

Old Prose Movement

Gǔwén Yùndòng 古文运动

The desire for a return to the past, to a golden age, has often driven change in Chinese life, including the arts and letters. Such longing for the past was sometimes a response to current societal ills, as was the case with The Old Prose Movement in the Tang dynasty (618–907 CE).

Literary innovation or even literary reform in the Chinese context has often meant the restoration of antiquity, the return to styles and modes of the past, where purity of expression was thought to be found. This is in keeping with the Confucian ideal of the past as the location of perfection and the present as a falling away from that golden epoch. The Old Prose Movement, or Classical Prose Movement (*guwen yundong*), which emerged during the middle years of the Tang dynasty (618–907), was part of this call to return to the past. Leaders of the movement, including the scholar-poet Han Yu (768–825), favored imitating the literary prose styles of the Qin (221–206 BCE) and Han (206 BCE–220 CE) dynasties. To Han Yu and his fellow intellectuals, the literary fashion practiced during the period of the Tang was unsatisfactory.

Causes of Change

The Old Prose Movement, however, should not be seen as literary nostalgia. It is often thought that this

movement sought to return moral gravity to literature, which had been abandoned for flashy style. This view does not accurately describe the reasons why such a movement came to the forefront. The causes of change are found in the political and cultural instability that followed the An Lushan rebellion (755) that brought chaos to northern China, in the form of decentralization of power, and dire economic and cultural consequences.

One aspect of this disorder was a sense of insecurity that the intellectual classes felt. The culture they had come to believe in, as worthy and stable, had suddenly been destroyed by the rebellion. These men looked for reasons for the disaster and concluded that they themselves were to blame because they, and the men of their class, had over time forsaken the morality of old that had provided not only structure to society but also a sense of continuity. The problem, therefore, was a moral one. Moral corruption had brought about political and cultural turmoil.

Private Experience

The Old Prose Movement used the past to critique the present, and it did so by broadening the reach of literary activity. In the past the concern of the writer had been to grapple with the larger forces that affected society and the individual. Literary concern centered upon social, political, and intellectual questions. Han added a fourth aspect: private and interior life. This new concern has been attributed



The Old Prose Movement was a belief among Tang dynasty scholars that a return to the writings styles of the past was necessary to combat the moral corruption that had brought about political and cultural turmoil during their time. This Chinese study offers a tranquil environment for reading and writing. PHOTO BY YIXUAN SHUKE.

to the volatility in society after the An Lushan rebellion, where the only surety was the self and its protection, as well as private experience. Han favored a direct, personalized style and the use of colloquial expressions over formal ones. He also sought to record the individual's reaction to external forces. This reaction becomes a guide for constructing a personal morality through which the individual may make sense of a fragmented social structure. Further, Han felt that the disintegration of morality was linked to the general weakening of Confucianism. He attributed this weakening to an external force, Buddhism, which he denounced as dangerous to the Chinese way of life.

Han's concerns were shared by his friend the scholar-official Liu Zongyuan (773–819), who also regarded the utilitarian aspect of literary culture the most vital. His famous dictum, "Literature is to illuminate the [Confucian] Way," was a motto of the Old Prose Movement. Confucian morality could be made known only by doing what the ancient sages had done. He advocated elucidating Confucianism for the people of his time by way of the tradition. Thus literary skill without moral content was useless; writing that was beautiful and attractive could also be morally wrong. He also gave a very specific definition to the Way. It was a morally correct attitude to life that could be learned

by entering into a dialog with the sages of the past through intensive study of the Five Classics and the various texts of the One Hundred Schools, the many books of history and literature that addressed political and cultural attitudes and were so popular with the Confucians.

The desire to enter into a dialog with the sages was a way to acquire a clear and precise style of writing, which for Liu was important because it was a way to engage in life through the written word. Literary activity was not entertainment, nor was it merely intellectual activity; rather, it was a way to life itself. Therefore, the prose that he valued was one that contained depth, clarity, restraint, fullness and range, simplicity, precision, and gravity.

The Old Prose Movement initiated by Han Yu and developed by Liu Zongyuan was more than a style. It began with an affirmation that the past contains moral value that must be continually recouped by way of literary and intellectual engagement with life. More forcefully, this movement sought to find and reestablish a unified culture, after the fragmentation brought about the An Lushan rebellion, by recognizing that content must determine form, that writing is the search for a moral center, and that literary culture is not merely cultural production; it is wisdom about life.

Legacy

The Old Prose Movement did not last beyond its two main proponents, perhaps because the influence of Buddhism, as well as Daoism, was gaining ground in China, so that engagement with life was tempered by a desire to understand the ways of the soul and the cosmos. However, during the Song period (960–1279), the movement enjoyed a brief revival with the works of Ouyang Xiu (1007–1072) and Su Shi (1037–1101). Thereafter, the movement retained very little popularity.

It was a unique aspect of Chinese literary culture in that it sought perfection in the past; perhaps for this reason its influence was limited and it has had little effect on later Chinese literary production.

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