen—even with the aid of the finest mirror. And so, in their stead, the seemingly banal activities of the woman in her private quarters become the object of the reader's gaze, enacted behind the boudoir's proverbial curtains, where mirrors serve an essential quotidian function and are assumed to be reliable. There, this presumably beautiful woman (whose looks must be inferred, for they are thus far hidden even from the reader's view), having gotten herself all mussed up in the company of the prince, attends to her toilette, and in doing so merges, unawares, with the many anonymous folksong maids who preceded her.

In the course of this merging, she checks her reflection twice: once in the basin of water by the steps (ll. 13–14), where she notices that her appearance is in slight disarray; and then once in her mirror, as she sets about making things right (ll. 17–18). But the righting of her hairdo occurs before she has even glanced in the water basin, and this we may attribute, in part, to the self-consciousness typical of these avatars of the boudoir. That is, her awareness of her appearance derives at least as much from being the habitual object of the gaze of others as it does from her own ability to see herself. But the depiction of this gesture by the poet, a gesture of "alignment" as yet invisible to herself, amounts to a bifurcation between the reader's gaze and that of the woman, the nominal subject of this section of the poem. The reader is invited to watch as she moves from the water basin, where she evinces surprised bemusement at the spectacle of the traces of her nighttime rollicking (the pointedly described "non-alignment" 不正 of her ornaments—translated as "awry"), to the presumably more luminous mirror, which she places by the window, all the better to begin the work of erasing those traces.

As the light source grows stronger (from that of the relatively dim water basin's reflection to the bright sunlight streaming in, unimpeded, through

the window), the image of her face undoubtedly becomes clearer. But the woman's discernment of who she is—her self-recognition—does not. That clear vision is bestowed on the seasoned reader, who recognizes her typicality: as the kingdom-toppling female, endlessly reflected in the "mirror" of history. And, in this recognition, the reader robs her of her subjectivity.

It is the transfer of the act of mirror-reflection from the woman to the viewer (here, the reader) that both wrests subjectivity from the woman and replaces the limited mirror of the boudoir with the far-seeing mirror of history. Before the reader's eyes, this woman finally dissolves from an emerging subject to a literary trope, her obligatory yet futile attempts at self-correction left unrecounted and unmissed. Instead, the mirror itself is deftly placed in the foreground, an object fitted into a stand, complete with an inscription that simultaneously draws attention to its own past and predicts this woman's future (ll. 19–22):

> Its stand was originally that of Madame Wen, the palace maid,
> And on its back, an inscription intended for her descendants:
> "On all four sides, swirling wind like flowing water,
> The balustrade encloses like a city gate."

It is probable that the mirror stand of Madame Wen is an allusion to a story in the *Shishuo xinyu* (New account of tales of the world), a fifth-century collection of anecdotal tales cataloging the behavior of the members of a coterie of intellectuals and artists living in the period from the second century through the early part of the fifth century. This particular story tells how the great Jin Dynasty general Wen Qiao 溫嶠 (288–329) cleverly won the hand of a beautiful distant cousin by pretending to help her find a suitor. Presenting the girl's mother—on the imagined suitor's behalf—with a jade mirror stand that he had actually acquired during a campaign in the north, he succeeded in gaining the mother's approval. Only then did General Wen reveal his true identity.[48] Now, centuries later, the only trace that remains of the countless hours that the coveted beauty spent before her mirror inspecting her face for cosmetic flaws is the mirror stand itself. Her own death and disappearance—sealed by an empty name and scattered descendants—is proof that (unlike the more knowledgeable reader) she lacked the discernment, the *ming*, to see in her reflection what was clearly there to be seen.

The mirror's cryptic inscription provides yet another opportunity to shift the subject position away from the woman to the reader. A first-level reading —that would be hers—might simply interpret the couplet as a clumsy poetic description of the design on the back of the mirror. But, like the reflective side of the mirror, the back has its own illuminating function, evident only to those who know how to reflect upon it. Its meaning thus remains stubbornly opaque to the nameless woman in this poem; but it would be infinitely

meaningful to someone with historical perspective: someone in the future, like Liu Huan, or like Su Shi—the eleventh-century writer whose acquisition of an ancient mirror inspired the thoughtful rumination that opens this article—someone who understands that, ultimately, it is the inscribed and ornamental mirror backs, the coded cultural language that mirrors transmit, that will stand up to the corrosive effects of time.

And so, we may well ask, what precisely is it that the woman is not seeing in this inscription; and, what is it that we, as readers, are meant to see? We might apprehend another example of apposition: the description of a maelstrom swirling just outside a protective enclosure, menacingly reminding of the acknowledged but omitted portentous activities taking place in the outside world beyond the boudoir, the world of the prince. This reading further encloses the woman in the frame of the historical archetype, providing as it does a commentary on the fate of the many mirror-gazing beauties of the world, including—unbeknownst to her—the current owner of the mirror. Linking the historical past with the future of this woman in a fixed, eternal moment, the inscription (thus interpreted) unmistakably identifies the mirror in this poem as a veritable "mirror of history."

However, even this reading falls short of being fully satisfying, as it overlooks the key words in this couplet. The words that carry the full meaning of this inscription are not "swirling wind" or "balustrade," but the two common function words *ruo* 若 and *si* 似, both of which are translated here as "to be like." Furthermore, the explicit comparisons they propose—between wind and water, and between the balustrade and the city gate—are cast in another comparative framework: the now-familiar structure of parallelism. But in this case, rather than supporting the comparison, the parallelism seems to work against it, raising doubt. That is, the swirling winds may well resemble flowing water, but how could a balustrade ever provide the same level of protection as the gate in a city wall?

As if to intensify the foreboding provoked by this flimsy comparison, the full import of "being like," in words that are flagged simply by their inclusion in a poem about "reflecting in a mirror," is carried over into the next couplet, in which *si* 似occurs yet again (ll. 23–24):

> So clear, *as though* without obstruction—
> Before this image, she is all the more alluring.

"Seeming" and being "like," repeated here in the phrase "as though," function much like the mirror itself, bringing into play the delicate interdependency between viewer and viewed, subject and object. These verbs do not just assert similarity but also have the potential to blur the distinction between perception and imagination; just as, in this woman's hands, the mirror makes it possible

for her to see what she thinks she sees. At the same time, as with all instances of apposition, in these verbs' assertions of likeness lies the tacit recognition of a fundamental, unbridgeable difference: in this case, that between the real and the imagined, between the image reflected in the mirror and the reflection as perceived by the mirror-gazer.

This is the moment when the poem definitively shifts from being one about mirror-gazing to *being like* a mirror into which the reader is invited to gaze. This couplet, which reads in Chinese like free indirect discourse, meaningfully begs the question of who the "viewer" is; that is, to whom does it *seem* that there is "no obstruction" to a clear view? To both, actually, in significantly different ways. From the woman's perspective, surfaces—both hers and the mirror's—suffice. The better the lighting, the clearer the view; and the clearer the view, the more alluring the image. For the reader, however, the likeness-producing surface does not so much reflect as it brilliantly *de*flects toward the invisible real—just like the metaphorical mirrors of old. Both the woman and the reader look at the same reflection; only the reader, schooled in the way of mirrors, discerns the deception, the limitation, of that alluring reflection and understands how to look beyond.

The poet Liu Huan has not forgotten to include, in this painstaking revelation of the mirror's intricate interweaving of the rhetoric of powers and limitations, the mirror's specific, cruel harnessing of beauty to mortality. When, in the next two lines, the passage of time is invoked in a reference to the woman's all-but-imperceptible passage from innocent girl to erotic woman, it is presented in the form of the suspicion, unconfirmed, of a tiny, artificial enhancement of her appearance—"Now her lovely brows are as if dusted black" (l. 25). There is a bitter irony in this invocation of a woman's attempts—whether real or not—at self-correction, self-alignment; for in this age-old, eternal image is the harbinger of her inevitable aging and consignment to oblivion, where she will join the once much-desired, but long-since faceless, Madame Wen.

With this peek into the workings of time and fate, the poem abruptly leaves the scene of the boudoir and its mirrors. The narrator's voice unexpectedly breaks in (l. 26), with a coda-like section offering a point of view that subsumes both subjects of the poem—the woman and the reader—uniting them as the single object of his own gaze. He explicitly pronounces on the underlying, unifying theme of time and its passage, asserting that only the immortal goddesses can truly and deservedly "love mirrors"; for, untouched by even the slightest mark of old age and death (and, by implication, the desire to cling to youth and life), they produce and perceive mirror reflections that are consistent with their timeless reality.

Then, in the final section (ll. 31–38), the poet explicates his point in terms that could not be clearer (except, perhaps, for the perplexing final

couplet). Sweeping away the Confucian vision of moral and political norms, which *seemed* to inform the poem at every level (from the prince's obligations at court to the reminder of the dangers of kingdom-toppling beauties), Liu Huan abruptly introduces one that is overtly Buddhist. With his remonstrance to "not become attached to provisional things," he effectively incorporates both the concubine's boudoir mirror and the reader's historical, morally upright mirror-poem into what he might call the ultimate mirror: the one that reveals the true ephemerality and unreality of *all* things, whether reflected or directly perceived.[49] It is a radical move, the very abruptness of which seems to argue forcefully against categories and distinctions of all kinds—including that between the archetypal woman and the would-be discerning, and thus vain, reader. No mention of a mirror is made, nor is one needed. Only in the last couplet is there a reference to the act of replication or "copying," *miao* 描, which could refer to the action of the mirror but also means "to describe"—referring to the main action of the *fu* poem itself.

> The Formless Realm is what one should copy—
> It is not that one should fear hairpin and comb.

The "Formless Realm" (*kongchu* 空處) referred to here is the Buddhist term for the world of sensory perception: the world of things susceptible to being reflected in mirrors (or words) and mistaken, by the unenlightened, for reality. In this realm, the seemingly distinct identities of subject and object naturally collapse into one, as do those of things reflecting and reflected—not to mention the heretofore carefully delineated identities of Madame Wen and our lady of the boudoir, on one hand, and those of the reader and most clever "copier" (that is, the poet himself), on the other. In the end, the poet finds and offers some comfort in the conclusion that even the act of copying is not to be condemned; for it is the nature of the illusory objects of perception to be copied, described, iterated, and imitated. Buddhist mirrors, like the mirrors of Six Dynasties lyric poetry, are there to remind us of what we cannot see. Therefore, it is not the simple condemnation of individual vanity that will make the difference, and that is probably why the ministrations of "hairpin and comb" are not to be feared.

During the Six Dynasties, skillful poets would invoke mirrors in ways that would cause them to disappear by merging them with the uncompromising illumination, or *zhao* 照, of the mirrorlike mind of the Sagely poet and, through him, the reader. In like manner, the subjects who used these mirrors—both their physical and figurative incarnations—illuminated one another's boundaries as their respective gazes intersected in and were split by those same mirrors. Early Confucian notions about the ideal consistency between external appearance and the subject's inner state—expressed most succinctly

in the parallel phraseology and analogies typical of the rhetoric of those times—yielded to Daoist and Buddhist convictions about the contingency of perception and the impermanence, relativity, and unreality of its objects. Subjects could thus occupy the position of being inaccessible and autonomous vis-à-vis other (imagined) subjects, even as they seamlessly united with them in their own illusoriness.

Mirror as Predicate: The Tang Dynasty

The tradition of invoking mirrors continued on into the Tang Dynasty and beyond. One recent monograph anthologizes a large number of Tang poems either on or alluding to mirrors, along with mirror inscriptions and photographs of mirrors of the Tang and Song Dynasties. The authors of this volume divide poems on mirrors into eight thematic categories, all of which take up, in some form, themes that go back to the Warring States and Han.[50] While each of these thematic categories merits examination in its own right, it is the poems that extract the dualistic function of mirrors from the mirrors themselves that will be the focus of this final part of my discussion. This "dualistic function" is encapsulated in the verb *zhao* 照—epigrammatically translated as "reflect"—which captures the capacity of mirrors to act as *both* the agent and the object of reflection.

The reason for this selection is not that Tang poets did not write directly about mirrors. Quite the contrary, this was precisely the period during which the theme truly took hold. Yet, this indirect remanifestation of the disappeared mirror is strikingly emblematic of the intense experimentation in the interpenetration of language and sensual experience, for which the Tang has so long been admired. It is this heightened sensitivity that encourages a broader consideration of the play of reflections and reflexivity in certain poems. With this in mind, I will conclude with a discussion of one very famous poem by Du Fu (712–770), in which he expresses his feelings of missing his wife while he was blockaded in the capital, Chang'an, during the years of the great rebellion that began the long process of that dynasty's decline.

Moonlit Night

On this night, a Fuzhou moon;
From her bedroom she but looks at it, alone.
While, far away, I cherish our sons and daughters—
As yet too young to miss Chang'an.

Fragrant mist, her cloudy hair damp;
Clear bright beams, her jade arms cold.

When shall we lean by those empty curtains,
Shining (*zhao*) on each other, our tears' traces dry?[51]

This poem exhausts virtually all of the poetic possibilities inherent in the word *zhao*, though it occurs only once, in the final line. The title of the poem draws attention to the image of the moon; but just as in earlier writings examined here, it is not the depicted things that carry the poem's meaning, but its central verb. Taking advantage of age-old associations of moon and mirror, Du Fu embraces the implicit "duality" of the same verb *zhao* seen in Liu Huan's *fu*, both in its capacity to collapse subject and object and in its potential to sustain an ambiguity that blends illumination, reflection, and the gaze into one gesture. Even the traditionally upheld temporal action of the mirror—its ability to reveal past and future—is woven into this deceptively straightforward poem.

The tenderness expressed in this poem discourages one from dissecting it into grammatical tidbits. Yet, much can be revealed by a simple tracing of the direction of reflections from one line to the next. As we shall see, what Du Fu achieves is not merely the poignant, seemingly insuperable contrast between real separation and imagined reunion, but the transcendence of that contrast, and of the time and space that keep the couple apart.

When the poem opens, the first line leads the reader to imagine the poet in Fuzhou looking at the moon. It is only in the second line, which turns out to enjamb the topic of the first line with the comment in the second, that we realize that the subject gazing at the moon in Fuzhou is not the poet/speaker, but his wife, signaled by the conventional synecdoche of "in her bedroom" (*guizhong* 閨中). The seemingly redundant adverbs, "but" (*zhi* 只) and "alone" (*du* 獨), establish the unidirectionality of her "look" as well as her isolation as the looking subject; but, just as quickly, both of these signals are belied by the very existence of the couplet in which they are contained. Picturing the scene in order to write it, the poet joins his gaze with hers, if only in his imagination, and it becomes clear that his act must be understood as mirroring her own; he must be looking at the moon in Chang'an. While the image of a lonely woman gazing at the moon approaches archetype, the process of discovery in which that image is couched—a process doubly delayed by the modifier "Fuzhou" and the topic-comment enjambment—restores her individuality, if not specifically her subjectivity, through the poet's infusion of the elements of time and distance that lie at the heart of this pose.

The second couplet returns us to the point of origin of the poet's gaze, identifying it as Chang'an; but rather than establishing it as "here," where the poet stands, it too is placed at a distance, as the direct object of what his children are "as yet" not missing. Almost as if to overturn the reader's

knowledge that Du Fu is in Chang'an, the slippery syntax of these two couplets, and the emphatically juxtaposed verbs of "looking" and "not missing," reverse Du Fu's "here" and "there." In the process, subject and object, as well as imagination and reality, seem to be confounded—in a most eloquent expression of the desire for reunion.

In the third couplet, this vivid expression of Du Fu's estrangement begins to be counterbalanced by the shining presence of the moon—the object of both their gazes.

Present primarily as a source of radiance, the moon imbues Du Fu's wife with its qualities. At this moment, the poet's implied gaze and the moon's illumination blend, momentarily collapsing the distance so painstakingly constructed in the first couplet. "Here" and "there" are not just reversed, but collapsed; Du Fu pictures his wife at close range, and the wife's gaze is replaced by the radiant luminescence she has borrowed from the moon.

When we finally arrive at the last couplet, the poet's questioning voice, in all its yearning, sunders the imagined moment of union. Yet, even then, he manages to draw present and future as close together as possible, qualifying the curtains as empty even as the longed-for, future scene he depicts fills them. In that moment, Du Fu makes explicit the doubleness of reflection, of *zhao*, by coining the untranslatable phrase, *shuangzhao*: "doubly (*shuang*) shining/reflecting/gazing." In that phrase, all of *zhao*'s functions, unidirectional and reflexive, human and lunar, are united; and so are husband and wife. The three "shining" subjects of this poem—moon, husband, and wife—join in a unity whose combined illumination is so strong that it transforms cold moonlight into warmth, a warmth (much like that of the absent sun) that dries the very traces of their "paired" streams of tears.

FIGURE 2. Mirror (front), Western Han Dynasty (206 BCE–9 CE), approx. 50 BCE–9 CE. China. Bronze. The Avery Brundage Collection, B6OB542. © Asian Art Museum, San Francisco. Used by permission.

The Fate of the Mirror-Gazing Subject

Some three hundred years later, during the Northern Song Dynasty, Su Shi would obtain an antique mirror, its power to reflect gone,

but its inscription and decoration unspoiled. For him, the pleasure lay in recovering an object of the past; at the same time, the constraint in his language suggests that such pleasure must be kept in its place. Adopting the mirror-mind of the sage, he appreciates its qualities, notes every detail, and seems not to become attached. But, still merely human, and—what is even more damning—a highly cultivated individual possessed of refined taste, he keeps the object anyway. Even this less than excellent mirror, its inherent luminosity dimmed by time, and sporting its careless mix of calligraphy styles, has the power to galvanize and single out the acquisitive, vain, and unique subject—in all its fatal contingency.

Notes

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1. Recent developments in "thing theory," emerging in fields ranging from art history to anthropology, have been helpful in getting us to look beyond culturally sanctioned ways of interpreting objects to focus on the unintended ways in which objects and subjects can be said to constitute each other. For a concise, relatively early iteration of this theory, see Bill Brown, "Thing Theory," *Critical Inquiry* 4, no. 1 (Autumn 2001): 1–22, as well as other essays in that volume, which Brown edited. See too, the essays in Lorraine Daston, ed., *Things that Talk: Object Lessons from Art and Science* (New York, 2004). Relevant studies elucidating the importance of things in premodern Chinese culture include Judith Zeitlin, "The Petrified Heart: Obsession in Chinese Literature, Art, and Medicine," *Late Imperial China* 12, no. 1 (June 1991): 1–26, and her "The Cultural Biography of a Musical Instrument: Little Hulei as Sounding Object, Antique, Prop, and Relic," in *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies* 69, no. 2 (December 2009): 395–441; Jing Wang, *The Story of Stone: Intertextuality, Chinese Stone Lore, and the Stone Symbolism of "Dream of the Red Chamber," "Water Margin," and "The Journey to the West"* (Durham, NC, 1992); Xiaoshan Yang, *Metamorphosis of the Private Sphere: Gardens and Objects in Tang-Song Poetry* (Cambridge, MA, 2003).

2. For a discussion of Su Shi's relationship to the world of art objects, see Ronald Egan, *The Problem of Beauty: Aesthetic Thought and Pursuits in Northern Song Dynasty China* (Cambridge, MA, 2006), 170–91; 205–6.
3. Su Shi, "*Shu suo huo gu tongjing* 書所獲古銅鏡," in *Su Shi wenji* 蘇軾文集 [The collected writings of Su Shi] (Beijing, 1986), 2064.
4. It is possible that either Su Shi misread the ancient character *dan* 丹 as *bai* 白 or, as is more likely, the inscription itself was incorrect; Danyang (modern-day Dangtu in Anhui Province), not Baiyang, was a well-known site during the Han Dynasty for the production of bronze and is very frequently cited in mirror inscriptions. Indeed, according to at least one scholar, many Han Dynasty mirror inscriptions may have falsely claimed Danyang as the source for their bronze as a way of advertising the mirror's fine quality. See Kong Xiangxing 孔祥星and Liu Yiman 劉一曼, *Zhongguo gu tongjing* 中國古銅鏡 [Ancient Chinese bronze mirrors] (Taibei, 1994).
5. An alternative reading of this line (其明照人微小) would be, "Its shine is such that it reflects people but very dimly." However, this reading would contradict Su's observation that the mirror has become thoroughly blackened with time. The possibility that Su is extrapolating how it used to reflect images seems more likely, and corresponds, not only with the Daoist use of the mirror as an object of meditation (see note 6), but also with the use of mirrors to reflect vast spaces within the limited space of their surface. See, for example, this mention of mirrors in the "Five Elements Commentary" of the second-century BCE *Shangshu dazhuan*: "If, situated in the lowest depths, one holds a mirror that is one-foot square, and from above it draws in the Great Clarity, then can one not be attentive to the fact that like things follow each other?" See Fu Sheng 伏勝 and D. C. Lau, *Shang Shu dazhuan zhuzi suoyin* 尚書大傳逐字索引*: A Concordance to the Shangshudazhuan* (Hong Kong, 1994).
6. The phrase *ju xing* 聚形 (translated here as "coalesce form") seems to refer to the Daoist use of mirrors in meditation. In this practice, gazing steadily into a mirror will make the invisible concrete and concentrate dispersed *qi* (or "breath"), thereby revealing the veritable nature of perceived form. This is discussed in Kristofer Marinus Schipper, *Le corps taoïste: corps physique, corps social* (Paris, 1982); and, Isabelle Robinet and Phyllis Brooks, *Taoism: Growth of a Religion* (Stanford, 1997).
7. The improvements in the reflective capacities of mirrors came about with increased skill in producing amalgams containing quantities of tin and lead. Recent scholarship identifies two moments when improvement in this area was most dramatic: first, during the Western Han Dynasty, when the amalgam's composition appears to have stabilized; and then again during the Tang, when metallurgists were able to dramatically increase the percentage of tin and add silver to the mix. See Guan Weiliang 管維良, *Zhongguo tongjing shi* 中國銅鏡史 [A history of Chinese bronze mirrors] (Chongqing, 2006). For a more detailed account of the metallurgical evolution of mirror technology, see Kong and Liu, *Zhongguo gu tongjing*, 82–86. And for an extended chemical analysis of Chinese mirrors throughout the imperial periods, see He Tangkun 何堂坤, *Zhongguo gudai tongjing de jishu yanjiu* 中國古代銅鏡的技術研究 [A technological study of ancient Chinese bronze mirrors] (Beijing, 1999).
8. For an example of the use of mirror backs to narrate historical events, see Eugene Wang's exploration of the different pictorial renderings of the story of the famous Warring States minister Wu Zixu (d. 484) in his article, "Mirror, Death, and Rhetoric: Reading Later Han Chinese Bronze Artifacts," *Art Bulletin* 76, no. 3 (September 1994): 511–34.

9. Similar dualities are cited by the contemporary philosopher Henri Lefebvre in his discussion of mirrors, namely: "imaginary/real, produced/producing, material/social, immediate/mediated (milieu/transition), connection/separation, and so on." See Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space* (Oxford, 1991), 187.
10. In the main extant *leishu* encyclopedias cataloging literature dating up through the Tang Dynasty, the entries for mirrors, *jing*, are simply categorized among the homely objects of daily use. In the *Beitang shuchao*, in the category titled "decorative furnishings" mirrors are preceded by "face powder" and followed by "mirror stands" and "cosmetics"; in the *Yiwen leiju*, they are preceded by "silk bags" and followed by "stockings." In the *Chuxueji* they fall under the broader category of "useful objects," where they are preceded by "incense burners" (themselves bearing representations of the cosmos) and followed by "mirror stands." For the preceding works see, respectively, *Beitang shuchao* 北堂書鈔, ed. Yu Shinan 虞世南 (558–638), in *Tangdai sida leishu* 唐代四大類書, ed. Dong Zhian 董治安, 3 vols. (Beijing, 2003), 1: *j.* 25; *Yiwen leiju* 藝文類聚, ed. Ouyang Xun 歐陽詢 (557–641), in *Tangdai sida leishu*, vol. 2; and *Chuxueji* 初學記, ed. Bo Juyi (772–846), 3: *j.* 136.
11. This rather straightforward use of the mirror finds one of its earliest historical instances in a famous legend about the First Emperor. As the story has it, he would force his ministers to stand before a mirror, which would reveal their very guts; if the ministers felt anxious or guilty, their viscera would expand, giving them away, and the Emperor would then execute them. Later, in the long list of marvelous items that the founding Emperor Gaozu of the Han brought with him when he was installed in the Xianyang Palace, there was a square mirror that he used to diagnose illness and to reveal the true inner feelings (that is, the fidelity) of his concubines. See the *Xijing zaji* 西京雜記 [Miscellaneous records of the western capital] 3.4b–5a, in *Yingyin wenyuange siku quanshu* 景印文淵閣四庫全書 (Taipei, 1983–1986), vol. 1035; hereafter SKQS. Another famous example can be found in Sima Qian's biography of Dongfang Shuo 東方朔, the magician and "court jester" of Emperor Wu of the Han: "When two people look at each other [in the mirror], they understand each other's inner feelings." In Sima Qian 司馬遷, *Shiji* 史記 [Records of the historian] (1959; reprint, Beijing, 1982), 10:126. 3205–3214. Later stories abound in which mirrors reveal the true nature of shape-shifting demons or discern the inner character of people.
12. For a brief but insightful discussion of how the mirror is used to play with lyric subjectivity in late imperial fiction, see especially the discussion by Wai-yee Li in her book, *Enchantment and Disenchantment: Love and Illusion in Chinese Literature* (Princeton, 1993).
13. A comparative perspective on the analysis offered here is suggested by Martin Jay's description of the specular in the Western classical tradition, in which the mirror is enlisted to demonstrate the drawing together or "collapsing" of subject and object. See Martin Jay, *Downcast Eyes: The Denigration of Vision in Twentieth-Century French Thought* (Berkeley, 1994), 33–34.
14. Guo Moruo 郭沫若, *Liang Zhou jinwen ci daxi kaoshi* 兩周金文辭大系考釋 (Tokyo, 1957), 155b.
15. See Michael Nylan, "Beliefs About Seeing: Optics and Moral Technologies in Early China," *Asia Major*, 3rd ser. 21, no. 1 (2008): 89–132.
16. The *Shangshu* 尚書, also referred to as the *Shujing* 書經 [Classic of documents], is considered to be China's oldest extant historiographical work, including documents dating back as early as the end of the second millennium BCE. It has been translated into English by Bernhard Kargren as *The Book of Documents* (Göteborg, 1950). The translation in the text is my own. For the original text, see Kong Yingda

孔穎達 and Kong Anguo 孔安國, eds., *Shangshu zhengyi* 尚書正義 (Beijing, 1999), 2:380–81.

17. *Xin Tangshu* 新唐書 [New Tang history], ed. Ouyang Xiu 歐陽修 (1007–1072), 40: 97.18a, in *Sibu congkan* 四部叢刊 (Shanghai, 1936).
18. Duan Yucai annotates the entry thus: "'Sunlight' (*jing* 景) is 'light.' When metal is luminous enough to reflect things, it is called a mirror (*jing* 鏡)."
19. As cited in the encyclopedic dictionary *Hanyu da cidian* 漢語大詞典, ed. Luo Zhufeng 羅竹風, 12 vols. (Shanghai, 1986), 5:769. See also Axel Schuessler, *ABC Etymological Dictionary of Old Chinese* (Honolulu, 2007), 305–6; 315.
20. The renowned Chinese linguist Wang Li 王力 (1900–1986), for example, supports this view in his *Tongyuan zidian* 同源字典 [A dictionary of paronyms] (Beijing, 1982).
21. Consultation of the Qing Dynasty dictionary of poetic usage *Peiwen yunfu* 佩文韻府reveals many instances from the Han through Song Dynasties in which the modifier *ming* was used primarily for rhythmic or other prosodic purposes; in such cases, the modifier is merely foregrounding the conventionally recognized principle attribute of its object. At the same time, however, there did exist a special type of mirror frequently referred to, among other terms, as a *mingjing* (bright mirror), *mingzhaojing* (brightly reflecting mirror), or *toumingjing* (transparent mirror). These "magic mirrors" had the remarkable property of being able to project on a wall the image of the design on its back, when light was directed onto it in a particular way. For a description of this remarkable technology, see Kong and Liu, *Zhongguo gu tongjing*, 85. See also Julia K. Murray and Susan E. Cahill, "Recent Advances in Understanding the Mystery of Ancient Chinese 'Magic Mirrors'—a Brief Summary of Chinese Analytical and Experimental Studies," *Chinese Science* 8 (1987): 1–8.
22. Such expressions are legion during the classical period, with the most common including *ming wang* (illuminated/perspicacious prince), *ming zhu* (—ruler), *ming de* (—moral power), *ming sheng* (—sage), *ming jiao* (—teachings), and *ming shen* (—deity). See also Michael Nylan's discussion of how the use of this term contributes to the "slippage" between moral and optical categories in Mohist writings, in her "Beliefs About Seeing," 108, and throughout.
23. Examples abound in the *Baopuzi* 抱朴子 [The master who embraces simplicity] by the alchemist and philosopher, Ge Hong 葛洪 (283–343), as well as in the *Soushenji* 搜神記 [In search of the supernatural] (Beijing, 1980), the fourth-century collection of anomaly tales by the historian and writer Gan Bao 干寶 (fl. 317–322). For a synthetic discussion of some of the magical properties attributed to mirrors in Chinese lore, see Pauline Bentley Koffler, "The Story of the Magic Mirror (*Gujingji*): Translated with an Introduction and Notes by Pauline Bentley Koffler," in *Hommage à Kwong Hing Foon: Etudes d'histoire culturelle de la Chine*, ed. Jean-Paul Diény (Paris, 1995). See also K. E. Brashier's argument that mirrors were placed in tombs in order to facilitate the immortality of the deceased: K. E. Brashier, "Longevity Like Metal and Stone: The Role of the Mirror in Han Burials," *T'oung Pao*, 2nd ser. 81, nos. 4/5 (1995): 201–29. For the earliest examples, see also note 12.
24. *Hanfeizi jijie* 韓非子集解, in *Zhuzi jicheng* 諸子集成, 8 vols. (1954; reprint, Beijing, 1993), 5:8.145–46.
25. Stephen Owen, *Readings in Chinese Literary Thought* (Cambridge, MA, 1992), 589–90.
26. As has been famously, if controversially, argued by Pauline Yu in her book *The Reading of Imagery in the Chinese Poetic Tradition* (Princeton, 1987).

27. Besides the *Hanfeizi* quote presented earlier, one can also reliably turn to the *Huainanzi* and find ample substantiation of this view. One salient example is found in the "Quanyan xun" 詮言訓 chapter: "Drums are not obliterated by sound; that is why they can have [the quality of] sound. Mirrors are not erased by form; that is why they can have [the power to reflect] form." Liu An 劉安 (d. 122 BCE), *Huainan honglie jie* 淮南鴻烈解, ed. Gao You 高誘 (fl. 205–212) (Taipei, 1983), 14.12b.
28. A pithy example of the mirror's impartiality can be drawn from the *Wenzi* 文子 (traditionally understood as having been composed by a direct disciple of Laozi during the fifth century BCE, but the earliest extant text of which dates only to around the first or second century BCE): "Mirrors do not impart form; that is why they are able to harbor form." See Peng Yushang 彭裕商, *Wenzi jiaozhu* 文子校注 (Chengdu, 2006). Another, more oblique example is to be found in this simple inscription attributed to Li You 李尤 (Eastern Han), "Inscription on a Mirror," in which the mirror impartially reflects the ways in which the viewer's actual state falls short of expectations, thereby making corrections possible: "Smelt bronze to make a mirror. [Then] touch up the makeup on your face, adjust the lay of dharma robes, or right the angle of your official cap." As cited in the Tang *leishu* encyclopedia *Chuxueji* 初學記 25.20a.

    In further illustration of both the mirror's impartiality and its stability, we might also include the many admonitions in the *Huainanzi* insisting that one can only properly perceive one's reflection in calm water and in dust-free mirrors. See esp. *Huainan honglie jie* 2.15b, 16.1b.
29. The mirror's quality of fidelity or reliability is often invoked. For example, Liu Zhongbo's 劉仲伯 work "The Making of Mirrors" is cited in the Tang encyclopedia *Beitang shuchao* (136.1b) as saying, "When Zhang Zhongda discussed the secrets of mirrors, he said that when one applies sharp, clear vision to a mirror, it will reveal the intent with which one is reflecting himself therein. Some would say that [this means that] what enters the mirrors is what one gets out of them. It is just as when the sun and moon shine on the water; it mirrors them such that it is their light that shines back."

    In another, related example, which suggests that the reliability of the mirror depends on its proper use, the *Huainanzi* states: "Halberds are for attacking cities; mirrors are for reflecting form. When courtiers obtain halberds they use them to cut mallow; when the blind obtain mirrors, they use them to cover winejars. This is because they do not understand how [properly] to deploy things." In *Huainan honglie jie* 18.27a. Another pithy line in the *Huainanzi* states: "Do not give a mirror to a blind man; do not give shoes to a man who is lame." *Huainan honglie jie* 17.2a.

    A further illustration, recorded in the *Chuxueji*, is drawn from Xia Houzhan's 夏侯湛 (243–291) essay, "Countering Doubt" 抵疑: "In mirrors that have undergone smelting one hundred times, one can count hairs when trimming one's whiskers and brows. But a corrupt official will not be able to spot Mount Tai [in it]." *Chuxueji* 25.18a.
30. See the examples cited in note 12. For an example of the mirror enabling one to see transcendents, the *Chuxueji* (25.18a) cites the *Baopuzi* thus: "When using a nine-inch mirror, if you reflect yourself, there is [already] something to contemplate. If you then persist in looking at it for seven days, you will see divine transcendents, and will know the affairs taking place beyond one thousand kilometers' distance. You can use either one or two bright mirrors for this; it is called the 'mirror of four directions.'" See also the story in Gan Bao's *Soushenji* 1.22, in

which a military officer unjustly executes a Daoist whose reflection subsequently keeps appearing to him in his mirror. In a fit of fury, the officer finally throws himself upon the mirror, thereby reopening an old wound, and dies. We also have the two stories in the fifth chapter of Yin Yi's 殷藝 (471–529) collection of anomalies, *Xiaoshuo* 小說, in which mirrors are used to diagnose and cure illness, and to reveal the true nature of an evil man.

31. See, for example, *Huainan honglie jie* 19.9b–10a: "When bright mirrors begin [their existence], their base surface is so blurry that it is not possible to see one's countenance in it. But once it has been ground with pure tin and polished using white felt, then even the smallest hairs of one's temples and brows can be scrutinized. So, learning is the equivalent of man's being ground down and polished with tin."
32. For a contrastive discussion of the use of the mirror to demonstrate the limitations of subject/object dualism, see Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, 182–88.
33. See the concluding lines of "Dazong shi" 大宗師 [The great ancestral teacher], in *Zhuangzi zhu* 莊子注. Guo Xiang 郭象 (d. 312), ed. (Taipei, 1983), 3.24a. See also a corroborating passage in the "Tiandao" 天道 [The Way of heaven], chap. 5.15b: "When water is tranquil, it clearly reflects whiskers and brows. Its precision is such that the Great Craftsman takes his measure from it. If tranquil water is as luminous as this, then how much more so the mind of pure spirit and the sage! [This mind] is the mirror of heaven and earth, the mirror of the myriad things." Cf. the translation by Victor H. Mair in his *Wandering on the Way: Early Taoist Tales and Parables of Chuang Tzu* (Honolulu, 1994), 119–20. This comparison between the mirror and the sage would later be echoed in the *Huainanzi* and the *Fuzi* and by the exiled Han Dynasty poet Jia Yi 賈誼 (200–168 BCE).
34. I borrow this useful translation from David Knechtges, *The Han Rhapsody: A Study of the "Fu" of Yang Hsiung (53 B.C.–A.D. 18)* (Cambridge, 1976). In his more recent publications on this genre, Knechtges appears to have dropped this term.
35. For a cogent explication of the different types of *fu*, see David Knechgtes, "*Fu* Poetry: An Ancient-Style Rhapsody (*Gufu*)," in *How to Read Chinese Poetry: A Guided Anthology*, ed. Zong-qi Cai (New York, 2008), 59–83.
36. Liu Xie, *Wenxin diaolong zh shi* 文心雕龍 注釋 [The literary mind carves dragons: commentary and annotations], ed. Zhou Zhenfu 周振甫 (Beijing, 1981), 80–81. The phrase he uses is: *ti wu yan zhi* 體物言志.
37. For a detailed listing of the expansion of *fu* topics, as well as a discussion of the history of the form, see Ma Jigao 馬積高, *Lidai cifu yanjiu shiliao gaishu* 歷代辭賦研究史料概述 [A general account of historical material relating to the study of *ci* and *fu* poetry through the ages] (Beijing, 2001),74–76.
38. See Yü Ying-shih, "Individualism and the Neo-Taoist Movement," in *Individual and Holism: Studies in Confucian and Taoist Values*, Donald J. Munro, ed. (Ann Arbor, 1985), 121–55. Yü closely links the rise of self-awareness—which he takes as the foundation of the individual subject—with the practice of physiognomy and its categorization of personality types. For a more recent discussion, see Nanxiu Qian, *Spirit and Self in Medieval China: The Shih-Shuo Hsin-Yü and Its Legacy* (Honolulu, 2001), esp. "Character Appraisal and the Formation of the Wei-Chin Spirit," 43–83.
39. The most extensive extant collection of *fu* composed through the Ming Dynasty, the *Yuding lidai fuhui* 御定歷代賦彙 (Imperial collection of *fu* poetry through the ages) originally edited by Chen Yuanlong 陳元龍(1652–1736), records thirteen *fu* that take bronze mirrors (*jing* 鏡) as their theme, under the category of "useful objects" (*qiyong* 器用), 86.6b–9b. Only three of these date to the Six Dynasties—

the same three that we find in the Tang Dynasty *leishu* encyclopedia *Yiwen leiju* 17.7b–8b, and in the other Qing Dynasty anthology of *fu* poetry, the *Fuhai daguan* 賦海大觀 [A panoramic view of the sea of *fu* poetry], 22.22–25—while ten are dated to the Tang.

40. See especially "Illusion and Illumination: A New Poetics of Seeing," in Xiaofei Tian, *Beacon Fire and Shooting Star: The Literary Culture of the Liang* (Cambridge, 2007), 211–59.
41. A thought-provoking precedent dates back to the "Airs" section of the ancient *Shijing* 詩經 [Book of songs] in Mao Poem #26, "Cypress Boat"—probably around the seventh century BCE: "My heart is not a mirror; you cannot take its full measure." Cf. Arthur Waley's translation, "My heart is not a mirror / to reflect what others will." In Arthur Waley, trans. *The Book of Songs* (1937; reprint, New York, 1987), 71.
42. *Yiwen leiju* 70.7b.
43. Ibid.
44. As recorded in *Yutai xinyong* 玉臺新詠 [New songs from a jade terrace], 10.19b, in SKQS, and in Feng Weina 馮惟訥 (fl. 1538), *Gushiji* [A record of ancient poems] 古詩紀, 79.13b, in SKQS. The rich ambiguity of the last line, which also means "that itself can still manage to recognize me," only intensifies the speaker's wry humor.
45. As recorded in the *Beitang shuchao*, *j.* 136.
46. This refers to the needle of the clypsedra, or water clock.
47. There are two historical personages who bear this title: The Prince of Chu (fourth century BCE), whose encounter with the divine lady of Wu Mountain is recounted in Song Yu's 宋玉 (fl. 290–223 BCE) "*Shennü fu*" 神女賦 [Rhapsody on the goddess]; and Liu Jia 劉賈, a brave minister serving in the court of Emperor Gaozu of the Han. Even if this poem is referring to the latter, it is probable that the enchantment of the Chu prince is also being called to mind.
48. See Liu Yiqing 劉義慶 (403–44), *Shishuo xinyu jiaojian* 世説新語校箋, ed. Xu Zhen'e 徐震堮 (Beijing, 1984), 458.
49. For a discussion about the various, and often contradictory, uses of mirror imagery in Buddhism, see Paul Demiéville, "The Mirror of the Mind," and Luis O. Gomez, "Purifying Gold: The Metaphor of Effort and Intuition in Buddhist Thought and Practice," in *Sudden and Gradual: Approaches to Enlightenment in Chinese Thought*, ed. Peter Gregory (Honolulu, 1987), 13–40; 67–165.
50. These categories are: using bronze as a mirror (divided into several subthemes, including mirror-polishing, magical properties, rhapsodies on the beauty of the object, and more); taking other people as a mirror; taking the events one encounters as a mirror; the mirror of the Thousand Autumns Festival; the mirror as the lens of literary evaluation; taking history as a mirror; Buddhist and Daoist mirrors; the mirrors of heaven and earth. See Wang Ganghuai 王綱懷 and Sun Kerang 孫克讓, *Tangdai tongjing yu Tang shi* 唐代銅鏡與唐詩 [Tang Dynasty bronze mirrors and Tang poetry] (Shanghai, 2007), 244–81.
51. 月夜（杜甫）
    今夜鄜州月，閨中只獨看。
    遙憐小兒女，未解憶長安。
    香霧雲鬟濕，清輝玉臂寒。
    何時倚虛幌，雙照淚痕乾。
    See *Du shi xiang zhu* 杜詩詳注, ed. Qiu Zhaoao 仇兆鰲 (1638–1717), 5 vols. (1979; reprint, Shanghai, 2004), 1:309.