



REFLECTIONS ON
PLATO'S POETICS
Essays from Beijing

Edited by Rick Benitez & Keping Wang

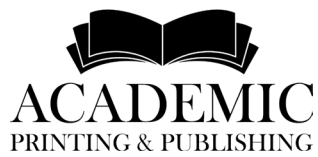
Reflections on Plato's Poetics
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Reflections on Plato's Poetics presents the reflections of leading scholars from China and the West on the form, nature and significance of Plato's engagement with poetry. The book does not adopt any monolithic point of view about Plato and poetry. Instead it openly explores Plato's attitudes to poetry, both comprehensively and within the intricate confines of particular dialogues. These reflections reveal a Plato who is deeply influenced by poetry; a Plato who writes, at least very often, from within a poetic paradigm; a Plato whose concerns about the influence and ambiguity of words force him to play with meaning and to provoke questions about meaning. Thus, many of the contributions reveal a concern about the relation of philosophy to poetry, how the two categories are different and whether (or in what way) one is superior to the other.

A unique feature of *Reflections on Plato's Poetics* is the establishment of a dialogue between Chinese and Western scholars, whose different background assumptions about philosophy, poetry and Plato lead, we hope, to further reflections of genuinely novel and significant interest.

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The idea for this book began to take shape in 2013. I was doing research on myth and poetry in Plato, and Keping was seeking a distinctive way of commemorating the 50th anniversary of his home institution, the Beijing International Studies University. We had collaborated on and off for over ten years, mostly in the areas of transcultural aesthetics and comparative philosophy. Presented with a unique opportunity, we combined interests to organise an international symposium on Plato's poetics at the Beijing International Studies University in September 2014. The program was comprised of twenty-five sessions, in English and Chinese, running over three full days, and followed by memorable cultural tours in which we all had a chance to get to know each other better. In addition to providing an opportunity for multicultural reflections on Plato, the symposium showcased Western scholarship in China, which is rapidly developing capabilities in Classical studies. The fruitfulness of this interaction can be seen in the revised papers that comprise this volume. This book represents, we hope, the beginning of sustained international cooperation between China and the West in Plato studies, and we are grateful to all the people and organisations who helped make it possible.

Many of the contributors to this volume participated in the *Inspired Voices* research project, an investigation of Plato's disposition towards myth and poetry funded in its infancy by the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences at the University of Sydney and then more fully by the Australian Research Council (ARC) through its Discovery Projects scheme. We are especially grateful to the ARC for providing the research time and support to make this book possible.

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Rick Benitez
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April, 2016

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INTRODUCTION

Iron Rings, Ravens and the Vast Sea of Beauty

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Composition sometimes dictates a path to a goal, or a map of it, wherein elements must differ from expectations, including the expectations of the composers themselves. Some images just won't work. Others, if they are too literal, can become fakes that distract attention from genuine experience, and occupy it with anodyne familiarity. Some disruption of expectations is usually necessary; familiar and unfamiliar must both be in play in order for representation to work its magic.

Take for example the painting that occupies the cover of this book. We originally conceived merely of a composition that would represent some of the central images of Plato's engagement with poetry and poetics. In this connection, of course, the iron rings will be familiar from the image, in Plato's *Ion*, of the Heracleian Stone, whose power of magnetism transfuses iron rings and holds them together in direct chains, like the chain of inspiration from muse to poet to rhapsode to spectator. We have consciously distorted Plato's image, however: our rings, which are only more or less solid, depend from the lodestone not in direct chains, but in chaotic interconnections. The most real of them (upper left, viewed directly on) hovers apart, in mid air, an almost perfect circle which the others merely resemble. We think that inspiration is more accurately represented by such complexity, and we fancy that Plato would have approved, but the composition of his image was dictated by a need for simplicity.

Our composition is different. The image on the cover, though it references the *Ion*, is not so much a representation of that dialogue's central image as it is a representation of the collective effort of the contributors to this volume to reconstruct Plato's understanding of poetry. We came together, from many different backgrounds and perspectives, under the spell of Plato's images, captured and held both by the attraction of the perfect circle (the possibility of a Platonic theory of poetry) and by the power of the ore itself (the raw material of observations on poetry that run like a rich vein through the dialogues). We have tried through this volume to represent fairly the attraction of both the circle and the stone.

The stone on our cover is also not true to Plato's image. Whereas Plato's image probably refers to a moderately sized, meteoritic lump of iron, ours is a huge boulder on the edge of the sea. You might say that convention alone required this distortion: a shoe-box sized lump of iron would not have looked very impressive. But we

also wanted to intimate something about the transition and plenitude of images in Plato. For better or worse, Plato is not the sort of philosopher who stands consistently by a metaphor. His Socrates presents a good example: at one time he is a gadfly, at another he is a midwife; now he is a sting-ray, later he is an asp. Or, he is one of those statues of Silenus one finds in the market, with gods inside. Or, he is Achilles, or Odysseus, or Teiresias, or Marsyas, or Orpheus. Plato has many different images of Socrates. Similarly, he has many images of what poetry does and how it works. Many of these are presented in images *about* images, for example about sculpture, or painting, or architecture, or music. At the most general level, Plato's poet is a maker who endeavours to make beautiful images. But there is a vast sea of beautiful images. Whatever poetry is, for Plato, it can be expressed in dialogue, in myth, in constitutions and in actions, as well as in verse. We have tried, in this volume, to capture something of the vastness of Plato's interest in poetics, from specific attention to language in verse to the "tragedy" enacted by the citizens of Magnesia in the *Laws*.

The final element of our cover painting, the raven, is also the most unexpected. We wanted a winged thing to represent the poet or the philosopher or both, but a swan in flight (which may have been most suitable to Plato, who was in ancient times likened to a swan) would have been incongruously large or inordinately clumsy or both. A bee, by contrast, would not be seen. The white raven was the artist's inspiration, as I remember. Winging its way to Apollo, the rook may be going to report what is said about poetry here. Whether the poet-god will curse it for that or not remains to be seen. But there is another way to take our imagery. The white raven is Apollo's bird, but its counterpart here is not the familiar black raven, cursed by Apollo. Its ochre-infused outline is a gesture towards *Sanzuwu*, the Sun-Crow, a creature from Chinese mythology, which both inhabits and represents the Sun.

The most distinctive feature of this book is that it represents a first flight, from a nest, as it were, in Beijing International Studies University, where Classicists and philosophers from East and West hatched an investigation of Plato's poetics, towards a final destination in the Sun. As far as we know, this is the first such cooperative exchange between China and the West on Plato's poetics (more about the development of Classical studies in Modern China can be found in Weiwei Huang's useful sequel to this introduction). Through this cooperation we hope to support the development of Hellenic studies in China. This is relevant to the active tendency in China to rediscover the values of multicultural traditions both in the research arena and publicly. In many contexts, the rediscovery of ancient Chinese heritage is now conducted with particular reference to Classical Greek heritage as its corresponding "other". Thus, study of the two distinctive cultural heritages facilitates the creative transformation of Chinese culture in the process of contemporary reconstruction. We hope it may facilitate a similar transformation in the West.

This book is being published simultaneously in English and Chinese. Each version is a reflection of the other, like the two birds on the cover, and it seems impossible to say which should be called the original. Logically, of course, it would be possible to divide—each paper originated in one of the two languages—but each book as a whole represents an engagement that is much wider than any of its parts, and the two books, like twin shadows, have a special relationship to each other. Although I believe both books are faithful to the works of Plato, they contain a diversity of approaches and perspectives hovering over the same theme. This suits the study of Plato.

Like the composition on the cover, this book is comprised of three parts. It is our hope that as readers progress through the parts, they will continuously encounter elements that challenge expectations, even in the context of what might appear familiar. Chapters in the first part of this book concern Plato and poetry in general. The aim here is to clarify the parameters and direction of Plato's interest in poetry, since Plato never explicitly identifies poetics as a specific subject. We begin with an overview of Plato's attitude toward the arts in general. Tom Robinson rejects the commonly held view that for Plato the arts are fundamentally flawed. He explores a different approach to Plato's views, beginning with the assumption that Plato's criticisms of the arts are directed towards their practice in his own day. At the same time, Robinson argues, Plato believes that art is capable of producing virtue and understanding.

Penelope Murray challenges the position of the first chapter. While she accepts that Plato's attitude towards the arts is ambiguous, she does not think that his criticism is limited to how the arts, and specifically poetry, were practised. Instead she claims that Plato saw danger in certain art forms themselves, particularly tragedy. She argues that tragedy presents us with a vision of human life that is fundamentally opposed to the values espoused by Platonic philosophy. This position sets up an interesting challenge for the idea that Plato had a conception of true tragedy (an idea discussed in the last chapter of this book).

Stephen Halliwell's chapter stands outside of the Robinson-Murray dialectic. It encourages a complete re-examination of traditional views about Plato and poetry. Halliwell's examination of Plato's hermeneutical focus suggests that, for Plato, aesthetic considerations are secondary to a quest for general perspectives. One of the chief difficulties in understanding Plato's attitude towards and engagement with poetry, he argues, stems from the fact that questions of poetics are approached from diverse perspectives in the dialogues. Halliwell resists the temptation to resolve these perspectives, and argues instead that Platonic poetics poses challenging problems and difficult questions to which it never purports to offer final answers.

Part I closes with an examination that may shed light on how Plato was able to adopt many different perspectives about poetry. In “Extensions of the House of Hades,” Anthony Hooper uses a construction metaphor to examine both poetic constructions of the afterlife and Plato’s uptake and extension of those constructions. Essentially, the Platonic experiment is conducted in order to understand poetic perspectives by testing their construction, seeing what sort of superstructure can be built upon them, and examining what they are by how they look when augmented in various ways. Like Halliwell, Hooper believes that these Platonic extensions are not doctrinal, but rather, experimental, though the experiment has much to reveal about Plato’s engagement with poetry in general.

The second part of the book takes up the suggestion that Plato may engage with poetry in ways different from what the history of literary criticism has led us to expect. Catherine Collobert’s article picks up where Halliwell leaves off, showing how Plato foregrounds hermeneutical questions by playing with meaning in his engagement with poetry. For Collobert, poetry constitutes a “reservoir” of meanings. Socratic play with these meanings can free us from false beliefs and persuade us of certain truths. In this way, philosophy is reflected in poetry and finds there echoes sharing the same truth. Angus Bowie continues in this vein by showing how Plato’s Socrates uses conventional engagement with poetry ironically to pose questions about the cultural significance of poetic content.

Zhongmei Chen sets out on a different path. He is concerned about the relation between dialectic and poetry in Plato. Chen accepts that, for Plato, dialectic is separate from and superior to poetry, but he shows, through an intriguing comparison with Confucius, how Plato’s separation of dialectic from poetry is contingent upon cultural attitudes. Chen shows how Confucius’ engagement with poetry offers an opportunity for a Platonist to revalue poetry through dialectic.

In the closing chapter of Part II, Gerard Naddaf tackles the relationship between poetry, myth and philosophy in Plato. Some of the themes discussed here will already be familiar from Anthony Hooper’s chapter, since Naddaf focuses on the notion of soul and myths of the afterlife from Homer to Plato. But whereas Hooper focuses on the evolution of perspectives from Homer to Plato, Naddaf focuses on the role of the poet as inspired voice and educator. This connects interestingly with Chen’s view about the relation between dialectic and poetry. Naddaf argues that we must not lose sight of the role of Plato as a poet and the role of poetic performance throughout Plato’s dialogues.

The final part of the book looks closely at the way the general themes of Part I and specific ideas about Plato's engagement with poetry play out in particular dialogues. These chapters are like case studies or applications of ideas raised in Parts I and II. Shuanghong Wang and Keping Wang both take up issues about Plato's criticism of poetry raised in Part I and connect them with concerns about the relation of poetry to culture raised in Part II. Hermeneutics is the focus of "Storytelling and Authority," and the relationship of philosophy to poetry and myth occupies the attention of Kathryn Morgan and Zhimeng Lin. It is hoped that these chapters provide the kind of detailed explorations anticipated earlier in the book.

The overall picture presented here is not intended to smooth over conflict, difference or difficulty in the interest of a single coherent image. The rings interconnect, but not in straight lines. The birds fly, but not necessarily to the same place. The vast sea of beauty remains.

The Role of Western Classics in China

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Western classics are often seen as crystallisations of great minds shining through the history of humankind. These works have played an important role in intellectual growth and education in the humanities, nourishing both human spirit and human thinking. Western classics reveal the foundation of ancient Western civilization and provide one source of modern Western thought. In a similar way, Chinese classics reveal and ground Chinese culture.

In view of the common relations between classical literature and cultural development in China and the West, Western classics have been attracting academic attention in China. In both cultures it is possible to trace significant contributions to the development of society in general—for instance, the Hellenic heritage of democracy has universal significance. We must be careful to note, however, that this heritage was originated by and only came into being along with doubts expressed by some of the greatest minds in Greece. These minds examined the nature of democracy critically and in depth in a way that resulted in masterpieces about the vicissitudes of the very first democratic regime in human history. Among these thinkers, Plato, Xenophon, and Thucydides have no rivals with regard to their profound introspection about the quality of life under democratic Athens. In order to facilitate the transmission of the content of these works and to reveal the connection of the insights of the Ancient Greek authors with more modern instantiations of democracy in the Enlightenment, the Greek classics were re-translated and re-interpreted in the West. However, it was not until the 20th century that the Chinese academia became aware of this significant re-appraisal of classics in the West.

In China, the exposure to Western classics took place in two phases. In the initial phase, classical texts were mainly introduced to non-specialist readers; subsequently, the classics of Western culture began to attract academic attention and have been the subject of scrupulous studies. At first, these studies were focused on a general introduction of the core components and achievements of Western civilization. Subsequently, the focus was shifted to rethinking the conflict between ancient Western civilization and its modern counterpart.

From around the 16th century, China witnessed a temporary flourishing of interest in Western classics. At that time, a large number of works were translated into Chinese and disseminated throughout China, including the works of Aristotle, Seneca, and Cicero. This cultural phenomenon reached its peak in the early 20th century, when it took a new direction because of the outbreak of the May Fourth Movement and the New Culture Movement. As they were heading in a new historical and cultural direction, many Chinese intellectuals examined the differences between Chinese and Western

civilizations by comparison with modern Western thinking, trying, at the same time, to deal with the conflict between modern Western learning and traditional Chinese culture. These intellectuals were convinced that the modern Western way was the right remedy to resolve the national social, political and cultural crisis in China. This conviction expressed itself practically via piles of translations of modern Western works, which exposed China to new ideas. The ensuing trend of “The Eastward Spread of Western Learning” shattered the idealistic vision of traditional Chinese culture, oriented towards cultivating the morality of “surefooted and temperate” people. Eventually, however, it was noticed that there was a gap between the modern and ancient civilizations of the West. The realization that the understanding of ancient Western civilization must be incorporated into the full understanding of modern Western civilization, engendered the worry that it would not be wise to ground the development of modern Chinese culture on an understanding of modern Western culture alone. For example, since ancient Western classics developed criticisms that were applicable to some of the modern Western institutions, it became clear that modern Western civilization was not without its own problems. Since the past of the West should be in some intimate way related to its present, a better understanding of the ancient Western civilization became a prerequisite not merely for a thorough understanding of its modern counterpart, but also for an in-depth comprehension of Western civilization as a whole. Learning from the mistakes of the past of Western culture and relating these mistakes to the present problems of this culture, the Chinese academia could judge more critically their national crisis and decide what could be the most appropriate solution to it as well. With all this in mind, more and more Chinese intellectuals came to realize the fact that the real difference between China and the West should lie in the conflict between the ancient and modern Western civilizations. They therefore commenced to reconsider the result of this conflict and turned more directly to the study of ancient Western civilization, which offers a novel angle either to interpret the difficulties that China had encountered or to envisage the future for China. Since then, the study of Western Classics has developed gradually as a proper field of scholarship in China.

It was not until the 1920s and 1930s, however, that Chinese scholars fully embraced the crucial importance of translating Western classics and introducing them to Chinese readers. Just like the scholars in the Enlightenment, Chinese scholars expected to be able to retrace the origin of modern Western civilization using the thoughts of ancient Greece and Rome. However, slow progress was made because of the unfavorable atmosphere of the Cultural Revolution in the 1960s and 70s. Thanks to the Open-door and Reform policy in the past decades, such studies have been flourishing on a more solid basis. With the joint efforts of the new generation of Chinese scholars, more and more Western classics have been translated and published, and the research methods have

also been upgraded to an international level by making them more specialized and systematic. More significantly, many colleges and universities have been actively engaged, in different degrees, in the study of the Western classics. With the official support from their own universities, many Centers for Classical Civilization have been gradually established across the country. All these factors have contributed to rendering the study of the Western classics a popular trend all over the nation.

An example of the popularity of these studies in contemporary China is offered by the Center for Classical Civilization in Renmin University, which is part of the School of Liberal Arts. Its main task is the production of commentaries and interpretations of Western classical works, but it is also devoted to carrying out a general program of liberal education. Up until 2015, with the cooperation of Huaxia Press and East China Normal University Press, more than 350 books, defined as “Classics and Commentary,” have been published. Most of these books are translations of the notes and commentaries on classics made by the great classical philologists, as well as of the monographs or articles about the interpretations on classics written by many famous scholars in the fields of literature, history, and philosophy. At present, there are hundreds of scholars and students from various parts of China participating in this huge translation project.

In addition to these works, there are also monographs written by Chinese scholars, who have dedicated many years to the study and diffusion of the classics in China. However, the study of Western classics has not yet been evolved into an independent discipline; not a single university in China has so far established a Department of Classics. Therefore, Chinese scholars can only develop their research, relevant to Western classics, within disciplines such as World History, History of Western Philosophy, Classical Political Philosophy, or Comparative Literature and World Literature. Working in different universities and departments, those scholars have diligently taught ancient Greek and Latin, giving their students the opportunity to read the works of Homer, Plato, and Aristotle in the original languages. At the same time, these scholars have composed numerous treatises on Western classics.

In order to carry out the program of Liberal Education, the Center for Classical Civilization has organized a special class named “the Experimental Class of the Classical Study” since 2010. Each year, about 15 freshmen students attending Renmin University have been selected from any discipline to be transferred to this Experimental Class. They will join the Class after they have completed the first-year of study in their own main discipline. Then they will continue their education in this Class until they graduate. Compulsory courses within this Class include reading the ancient classics not only from Chinese classics such as “Jing Shi Zi Ji” (namely four categories of the traditional Chinese canon: Confucian classics, historical records, philosophical writings and miscellaneous

literary works), but also from Western classics like Graeco-Roman epics, tragedies, history and philosophy books, and even from the classics of Judaism and Christianity, along with early modern Western classics of literature, philosophy, history, and law. In addition, there is a list of optional courses, such as Chinese calligraphy and theory of Western classical music, closely related to liberal arts or humanities education. From the courses just mentioned, some institutions in China have been trying to develop a discipline which can be defined as Classics with Chinese characteristics. The Chinese academia aims at organizing the discipline as a combination of the study of Western classics with the Chinese classics, which will not be a mere imitation of the Western mode of disciplinary construction and teaching. The Experimental Class is thus not designed with the purpose of transforming the students merely into good admirers of Western culture. Through programs such as this, Chinese scholars, as educators, are eager to turn talented students into the pillars of the nation who, in the words of the famous scholar Pi Xi'rui of the late Qing Dynasty "will have a good mastery of both Chinese and Western learning by recognizing their strengths as well as weaknesses, and know very well the social development of both the past and present world." The Chinese-style classical study aims at recovering the system of the traditional Chinese education which has been damaged since the previous trend of "The Eastward Spread of Western Learning." Students are trained to be readers and learners of both Oriental and Occidental classics, rather than simply apprentices of practical skills or techniques of Western culture.

The rise of the study of Western classics in China does not mean that study of ancient Western civilization has overtaken, on the one hand, the study of modern Western civilization, which has had a great impact on the social and cultural growth of modern China, or on the other hand, that it has overtaken study of the traditional Chinese culture which serves as the root of the nation. Rather, the rise of the study of Western classics can be considered as an accompaniment to the comprehensive cultural rise of China, which comes along with the increasing economic and military power of the country. The reason why Chinese scholars and intellectuals value Western classics is their foresight in regard to the crises of the modern Western world. Such foresight have pervaded China, too, when its national strength was declining rapidly, causing unprecedented damage to the ancient civilization of the country. Therefore, the study of Western classics offers a chance for China to rediscover its own essence through engagement with the essence of Western culture. The first step in this engagement is rethinking the conflict between ancient Western civilization and modern Western civilization. China might be assisted in reaching the exit of its own cultural labyrinth when its intellectuals have a clear picture of the factors which caused modern Western culture to depart from its beginnings, factors which still operate on contemporary Western culture.

Finally, some Chinese scholars nowadays perceive Western civilization as historically fractured. They are concerned that the introduction of such a history has had a negative impact on Chinese civilisation, which they perceive as shaped by a continuous history of over 5000 years. In light of these considerations, these scholars have emphasized that only if the Chinese academia discovers the reasons for the fractures evident in the history of Western civilization can they integrate and sustain their own traditional civilization. The flourishing of both research and education in Western classics, then, is, to some extent, an indication of both progressive and conservative elements in China's cultural renaissance.

We have already made thrilling accomplishments, but there is still a long way to go to fulfil this ambitious cultural project. It cannot be an easy task, but we are undertaking it with ebullience and confidence because of our deep conviction that both the Greek culture and the Chinese traditional civilization will radiate their glory through a scholastic joint effort, whose pains and rewards are efficaciously described by Hesiod's words:

Between us and Goodness the gods have placed the sweat of our brows;
long and steep is the path that leads to her, and it is rough at the first; but
when a man has reached the top, then is she easy to retain, though before
that she was hard. (*Works and Days*, 289-94)

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This index has been compiled with usefulness to the reader in mind, and is therefore not exhaustive. Where a passage is barely mentioned, we decided not to index it. Because different readers may profit more or less from even slight discussion, we have, as a rule, erred on the side of inclusiveness, but such judgments are of course imperfect. Where possible we have collapsed related entries into one so that a reader can see that the same subject is discussed at various places in the book.

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