INTRODUCTION

The third century A.D. was one of the great turning points in Chinese history, a period of changes in all aspects of human life. The poet we are going to study in the following pages was very much a product of his times, very much aware of the changes taking place about him, and he responded to them so strongly in his life and in his works that in a way he has become their embodiment: the ambiguities and contradictions he shows in regard to politics, to society and to the main currents of contemporary philosophy are in great part products of his historical milieu. They are what make it so difficult to study him, and so rewarding.

That poet is named Juan Chi 阮籍 (polite name, or tzu, Ssu-tsung 隋同) and he lived from 210 to 263, through the crucial decades of the changes that were to transfigure China. The very name of his poetic masterpiece, a long series of eighty-two poems, gives us a clue to his originality and his complexity. He called his poems ‘Yung-huai shih’ 詠懷詩, ‘Poems which sing of my innermost thoughts’. The title had never been used before (although it almost immediately became the name of a poetic genre), nor had any poet ever given as much of himself in his verse: Juan Chi’s ‘innermost thoughts’ cover a wider range of experience and probe more deeply into the mind than any poet had previously attempted. His poems are ambiguously committed to the political conflict he lived through and comment closely, by innuendo, on current events; at the same time they are deeply concerned with ultimate values, both moral and religious. But this concern for current events has produced some of the most obscure poetry ever written in China. The style is ‘simple’ and direct, as one would use when speaking straight from the heart, but it is often extremely hard, often impossible, to understand the allusions to contemporary figures. One commentator (probably one of the ‘Five Officials’, wu-ch’en) in a prefatory note to the selection of these poems that appears in the medieval Anthology (Liu-ch’en chu Wen hsuan 23, p. 1a) says that ‘only the author himself could plumb their depths’. Juan Chi’s innermost thoughts include his feelings towards the men in power, the usurpers of the Wei imperial throne or their underlings, and his outrage can only find ex-
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generally considered one of the dimmer if not the dimmest lights of the group, but the dozen or so of his poems that remain are not, in their rugged simplicity, without merit. He was, in any case, more renowned for his prose, and in particular for his letters, during his own lifetime: ‘A great many of the letters and official edicts of the Military Government were written by Ch’en Lin and Juan Yü.’ The first emperor of the Wei dynasty, in a famous letter describing each of the Seven Masters, speaks of the ‘delight produced by the grace and elegance of Juan Yü’s missives’, and elsewhere he speaks of them as being ‘outstanding in our times’. We see Juan Yü in action, writing a letter for the head of the Military Government, Ts’ai Ts’ao (who was himself a very great writer), in an anecdote that makes his letter-writing ability almost legendary.

Ts’ai Ts’ao once had Juan Yü write a letter to Han Sui. At the time Ts’ai Ts’ao had gone out a short distance [from his camp] and Juan Yü, who was accompanying him, wrote out the entire draft on horseback. When he had finished he presented it to Ts’ai Ts’ao, holding his brush in his hand ready to correct it, finally found that he was unable to add or to delete anything.

Juan Yü seems to have been devoted to Ts’ai Ts’ao. After refusing a secretarial post under Ts’ai Hung, Ts’ai Ts’ao’s younger brother, he occupied several posts under Ts’ai Ts’ao, all directly under his supervision and all, technically at least, very minor, fifth or seventh grade posts. He was chün-shih chhi chu 軍節察酒 (post created in 198) and Secretary, chi-shih 記室, in Ts’ai Ts’ao’s headquarters when the latter was ssu-k’ung 空. His last post seems to have been in the Department of Granaries, ts’ang-tsu’ao 倉署, attached to the ssu-k’ung’s bureau. These posts were extremely modest, but it is probable that, during the disorders that accompanied the fall of the Han dynasty, a subordinate post under Ts’ai Ts’ao was more important than its official rank might lead one to believe. The post in the Department of Granaries must have been particularly crucial in connection with the ‘agricultural colony’ (t’un-t’ien 汀欽) system Ts’ai Ts’ao inaugurated in 196, when he first became ssu-k’ung. The only other person known to have occupied the post, Liu Yeh 劉穎, who died around 234, became one of the most important officials in the government at the time of Ts’ai Jui, Emperor Ming.

When Juan Yü died in 212, Ts’ai Pi, son of Ts’ai Ts’ao and first emperor of the Wei dynasty, was so moved by the plight of his widow that he wrote a poem to express his commiseration:

Juan Yü and I were friends of old, but the span of life destiny allotted to him was short, and he died an early death. I cannot think of the
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orphans he has left behind without being sorely afflicted. That is why I have written this fu expressing the sadness and pain of his wife and children. I have commanded Wang Ts'an and the others to write too. 14

Both Ts'ao Pi's and Wang Ts'an's poems remain, and they are touching tributes to a bereaved woman.

In spite of what seems to be Juan Yü's obvious attachment to the Ts'ao family, there is an amusing story, surely apocryphal, about his refusal to join Ts'ao Ts'ao's Military Government:

Ts'ao Ts'ao, constantly hearing of Juan Yü's fame, called him to office, but he failed to respond. When, after repeated urgings, he fled into the mountains, Ts'ao Ts'ao had the mountain set on fire. They caught Juan Yü and sent him to Ts'ao Ts'ao who summoned him to an audience. Ts'ao Ts'ao was giving a great reception during his campaign against Ch'ang-an. Angered when Juan Yü refused to talk to him, he had him sent to the ranks of the musicians. But Juan Yü was well versed in music and knew how to play the zither, so he strummed on its strings and sang, improvising the following refrain as he went along:

With grandeur ope's the Gate of Heav'n:
Great Wei responds to fortune's move!
The Blue Umbrell' o'er Nine States circles:
The West regrets its Eastward move,
A knight doth die for his dear friend
And women play for those they love:
If Bounty and Right be far widespread,
Will not revolt unheard of prove?

The refrain was made with such rapidity, the music was so uncommonly beautiful, that he was considered to surpass all assembled. Ts'ao Ts'ao was greatly pleased. 15

The 'Blue Umbrella' and 'Nine States' of the third line are somewhat contradictory. According to Han ritual, 16 'a carriage with a blue umbrella [or blue canopy] ' was given as a present to sons of the emperor when they received principalities. But only the emperor himself was supposed to make the rounds of the Nine Provinces forming the Chinese empire. If the poem were genuine, this could have been construed as unsubtle flattery of Ts'ao Ts'ao, prematurely treated as accomplishing the emperor's duties while only in a 'princely' position (although he actually became Prince of Wei only in 216).

The anecdote, however, not only contradicts other sources 17 which state that Juan Yü, after refusing Ts'ao Hung's advances, accepted Ts'ao Ts'ao's freely, it also contains impossible anachronisms: Ts'ao Ts'ao took the title 'Duke of Wei' only in 213, 18 the year after Juan Yü's death; the latter could
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not, therefore, speak of ‘Great Wei’ with reference to Ts’ai’o Ts’ai’o. The letter written to Han Sui, moreover, must have been written before Ts’ai’o Ts’ai’o’s campaign against Ch’ang’an, for it was Han Sui’s defeat that permitted his attack on the capital. The historian who invented this anecdote was probably repeating a story typical of the period into which he introduced the name of Juan Yü as Latter Han local color.19

The very fact that this anecdote is apocryphal gives it a certain universality; the state of affairs it describes, the flight from official service of a prominent man, was almost standard behavior.20 It is easy to see why Juan Yü lived during one of the most chaotic periods China has ever known. The fall of the great Han dynasty meant the collapse of order, of the classical system of government, of thinking, and of morality. It brought with it rebellions that caused enormous loss of life. But it was not to flee from the perils of war and revolution that the best of the officials shied away from public life; it was because public life had become, as it always becomes in such a period, corrupted, and serving in it meant turning one’s back on traditional law and order and following some upstart warlord whose whims and whose suspicion of his subaltern officers were often more murderous than the local rebellions themselves.

Juan Yü chose to serve Ts’ai’o Ts’ai’o, the warlord who, ostensibly, won, and we might imagine that his son would simply inherit his father’s influence and serve the new Wei dynasty. Ts’ai’o Ts’ai’o did not, however, win a definitive victory. The dynasty he established, like the Republic established in 1911, was only an interregnum and before many years had passed, precisely at the moment Juan Chi was ready to enter public office, the new dynasty found itself face to face with another warlord whose family was destined, during the second half of Juan Chi’s lifetime, to overthrow the Wei and establish a new empire.

This new warlord was named Ssu-ma I. He and his sons turned the political world during the last twenty years of Juan Chi’s lifetime into something close to a living nightmare. The disloyalty, the hypocrisy and the cruelty of their methods have made them infamous in Chinese history. Some sixty years after Juan Chi’s death, around 323, the following scene was enacted, a dramatic retrospective illustration of the events that took place under his very eyes.

Wang Tao 王 (267–330) and Wen Ch’iao 温 (288–329) were in attendance upon Emperor Ming (299–325) who asked Wen Ch’iao to tell him how his ancestors [the Ssu-ma usurpers] won the throne. Wen Ch’iao remained silent. After a bit, Wang Tao said: ‘Wen Ch’iao is young and knows little of those things. Allow me to tell them to Your Majesty.’ Wang Tao then related the whole story in detail: the foundation of the dynasty by Ssu-ma I, how he exterminated the famous
intellectuals and their families and surrounded himself with his own faction, up to the end of the regency of Suu-ma Chao and the affair of the Duke of Kao-kuei-hsiang, [the young Wei emperor Suu-ma Chao had assassinated in 260]. When Emperor Ming had heard him out he covered his face and buried it on the throne, saying: ‘If it is as you have said, how will We be able to keep the imperial title for long?’
1

THE EARLY WEI EMPERORS

Politics was at the center of Juan Chi’s preoccupations, as it was of almost all Chinese poets of the Middle Ages. In the fourth and fifth centuries, indeed, ten of the greatest poets of the age were executed for political reasons,¹ and a concern for politics, a yearning for participation in the life of the court at the center of the civilized world, can be felt in most of the poetry of the time, even in the bucolic poetry of the greatest poets of them all, T’ao Yuan-ming and Hsih Ling-yün. There can be no doubt that Juan Chi was tormented by the state of contemporary political life and that his poetry reflects that torment to a very high degree. Many of the Chinese critics who have studied him see only this aspect of his work and they are surely wrong to neglect the philosophical and religious aspirations he expresses; but the political concern is there and, however obscure his satirical verses must forever remain and however ultimately unsatisfactory our analyses of them must be, we must begin by trying to understand as much of Juan Chi’s attitude towards contemporary politics as we can.

The earliest commentator of his poetry, Yen Yen-chih (384–456), a poet who also lived during a period of dynastic change, has already underlined this aspect of his poetry:

It is said that Juan Chi wrote his songs because he lived during the reign of Ssu-ma Chao, in constant fear that some catastrophe might befall him.

And then he adds:

Juan Chi personally served a dynasty in disorder and was in constant fear of being slandered and meeting disaster. That is why he expressed himself in song, and that is why each time he sighs, lamenting his life, although his aim is to criticize and reprimand [men in public life], his style is full of obscurities. Many centuries later, it will be difficult to fathom his true intentions. Therefore I have explained the main ideas in these verses in a general way and touched on their hidden meanings.²

This is a sobering view of the problem: less than two centuries after Juan Chi’s
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death one of the most competent contemporary men of letters admits that it was no longer possible to give any but the most general outline of the satirical meaning of these poems. However humble this declaration may make us, it is clear that politics animates much of Juan Chi’s verse and that it is there that we must begin our investigation.

In reading the anecdotes referring to Juan Chi’s participation in the politics of his time, we have the impression that he is constantly attempting to withstand a figurative if not a literal ‘smoking out’ by the central authorities, as his father is said to have done some years before. The first time he enters history, sometime after 225, when he was perhaps no more than sixteen years old, he is shying away from any involvement in political affairs. We see him visiting the governor of his home province, Wang Ch’ang (d. 259), a protégé of the powerful Su-ма і and the founder of the most famous family of the Middle Ages, the Wang family of T’ai-yüan.

Juan Chi once went with his uncle to Tung-chün where the governor of Yen-chou, Wang Ch’ang, asked to have an interview with him. When he had been with Juan Chi a whole day long and was unable to get a word out of him, Wang Ch’ang was abashed and filled with admiration for him. He felt that, as far as he was concerned, Juan Chi was unfathomable.

We are tempted to find Juan Chi slightly unfathomable too (and not with the laudatory overtones of the Chinese term), until we remember that an interview with one’s provincial governor (even at the age of sixteen) meant that one was being ‘rated’ for the beginning of an official career. Juan Chi’s silence was his first refusal to enter politics and his first demonstration that he was not in any way an ordinary man, that he had no intention of docilely following the normal course of promotion to make his way in an official career.

We next see Juan Chi in politics some ten years later, in 239. But it is important, first, to study the general political developments up until that time. In 225 the son of Ts’ao Ts’ai, Ts’ao Pi, had been emperor of the Wei dynasty for about five years and had proved himself incapable of conquering the south and west of China, where two other kingdoms had been formed out of the debris of the Han empire: the kingdoms of Wu in the south and of Shu in the west. Ts’ao Pi was also inept in consolidating his own position in his northern kingdom of Wei, the most important, by far, of the Three Kingdoms. Instead of utilizing his own family in strategic posts throughout the empire and in the capital (his brilliant brothers Ts’ao Chih and Ts’ao Chang, for example), he showed himself distrustful of their loyalty and insisted on keeping all authority in his own hands, giving important posts to lower officials. His aim
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in acting in this way was to build up a strong central government and thus thwart the feudalistic or at least centrifugal tendencies (endemic throughout Chinese history) which the Han dynasty, in spite of the bloodiest repressions of the local princes, had never been able to suppress completely, and which the fall of the dynasty had strongly accentuated. This anti-feudalistic attitude weakened the power and prestige of the imperial family greatly. Ts'ao Pi died on 26 June 226 and was succeeded by his son, Ts'ao Jui, who continued in this same manner, relying on lesser officials instead of on his own family. To make matters worse, he engaged in the construction of costly and luxurious palaces and assembled harems, oppressing the people and weakening his personal prestige.

Ts'ao Jui died in 239 without any male offspring of his own. Like his father, Ts'ao Jui seemed to fear seizure of imperial power by his own family more than usurpation by outsiders and he chose a child of unknown origin to succeed him on the throne. Before he died he also appointed two co-regents to assist his young successor: a distant relative (son of a nephew of Ts'ao Ts'ao), Ts'ao Shuang, and an old and successful general, Ssu-ma I. The latter, who was descended from an ancient and powerful family of landowners, was soon brushed aside, but only for a short while. Ten years later, in 249, he came back from retirement, took all power into his own hands and began the process that was to end, sixteen years later, in the usurpation of the dynasty by his grandson, Ssu-ma Yen, first emperor of the Chin.

As Ts'ao Jui was the last adult to reign as emperor of the Ts'ao-Wei dynasty, his responsibility for its rapid decline was surely very great. Juan Chi was personally familiar with the events of his reign because they occurred during his own adolescence and youth (from his sixteenth to his twenty-ninth year of age), and he might very well have been inspired to comment on them in his poetry. There are two poems that I believe may be hidden commentaries on Ts'ao Jui's reign, Poems 31 and 29. We have no way of knowing when any of Juan Chi's poems in regular meters (shih) were written. It is probable, however, that unless he was endowed with remarkable foresight, these two poems date from sometime after the purge of 249, when Ssu-ma I's ambitions became clear and the fall of the Wei dynasty inevitable. Here is the first of the two poems:

31
I yoke up my carriage and leave the city of Wei,
Turn towards the south and gaze at the Woodwind Terrace.
The sound of flutes and pipes remains there still,
But where, oh where is the king of Liang?

5 He fed his knights on husks and bran
And housed his sages amidst the weeds;
But before his songs and dances ended
The soldiers of Ch’in had come, and come again.
‘The Narrow Forest is no longer mine;
My scarlet palaces are covered with dust and grime,
My armies defeated below Hua-yang,
My body become ashes and earth.’

The first two words of the poem subtly suggest two lines of the *Shih ching*,
two lines common to *Shih ching* 39 and 59:

I yoke up my carriage and go out roaming
In order to dissipate my sadness

The ‘city of Wei’ (literally, ‘capital of Wei’), as we see in line 2, refers to Ta-liang, the capital of the ancient state of Wei, but contemporary readers would naturally think first of Lo-yang, capital of the Ts’ao-Wei dynasty. The words ‘Woodwind’ (literally, ‘blowing’) Terrace in the second line, however, show the reference is to ancient Ta-liang (which was called Chün-i during Juan Chi’s time and is the present K’ai-feng), because this terrace (according to *Shui-ching chu* 22, p. 47) was located to the southeast of the town, on the other side of an ancient canal. It is this terrace, or what was left of it in the third century A.D., ‘a mound some hundred paces square standing alone to the east of the “Shepherds’ Swamp”,’ that inspires the poem. Juan Chi seems to identify it with the Fan Terrace, scene of a famous treaty in 336 B.C. and of a probably fictional meeting between the King of Wei-Liang and his lords described in the *Chan-kuo ts’e* (Crump translation, No. 303). Juan Chi seems clearly to be thinking of the *Chan-kuo ts’e* anecdote in his poem. In it, the king is seen entertaining at a drinking party in the Fan Terrace when one of his guests, the Duke of Lu, makes a speech warning him against dissipation. According to the duke, too much wine, too much attention to fine cooking, too many women, or too much time spent ‘in a high pavilion looking upon beautiful scenery’ were fatal to a kingdom; in fact, any one of these things would suffice to ruin a kingdom altogether. He ends his harangue on a more personal note, accusing the king of dissipation and naming his poisons, including the ‘Narrow Forest’ which provides part of the ‘beautiful scenery’ that is so harmful to busy rulers.

Juan Chi has disregarded chronology in his poem to heighten the dramatic effect. The king of the Fan Terrace in the *Chan-kuo ts’e* anecdote is thought to be King Hui of Liang, the famous ruler who received Mencius in 336 B.C. and who reigned from 370 to 333. The battle at Hua-yang (some seventy kilometers southeast of K’ai-feng) took place in 273, and the final fall of the Wei-Liang took place only in 225, over a century after the death of King Hui. In