Week 10 Self-Realization in the Medieval World

Historical Overview

The medieval period is a complex history of division between north and south. It begins with the dissolution of the Han dynasty and the establishment of Three Kingdoms which divided China between the kingdom of Wei in the north, Shu in the west, and Wu in the south. Although none of these kingdoms could successfully restore order in China, the Jin dynasty superseded the Wei and defeated the kingdom of Wu into 280, briefly reunifying China for just over 30 years until invading northern tribes sacked the central plains and the Jin court was forced south.

The fragmentation of the Han into three kingdoms brings us back to the uprising of the yellow turbans, a religious group that preached about a way of great peace and challenged the authority of Han government. The armies raised to suppress this uprising eventually grew more powerful than the state. And civil war ensued. One powerful general, Cao Cao, joined forces with the Han and assumed real political power as dictator in northern China, although he never took the name "emperor" during his lifetime. His son, Cao Pi, forced the abdication of the last Han emperor and declared the Wei dynasty in 220 A.D.

After Wei defeated Shu in 263, the Sima family usurped the throne and declared the Jin Dynasty in 265. They finally defeated Wu in the south in 280. In the capital at Luoyang, however, tensions grew between Chinese, or Hanren, people culturally identified with the state of Han, and non-Chinese northern tribes.

A sinified Xiongnu by the name of Liu Yuan declared himself King of Han in 304. His son sacked Luoyang in 311, sending inhabitants in flight south across the Yangtze river. For over a century in what's known as the Period of 16 Kingdoms, tribal groups dominated politics, society, and economy.

Although some of the northern states showed an interest in Buddhism or even Chinese models of government, these northern tribes were better suited to winning wars than maintaining power. The most successful of the northern states was the Northern Wei, ruled by the Xianbei Tuoba clan who originated from southern Manchuria. Eventually, the Tuoba even adopted a Chinese surname and ordered the use of Chinese language and dress at court in Luoyang, a new magnificent city of over half a million people with ornate palaces and around 1,000 Buddhist monasteries. But the north was soon devastated again with tribal feuds and civil war until the Northern Zhou restored unity in the north in 577.

After escaping the destruction of northern China, officials installed a Jin prince in Jiankang, or modern Nanjing, in 316, which became the new capital of the south. This Eastern Jin dynasty lasted until 420 and was followed by the Song, Qi, Liang, and Chen, the southern dynasties. The hereditary aristocracy and northern emigre families that had arrived in the south culturally identified with the Han civilization and sought to maintain Chinese civic ideals in the tradition of the scholar official.

However, at the same time, they discovered a new space for individual expression and literature, calligraphy, and painting. In 548, however, the tribal leader Hou Jing instigated a rebellion and sieged Jiankang with a new general declaring the Chen dynasty. The Chen was finally defeated in 589 by the Sui who brought an end to the period of division between north and south but faced new challenges in maintaining power over a unified empire.
Section 1: Introduction: Four Strands of Aristocratic Culture

Today, we get to talk about sex and drugs, cosmic mystery, and literary creativity, death and immortality. I suppose I should tone that down a bit and say that what we're really talking about are four strands of aristocratic culture that emerged in the aftermath of the breakup of the Han dynasty and the movement of great clans from the north to the south.

Let me digress very briefly and make a parallel between Roman civilization and the collapse of Han civilization. China--as the Mediterranean world--was hit by barbarian foreign invasion, people who were not members, did not participate in the civilized culture of the imperial center. As the ideology of empire became less and less relevant, we see the rise of new religious movements. In the West, this was Christianity. In China, it will be a variety of movements and eventually the most important of all, Buddhism.

As the imperial elite disintegrated and factionalized, we see the rise of a feudal aristocracy in Europe. We see the rise of something similar in China, but here we have to make a distinction between north and south.

The north is invaded by tribal peoples, people who did not speak Chinese, did not read Chinese, did not write Chinese, and they were various tribes. And they soon were fighting with each other and factionalizing, even within a single tribe. But they were organized around tribes.

And what we see happening in the Chinese population is that the elite is organized around great clans, around clans that see themselves as the bearers of political power or responsibility, the right to criticize, and to participate in government. And as the north is invaded, the great Chinese clans move south and establish themselves there. And even though in the south one dynasty follows another--as you've seen in the historical overview--these clans would remain and provide a certain amount of continuity.

I'm interested in the kind of cultural endeavors they were part of, the kinds of things they did culturally speaking, because they had a lasting impact on China and East Asia. But at the same time, they were not conducive to centralization and the restoration of empire. In the late sixth century, empire would be restored but not from the Chinese clans of the south, but by semi-foreign clans in the north.

Now there are some commonalities to the four strands of aristocratic cultural, I'll be talking about. The first is that they're all aware that they're responding to the loss of empire, and I think it's generally true that they turn away from trying to restore empire and turned their attention elsewhere. They look for something deeper, something that's hidden, something that's not apparent, as a better foundation for living a life. And if they can't find a foundation for social life, they look for a foundation for the self and for the realization of qualities in the self. They are interested--to use a very modern term--in discovering themselves.

The problem is that if they search for some real foundation for culture, some real foundation for individual, and social, and political life, they reach no consensus about where to find it. For some, it comes from revelations. For some, it comes in the processes of heaven and earth, the process of nature itself. For some, it's something in us that we can find and realize. For others, it will be the teachings that come from the west, in this case, the west of Central Asia and India, Buddhism. But we will not talk about that till the next module.

Section 2: The Learning of Mystery
1. Conformity vs. Naturalness

I'm going to go through these four strands one by one and give you a chance to the comment and think about each one of them. The first, sometimes called the learning of mystery, xuanxue, sometimes neo-Daoism, sometimes Confucian-Daoism, or Daoistic Confucianism. And it's connected to another trend called pure conversation, qingtan. The premise of this movement is Daoistic, is that things develop, things should be allowed to develop on their own according to their natural tendencies. One should not interfere.

You can see this in the passage from Guo Xiang who says, "everything is spontaneous. Everything happens of itself, is not orchestrated." It's possible that originally the learning of mystery begins as a search for a new foundation for a unified political order, saying we can't find it in the legacy of Han institutions and models, we have to find something more real perhaps in nature itself. And if we can find it, we can build on top of that. We can have a new beginning.

In the end, however, politics didn't accord. And this movement turns away from trying to restore empire to something very different. We start to see them turning to justify non-conformity, that the idea of naturalness, spontaneity, goes together with not conforming to social and political norms.

There are debates over conformity versus naturalness. And we have the appearance of new model figures, something we haven't seen like this in Chinese society that eventually becomes terribly influential throughout East Asia. Ji Kang writes in his letter to Shan Tao, "one who acts naturally is superior to people who try to get ahead by conforming to society's standards or the demands of government."

Now, Ji Kang was one of the Seven Sages of the Bamboo Grove. And that's what you see behind me. Seven men devoted to literary creativity, to song, to music, and to drink. And this painting, in fact, is not a Chinese painting at all, though it's done in the Chinese style. This painting comes from Edo, Japan, from Japan probably sometime between the 17th and the early-19th century.

Now, Ji Kang was one of these seven very cultured gentlemen, the Seven Sages of the Bamboo Grove-- And you can see they're in a bamboo grove-- who would rather follow their spontaneous inclinations to drink, and talk, and make music, and transcend all worldly attachments. There's a story about one of them, Liu Ling-- and I'm not sure which one Liu Ling is-- that one day Liu Ling was hanging out in his house, naked, no clothes. And a friend comes to call.

And Liu Ling opens the door naked as the day he was born and greatly offends his visitor. After all, what kind of ritual behavior propriety is that to greet a guest in the buff? And Liu Ling looks at him, and smiles, and says, the world is my house, who invited you into my trousers?

There's are also a sense here, for the people like this, that refusing to serve in government is a way to show that you are not corrupted, that you are pure. And yet, at the same time, the refusal to serve because you claim to be above it all, because you claim to be pure, makes you more attractive to government. Because a court could say-- and remember, we're talking about lots of splintered states and small courts at various points, dynasties that come and go-- a court can look and say, ah, but you see, these very virtuous people have been willing to accept employment from me. That shows that I have a good ruler. I have a good state, a good dynasty.

2. From Non-Conformity to Fatalism
This movement, this interest in nonconformity, however, has a downside, and I'd say that it's something that approaches a kind of fatalism. Because if everybody should be natural, if everybody should develop according to their own inclinations, and if those inclinations that we have are endowed in us biologically, then it must be true that people are different, some better and some worse. And thus, to let ourselves be as we're inclined to be, is in fact to say that some of us are going to show our superiority to others. There's a kind-- I think-- of, one could say, sometimes a desperation to people who think they should try to save the world and realize they have no chance. But there's also a realization that they are caught in the world. And I'll tell you a story about a man named Xie An.

Xie An had quit government to be pure and retreated to his county estate. And the emperor at the time wants to bring him into government, and he refuses. And one of the people at court says to the emperor, this guy Xie An, back in his estate in the countryside, he has a singing girl with him. He's a hypocrite. He's indulging in his desires. He hasn't transcended anything.

And the ruler listens and says-- I think a very wise statement-- well, it's good to know that he shares the desires of other men, because perhaps eventually he'll also will begin to share our worries. In the case of Xie An, he did. Eventually, he went to court, he became a leading official, a great general, and defended the south against invasion from the north in a famous battle.

But this sense of an aristocracy of the pure, of people who were superior to others, comes out in another way in what's called pure conversation, the ability to capture the essence of somebody with an anecdote, with a story about them, just as I've talked about Xie An. There's a great interest in collecting anecdotes about people, but also in judging people and in ranking them. This sense that we have ranked people, that we have displayed ourselves so that we can be ranked, that we've defined who's superior and who's less qualified fits, of course, very much with an aristocratic culture, a culture that assumes that people of our kind, of our family will keep producing people like us, that we will always be superior. And that offers much less opportunity for talent to rise.

There are some legacies here that are important. The notion that superior men do not compete is certainly an old Confucian notion. The idea of spontaneity and naturalness we could say is certainly Daoist. We've seen that in the Zhuangzi, for example, during the Warring States period, but now it's brought to a new level. This notion of the validity, the righteousness of spontaneity of naturalness is given new voice in this period. It is a paradox, perhaps, that a movement that began as a search for a new foundation for imperial unity ends up finding the foundation for individuality and the discovery of self.

Section 3: Daoist Religion

1. Celestial Master Daoism

The second strand I want to address is Daoist religion. Now, we've talked about Laozi and Zhuangzi's Daoist philosophy, but what we're talking about now is something rather different. This Daoist religion involves the idea of having revelations from immortals or the perfected in Heaven. And one of the cults that's involved here is the Celestial Master cult, the Tianshi Dao. The Celestial Master cult was one of the most successful of the Daoist cults, and has continued right down into the present.

But where do its teachings come from? They don't come from antiquity. They don't come from the government. They come from revelation. The Celestial Masters believed that they could be in contact with the immortals or the perfected in Heaven, and that these immortals would give them text, would reveal text to them that they could write down, that would guide them in living in the present. Eventually, the Celestial
Master cult, which clearly begins as a very elite group, becomes a popular religion and spreads into many places in China. We can still find it today.

The teaching of the Celestial Masters was that by following these rules, following these released texts, we would be freed from sin. We could join the immortals, and that when this corrupt world would be destroyed, all those who had become immortals who had followed the cult would be reborn as immortals in this world. And when the world would be populated by immortals, an ideal society would emerge.

What are the teachings that we should follow in this society? They're based around the notion of the circulation and the mingling of qi, of matter and energy. The ideal order, whether it's a social order or a political order, is an organic one, where all the parts are connected together and play a role, where there is circulation. That circulation of qi, whether it's breath, or the blood, the air, the circulation of qi can be understood at many levels. At the political level, it can mean that those below rise to positions above. At the spiritual level, it can mean that the spirit circulates and moves through the world.

Now, we often think that when we dream, something is going on within our body and our mind. But you could imagine an alternative that the mind actually has a spirit, that when we dream, has departed the body and gone out into the world and is gaining information, and is in fact meeting the immortals, for example. When the spirit circulates, knowledge is gained. And in fact, when the spirit circulated, when the immortals and your spirit were in communication, texts were given. Knowledge was passed on.

Physically, the circulation and mingling of qi means that the qi is kept moving through the body. And there are various exercises that are developed, which unfortunately I'm not going to show you today. Various exercises that are developed to help you move qi through where it begins, in the scrotum, in the lower stomach, up through the arteries or the veins, and into the mind, or into the brain, into the top of the head.

The social implication of this is procreation. This is not a movement of celibates. This is a movement in which procreation and sex are very important. This is an example, again, of the mingling of the qi, but we'll have more to say about sex in a minute. This kind of Daoist religion brings with it a great interest in physical cultivation, not mental cultivation, not cultivation of one's taste, but of one's body.

We see a new generation flourishing of hermits. We see new diets, macrobiotic diets, diets that cut off grain, immortals who supposedly just live on the qi they breathe in, the energy matter they breathe in, or eat pine needles, and things like this. We see a great deal of interest in improving the flow of energy in the body. And this often takes the case of sitting in certain posture and with your mind, moving essential qi, pure qi, up through the arteries.

Now, pure qi is, in fact, male semen, so you can see that this is a male-oriented set of practices. And there are ways and techniques I will not go into, that semen, rather than being ejaculated, remains within the body, and the idea is to push this pure qi through all the veins and arteries until everything is clear, and everything is flowing again. Another part of this is the idea of having sex with women, in which the women have frequent orgasms, and release their energy, but the man never ejaculates, in order for the man to absorb the energy of the woman. We see a proliferation of sex manuals is in this period, in describing various sexual techniques, but very much male-oriented exploitation of women for the sake of male energy and vitality.

That's as much as I want to say about Daoist sexual techniques, but there have been books written about it. And what is the point of all of this? The point of all of this is, in fact, immortality.
2. The Maoshan Revelations and Supreme Purity Daoism

Now let me talk about one very important way in which, under the general umbrella of Daoist religion, cults developed devoted to immortality. Now let me begin with what's called Elixir Immortality. What's an elixir? An elixir is a drink, and I brought some examples.

Here's my first example, which is coffee, being passed out free on the streets by a company to bring in consumers to this particular kind of elixir. Another highly-caffeinated drink, also very popular now. And a five-hour energy little drink as well. And if we had been in Tokyo or Seoul or Shanghai, we could have gone into a shop and bought a whole range, or in Taipei, a whole range of elixirs for giving energy and vitality.

Now in the case that we're talking about, these elixirs are meant to lead to immortality. And the way I'm going to explain it is by giving a particular example. Tales from the Maoshan Revelations, these are revelations from the immortals. And here is where we get something very bizarre. People who imbibed elixirs of immortality died. Why would it be that you would take an elixir that would in fact kill you, unless you thought that the state that you are entering, which everyone agreed was death, unless you thought that state was not exactly what we would think it would be. That is, a state of death.

The tale goes like this. This is going to be a tale about a family named Mr. Yang Xi and the Xu family, northern emigres as they moved south, emigres who were part of the Celestial Master cult, became involved in the drug culture of the south, very concerned with herbs, sometimes even psychedelics, various kinds of medicines to improve physical health. We see, in fact, the passage from one of these great southern clansman, Ge Hong, who talks about the immortals.

Now my story, and I'm going to look down now to sort of follow my notes as I tell you this story, takes place in the 4th century, A.D. Between the year 364 and 370, a certain Yang Xi of a southern clan began to receive visits from immortals. And these immortals said they were from a new heaven that had not been known before. Not the heaven of the Celestial Masters, but a Supreme Purity heaven, Shangqing heaven.

And these immortals said, we have new information for you, new teachings. And Yang Xi wrote them down, and he wrote them in excellent calligraphy, a sign that they must be authentic, too. They turned over to the sacred texts, they said, of their domain, and they gave him oral instructions about how to understand them.

They tell Mr. Yang that he should share his revelations with the Xu family, also a southern family, a southern clan, but very highly placed at court, in the southern court. And Xu family soon begins to have visions and visits from the immortals from Supreme Purity heaven as well. From Yang Xi, the younger Mr. Xu learns that he has been told by the immortals that Mr. Xu, the younger, is to join the heavenly bureaucracy in Supreme Purity heaven.

Now this was unexpected. It was a bit too early. But still, joining the celestial bureaucracy, and then in that very honored position of chamberlain, was superior to any position he could have had at the court. So there's a reason to go. He wants to join a better bureaucracy and have a higher position.

The problem is how to go from this world to the world of the immortals. And this is where our elixirs fit in. We know something about the elixirs that can be taken to become an immortal. And I'm going to redo a passage from one of the recipes for an elixir of immortality.
3. How to Take an Elixir

So we were talking about how somebody like the younger Mr. Xu, once he's summoned to the realm of the immortals, would cross over. The way he would cross over would be to take an elixir. Now, we actually know something about these elixirs of immortality, because they are described in various works from the time. They include names like the Efflorescence of Langgan, Jade Essence, Powder of Liquefied Gold, and Dragon Fetus. That's my favorite.

And we have not only the recipes for these prescriptions, these elixirs, but we also have an account, which I'm going to read to you, of what happens when the adept takes the elixir. And here it goes. When you have taken a spatula full of it, you will feel an intense pain in your heart as if you had been stabbed with a knife.

After three days, you will want to drink. And when you have drunk a full container, your breath will be cut off. When this happens, it will mean that you are dead. When your body has been laid out, it will suddenly disappear and only your clothing will remain. Thus, you will be an immortal released in broad daylight by means of his waistband.

If one knows the secret names of the elixir's ingredients, he will not feel the pain in his heart. So this is a reason, of course, to become an adept. But after he has drunk a full container, he will still die.

When he is dead, he will become aware that he has left his corpse below him on the ground. At the proper time, jade youths and maidens will come with an azure carriage to take it away. If one wishes to linger on in the world, he should strictly regulate his drinking during the three days when he feels the pain in his heart. This formula may be used by the whole family.

It begins with the words, "take nine ounces of the garb of cloudy radiance," and so on. And this is what happened. The younger Mr. Xu took the elixir. I'm not sure which he took, but he took an elixir. And he died. And thus, he joined the immortals.

4. Why did Elixir Daoism Flourish?

So why does a cult that kills people flourish? Because that's clearly what's going on in this case. The recipe - the prescription for the drug-- tells you that it's going to kill you.

Well because they must be more than killers. They must be a sort of supreme religious expression. Certainly you just can't off-the-bat take it. It's not like you can go out to the street here and buy a cup of coffee. You would need training to be able to imbibe it. It's supported by a body of authoritative texts which some of the leading scholars of the day-- people in high position in politics-- believe in and accept.

People are having visions and conversations with the immortals. It turns out that these visions can be shared with other people. If I share with you, you can begin to have it yourself. And I know that this phenomena goes on right into the present because I've met people who have started to share visions.

There are career opportunities for those who promote the cult and the visions. And there are career opportunities for those who take the elixirs, or so they think. There are lots of potions then as there are now.

These potions are poisonous in various ways. In some cases, the body's killed. In some cases, the body is embalmed from within.
But I think we tend to forget that some of the poisons, such as arsenic, that go into these elixirs also are pick-me-ups. They give you a lot of extra energy. And in fact, the problem with arsenic, which was also used in the 18th century and 19th century in some American elixirs, is that it is cumulative in the body.

**Section 4: Alchemy**

One of the reasons people could believe in the elixirs of immortality was also because of the status of alchemy. And let me switch now to the question of alchemy as one of the strands of aristocratic culture. We often use the terms, later terms, of inner and outer alchemy. Inner alchemy is things you do within the body through diet, through moving the qi through the body. The kind of alchemy I'm interested in today is the kind of alchemy that takes base metals and turns them into gold not, however, to get rich but to create an elixir that gives you immortality.

Now, to give you some background on this. The belief was that gold represents a mineral in which the balance of yin and yang is so perfect that it's fixed and will not change. Let me talk now about the theoretical foundations for alchemy.

The view was that natural things are made up of qi. Qi exists as something that's changing and movable. They exist in cycles of change and transformation. And smaller cycles are caught up within larger cycles. We can, for example-- and they pointed out at the time-- we can see that minerals grow. And they change.

And the belief was that certain minerals would ultimately, over a long period of time, change and transform into gold after, in fact, 4,320 years-- a very long time to wait. But gold represented a state, a mineral state, in which there was perfect balance between yin and yang. In contrast to silver or to copper, both valuable metals, gold did not change. It did not tarnish. It developed no patina. It was constant.

They understood that people can interfere, through smelting, for example, through metallurgy, in the cycles of development of minerals and metals. And they believe that since, for example, with the theory of the five phases of change, that within a given state in the cycle of change of a mineral must be inherent the next state. And so they began to say, we could speed up the process of transformation so that this series of developments that would lead from the base metals to gold would happen much more quickly. In fact, we can make it happen within a single year.

Chinese alchemists demonstrated their ability by changing mercury into cinnabar and cinnabar back into mercury showing that you could change metals in this way. Why 4,320 years? Because there were 360 days in the year. Every day was composed of 12 hours. The Chinese hour is two hours. So one hour, one Chinese hour, would equal 1 year. And thus within one of our years, a solar year, you would reach the whole cycle that turned things into gold.

So in this sense, alchemy is a kind of an intellectual pursuit. It replicates the dao of nature's cycles. But it also gives man control over those cycles.

If the alchemist control the development of metals and the cycle of change, then presumably he can also create an elixir that can help the human body achieve that moment of perfect balance between yin and yang so that it becomes immortal as well. Elixirs are food for the immortals.

It's often said that people who take elixirs aren't alchemists and alchemists don't take elixirs. There's some truth to this, but probably because creating elixirs was very expensive. Only the rich could afford it.
There's a long tradition of seeking immortality in China. We find the first emperor of Qin sending expeditions out to find the immortals and find their secrets. And we find emperors much later in history taking elixirs of immortality as well and sometimes dying as a result.

But the intellectual contemplation of this process where the furnace represents the womb, where the control over heat represents the ability to change the cycles of yin and yang, where the five phases of change are renewed and controlled in various ways, all this is the human being looking at the processes of the universe and thinking that he now can actually replicate them perfectly and control them. And that's, I think, where alchemists find an audience among people who want to believe that we, in fact, can see. We can understand the real patterns of change in the natural world. Now, alchemists, ultimately, I think we would agree, despite the fact that people kept taking elixirs, alchemist, and the people who developed elixirs of immortality, did not create immortals as far as we know.

Section 5: Literature

1. Literature

This brings me to the fourth strand of aristocratic culture, the possibility of another kind of immortality, immortality achieved through literature and art. What do we mean by literature in this period? Well, we're talking about literature as a kind of writing, not just literature generally but writing which is personal and which is occasional. That is, it's written for a specific occasion in response to something that happens. Whether it's somebody's birthday and you write a poem to congratulate them, whether you write somebody a letter to say something to them, whether you write an inscription in response to an event, it's done for the occasion.

And the assumption is that literature, particularly poetry, is an authentic representation of how you yourself, the writer, responded to the events which the poem is about. There's a psychological model that lies behind this. And that is-- it's fairly old in China by this time. And that is that we have selves that are in many ways inchoate. They're not well-defined. Each one of us is individual.

Things happen in the world. And through our perception, we become aware of them. And it stirs up something inside of us. And we respond.

The quality of our response, which may be selfish and evil, or good and humane, reveals who we are as people. And one of the early arguments we see in China is that it's precisely because people are like this that we need ritual. We need to tell people how to behave in certain situations.

That same idea gets transferred to literature with the notion that we need to know how to respond in writing to the various occasions we confront in life, that there are rules and norms of expression. And yet, there's a great room, far more room, in literature for individuality and creativity than there is in the conduct of ritual. And so writers, in some sense, are engaged with the world, responding in normative ways but also in individual ways, writing in genres, in modes, that are widely accepted and are now being anthologized for the first time.

This sudden flowering of literary art begins in the third century A.D. And we have writers who begin to talk about what it means and why it is so important. And they make the point that it is through writing that we show as an individual that we are in tune with the cultural tradition and the text of the past. That by writing, we're creating something that could be enduring.
In some sense, we're, within ourselves, replicating the processes of heaven and earth. What we write reveals our personal character. It proves your qualities, your sharpness, your intelligence, your moral qualities as well.

And above all, when you're writing is read and transmitted, and we will be reading writings that have been read and transmitted, you're gaining a new kind of immortality where you will be remembered for what you did, for what you wrote, that doesn't depend upon your political station, does not depend upon having power. But then you can create something that will be enduring and will live forever. And it will affect others. This happens in calligraphy as well. And soon it will happen in painting.

We're going to have a chance to talk more about this in a minute with Professor Tian Xiaofei, who is an authority on medieval literature and culture. But let me sum up what we've been talking about today. We see in the medieval period in aristocratic culture a concern with the self, a concern with me, an interest in transcending the limits of nature, of time, of place, but also of being spontaneous and in accord with one's own character-- not necessarily conforming but trying to be oneself in all ways.

And that suggests that we've reached a moment when people are beginning to have the idea that the self, the individual, can be more important than family, can be more important than state. And perhaps this was not an entirely new idea in Chinese history. But it had never been, I think, so popular. With that, let's meet Professor Tian.

2. Interview with Professor Tian Xiaofei

Professor Peter Bol: I'm here and surrounded by dissertations written by students in the Department of East Asian Languages and Civilizations going back to 1930s with Professor Tian Xiaofei. You've joined this department, and your work is in medieval literature and this period after the Han Empire collapses into the reunification in Sui and Tang. I've been reading some of your work.

One of the things that I've been really fascinated by is the sense that you have that this sort of statecraft reading of a medieval period, which says, they didn't reunify China, right? These guys they were wimps. They didn't think right. They didn't have the right values. They didn't reunify.

That if I read your work, what I see is that sort of view misses the richness of the medieval period. When you look at the medieval period, what do you see? What do you find interesting?

Professor Tian Xiaofei: This sort of negative appraisal statecraft, usually focuses on the Southern dynasties, the Southerners. The Southerners are usually considered the wimps, right?

Professor Peter Bol: Right.

Professor Tian Xiaofei: I think this actually obscures, first off, this representational nature of history. I think there's always a gap between representation and what it purports to exemplify. So if we buy into this view of the Southerners, Southern dynasties, being miserable political failures and so on, so forth, we tend to forget the fact that this kind of appraisal comes from the conquest of dynasties first of all.

Professor Peter Bol: The winners?

Professor Tian Xiaofei: The winners. Exactly, exactly, exactly. More important, I suppose, for me as a literary scholar, this in many ways leaves another curious gap, a gap between the literary historical
appraisal and the representation of the Southern dynasties, Southern literature, and the actual influence the Southern literature wielded in subsequent development of Chinese literature.

That is in literary histories usually in premodern China, we have this kind of appraisal, all appear in state-sponsored dynastic histories. That is they pass judgement on the literature, on the literary men, men of letters of the Southern dynasties. And they sponsored the dynastic histories. They were to say they were miserable political failures and also their failure in politics and military culture in many ways must be blamed on their moral inferiority.

And so political failure was tied to their perceived moral inferiority, which in many ways was perceived to be responsible for bad literature. But this is the official version. This is the version basically given in dynastic histories and on all the theoretical level, literary historical representation.

On the other side, we have a curious fact is that is the Southern dynasties' literature wielded immense influence on the Northerners, on the conquest dynasties, and the subsequent development of Chinese literature.

Professor Peter Bol: Oh, right, think about famous poets of the period Tao Qian-

Professor Tian Xiaofei: Yes.

Professor Peter Bol: --or Tao Yuanming, Xie Lingyun, they're all Southern--

Professor Tian Xiaofei: Absolutely, yes absolutely. So Tao Yuanming, Xie Linguyn, the Landscape Poet, but also subsequently the Court Poets. Yes. And so the Court Poets, I suppose, they bore the brunt of this, the condemnation of the Southern dynasties.

Professor Peter Bol: The Southern

Professor Tian Xiaofei: Yeah, the Southern Court.

Professor Peter Bol: One of the things that you've written is that there is a tremendous fascination in the South with newness and innovation. This Chinese term change “xinqi”. And in later periods, this is often a condemnation of people that want to be new and different, and how could that ever be good? But there's this love of the new and different, it seems? How come? Why does this happen? What's this?

Professor Tian Xiaofei: This Interest, overall interest in newness and originality. One thing is the tremendous emphasis placed on literary excellence during this period in the South, in the Southern dynasties. And did this, I feel, primarily was for two reasons. First reason as such, we know that early medieval time in medieval China was a very march aristocratic culture. Everything was tied into bloodline, family lineage.

If you are a cousin of lord so and so, then you get appointment in the court, get a high official position. But in the Southern dynasties, the Southern rulers tried to change that. They realized the system was not really working all that well, because the dim-witted cousin of Lord so and so should not be occupying this position. And so in many ways, Southern rulers, especially Emperor Wu of the Liang dynasty tried to change this kind of political system, tried to change the recruitment system by placing immense emphasis on literary excellence, literary learning.

Professor Peter Bol: I see.

Professor Tian Xiaofei: And so to counterbalance to aristocratic culture that placed too much emphasis just to blood lineage and family and the clan, yeah.
Professor Peter Bol: So Emperor Wu is the founder of the Liang dynasty?

Professor Tian Xiaofei: That's correct, yes.

Professor Peter Bol: And that's the 6th century, early 6th century?

Professor Tian Xiaofei: That's right, first part of 6th century. Yes, yeah. So he tried to renovate the recruitment system. And also, by basically conferring immense cultural prestige, people who are not necessarily from the top tier of the aristocracy, but who possessed literary talents.

Professor Peter Bol: And literary talent then gets measured by this originality and excellence of composition. One of the things that's been said about Emperor Wu of the Liang dynasty, the Liang dynasty lasts what, 57-

Professor Tian Xiaofei: 57 years. Yes.

Professor Peter Bol: --and then supplanted by the Chen dynasty in the South. And then in 589 the Sui dynasty moves South and conquers the South?

Professor Tian Xiaofei: Yes.

Professor Peter Bol: But I read once some text that said the Liang dynasty fell because the emperor invested too much in Buddhism?

Professor Tian Xiaofei: Yes.

Professor Peter Bol: So here's a man whose court sponsors the literary, the artistic. But at the same time, it seems that he's very interested in giving patronage to Buddhism as well?

Professor Tian Xiaofei: Absolutely. Yes.

Professor Peter Bol: How come?

Professor Tian Xiaofei: Yes, I feel that Buddhism and literature are the two scapegoats. People tend to use, and people have been using Buddhism and literature to blame on the fall of the Liang dynasty and the fall of the South. This, again, this obscures a lot of things. For one thing, there's a lot of things that the Northern dynasties and Southern dynasties have in common, more so than people normally care to admit, or more than they themselves care to admit.

For one thing, both sides, both North and South were passionate about Confucian learning, Confucian classics. They did immense amount of commentaries, on both sides. But their, of course, styles of doing commentary might be very different, vary from North to South.

Another thing they were equally passionate about was Buddhism. So again, you can see the irony of this, that is nobody-- because the Northern dynasty eventually turned out to be the conqueror dynasty-- so nobody ever even give any thought to the fact that a Northern ruler were equally devout--

Professor Peter Bol: Even more, even more-

Professor Tian Xiaofei: Very much so, if you look at all of the beautiful statues, Buddhist statues at Luoyang, right?
3. Professor Tian Xiaofei: A Close Reading of Two Poems

Professor Peter Bol: So could you talk a bit-- and I know you brought a couple poems with you to read. But could you say something, really, about that connection-- the literary connection?

Professor Tian Xiaofei: Yes. I brought two poems. One poem is from the early-- the first part of the sixth century, written by one of the best known Court Poets of the day, Liu Xiaowei. And the title of the poem is "A Candle Within the Curtain." The literature of the fifth and, especially, the sixth century were very much indebted to the way of seeing the phenomenal world inspired by Buddhism.

So I just to tried to use one little text to demonstrate this idea. So the poem is very short. It reads like this, "Door opens, the curtain casts a shadow. The flame in the wind flickers back and forth. Drifting light illuminates the brocade sash. A congealed drop of wax stains hanging flowers."

Very short, and in many ways, kind of representative of the Liang dynasty court poetry, and the Southern dynasty's court poetry. First of all, what happens in the poem, right? So we know that a door opens. And then the curtain-- that is, door curtain-- casting a shadow. Whenever there's a shadow, there's a light source, right? And we also know this is dark. This is at night. So we know the time of this poem.

And then so the light source appears in the second line, the flame in the wind. And the flame in the wind for any reader from this period, or for any reader who's familiar with basic Buddhist doctrine, knows that candle in the wind, flame in the wind, is a Buddhist metaphor for the transience and fragility of human life, and all life, right? So flaming in the wind here is the candle-- candle flame in the wind flickers back and forth. Why is it flickering? Obviously because the door opens and a breeze slips in, right?

And the drifting light illuminates the brocade sash. And here, when we see brocade sash, it's a belt that could be worn by a man or a woman. So the light of the candle illuminates a detail. This is very much characteristic of the Liang poets' fascination with visual details, with minute details as well. So here, the drifting light illuminates the brocade sash worn by a person here. We don't know who the person is, whether the person is a man or woman. We don't know.

But what we see here, and here the eye of the poet is like a camera zooming into even more minute detail-- the brocade belt, that is a congealed drop of wax-- that is the wax tear of the candle-- stains hanging flowers. And since the poet is talking about a brocade sash, we know that he's not just talking about real flowers in nature. He's talking about artificial, embroidered flowers on the person's belt, right?

So this is a rather enigmatic little quatrain. What is the poet trying to say here? I think a lot of-- there is no definitive answer, of course, to a literary tattoo to a poem. I think it could lead to many different directions. But I think that one thing that comes out very strongly is, as I said, the fascination with visual details.

And also with this movement of the eye, the attention being paid to the sensuous surface of things, material objects of the phenomenal world-- which, in Buddhism, they call it "rupa" in Sanskrit. In Chinese, it's "se." And the poets of this period and the critics of the period are very interested in a concept of how to represent "wu se"-- that is, the sensuous appearances of material things, of objects, of the phenomenal world. But
here, because they were so steeped in Buddhism, Buddhist doctrine, underneath all this fascination of focus with "rupa," with "se," with objects of natural world, the phenomenal world, there's also a kind of underlying sense that all beauty and all life is very transient and fragile.

And so, in many ways, the wax tear that stays the brocaded sash is kind of basically destroying the sash--staining it, destroying it. But also, this image kind of connects very nicely with the flaming in the wind. So you see this kind of attention being paid to the apparently very detailed kind of sensuous surface of things. But there's an underlying sense of all the immense kind of fragility of beauty in the life in this-- almost a kind of sadness in it. But it's kind of also tied to this absorption in things-- you know, they're deeply absorbed in moments, fleeting moments.

Professor Peter Bol: Fleeting moments.

Professor Tian Xiaofei: Yes, fleeting moments. The reason why I brought a second poem here is because I believe sometimes by bringing two texts that have a lot of similarities and yet separated by time, right? In these two cases, we have two poems separated by--

Professor Peter Bol: 700 years.

Professor Tian Xiaofei: --basically, yeah, 500 to 700 years. But there are a lot of similarities in it, but by comparing the two texts from two time periods, we see the similarities. We also perceive the profound differences that separate. So you realize that immense changes had happened in Chinese cultural tradition--in literary tradition.

So the second text is by Yang Wanli, a Southern Song 12th century poet, is entitled "Passing Through Danyang in the Morning." So the poem reads like this. "A breeze comes out from inside the boat. It puffs up the curtain, purple brushing the sky. When I examine where the breeze comes from, it is nowhere to be found."

Professor Peter Bol: "A crack in the worn window, smaller than a coin."

Professor Tian Xiaofei: Here, we also have breeze. We have the inside, interior. We also have a window, right? We have a crack in the window. So the window is obviously in old times, paper-- paper window, yes. But here, you know, we have also a kind of mystery. But a mystery that's solved at the end of the poem. So first the mystery is a breeze comes out from inside of the boat. So how could that happen?

And then we have a rather so-called "high poetic image." That is, the breeze puffs up the curtain-- this door curtain of the boat-- kind of houseboat. The door curtain-- purple brushing the sky. So the purple is the color of the curtain brushing the sky.

And then the poet starts to try to find out what is going on. Why do we have a breeze coming from inside the boat? And then so he examines where the breeze comes from. It's nowhere to be found. And then finally, he found a crack in the window, which is smaller than a coin, which is why it took him awhile to discover the source-- that is, the wind comes from outside eventually, but from outside-- but through this crack in the window comes inside of the boat and blows up the curtain.

So this is a very interesting poem. It also is about a breeze. We also have a little kind of a mystery here. But here we see a process of discovery-- finding out what is going on. And the poet would not just stop with this image, this rather poetic image of curtain, purple brushing the sky-- beautiful purple curtain brushing the sky. He has to find out what is going on-- why this has happened-- with almost a kind of pseudo-- I would say scientific, you know kind of--

Professor Peter Bol: Right. But a sense of trying to find the reason for something, right?
Professor Tian Xiaofei: Exactly, finding the reason for something.

Professor Peter Bol: Rather than being caught up with the surface and the moment.

Professor Tian Xiaofei: Absolutely. Yeah, that's beautifully said. Basically, he refuses to be entirely just absorbed in the sensual detail. He needs to know why. He needs to find out the principle of things, rather than the-- rather than the "wu se," he needs to see "wu li." Yes.

Professor Peter Bol: I see. So what Professor Tian is saying that this is a shift from the surface and appearance of things to their nature, the principles behind them. Thank you so much. Thank you so much.

I did want to-- before stopping, though, I wanted to say something. It turns out that Professor Tian wrote her first book when she was nine years old-- or her first published book. I don't know how many you wrote before that. But you write a great deal, both on literary studies and on contemporary cultural studies in China, in English and Chinese. What are you working on now?

Professor Tian Xiaofei: I just finished an annotated translation of a late 19th century memoir, a memoir about Taiping Tianguo, the heavenly kingdom of Taiping.

Professor Peter Bol: You'll learn about this later, but it's a terrible rebellion that takes place in China.

Professor Tian Xiaofei: Yeah, caused a lot of devastation of the South China-- or all over China, but particularly the South. So this is from a middle-aged man looking back and trying to recapture his traumatic experience during the Taiping rebellion as a seven-year-old boy. So it's a very unique perspective-- that is, he experienced the rebellion basically from seven to nine years old. He was running around fleeing from soldiers-- from government soldiers, from Taiping soldiers, from local bandits, and went through a lot of traumatic experience. So I just finished an annotated translation with a critical introduction. So currently, I'm working on Three Kingdoms, yes.

Professor Peter Bol: Well, we'll have a chance, perhaps, when we get to the 19th century to make use of that book. Thank you so much.

Professor Tian Xiaofei: OK, Thank you.

Optional: Interview with Professor Kuriyama

Professor Bol: We're here in the office of Hisa Kuriyama, who's the Reischauer Institute Professor of Cultural History. He's the chairman of the Department of East Asian Languages and Civilizations. We've asked to talk to him because there is a puzzlement for us in the ways in which not only Chinese but also East Asians generally have conceptualized the way the world works, the way the body works. And Professor Kuriyama is an authority in the history of science and medicine, not only in China but East Asia. And we're here to talk with him about this. So Hisa, thank you.

Professor Kuriyama: Thank you for having me.

Professor Bol: I want to begin with two "two-term sets," you might say. One is this notion of yin yang that has become so popular today. And another one, I think, far less well understood by most people is the notion of the five phases of change, the five agents, the five elements-- all these various terms for it. But Chinese is wuxing, actually is notions of mu jin shui huo tu-- wood, metal, water, fire, and earth-- these
things called the five elements, five phases, five agents. What were they talking about when people used terms like that?

Professor Kuriyama: Well, I think the most important concept to understand is that in Chinese, the idea of change was intrinsic to the world. So if in, let's say, the Greek tradition, or in much of Western metaphysics, what a thing was was a crucial issue, or what made a thing a thing was a crucial issue. In China, the crucial issue was really, what are the patterns of change? How do things change? Change was the natural state.

Professor Bol: So the Greeks would be looking for essences of things, for example, and the Chinese are looking at what will things become, how will they--

Professor Kuriyama: So what that means is that first, in the Greek case, you're looking at what are the elements that make a thing. And then, if it changes, what makes a change? Whereas I think in the Chinese case, in the East Asian case, it's natural for things to change. So the question is not why do things change, but how do they change? What are the patterns that underlie change? And I think that both yin yang and the five phases are two different ways of analyzing that change.

Professor Bol: So this notion that things change-- there's no there's nothing causing it, so to speak. Everything is just zi ran er ran, naturally, spontaneously evolving and moving on. But is it moving somewhere? Is there an endpoint? Is it teleological change, or is it just a constant process of change?

Professor Kuriyama: I think it's basically a constant process of change. As the famous saying goes, has no beginning and no end. In a way, this is a perfectly natural way to think of things. In fact, much of the problems of Western metaphysics arise from the fact that once you posit that change is an issue, then you struggle to explain how it could possibly come into being. But if things are naturally changing, then the question is not, why did this happen, but how is it happening?

Essentially, with yin yang wuxing, with yin and yang and the five phases, you have two different ways of analyzing change.

Professor Bol: If we talk about yin and yang, which-- they're only two. It's simpler. What makes that a way of analyzing change? I mean, what are the implications of that?

Professor Kuriyama: Although they're two elements, and they seem like two poles, they're essentially two extremes of a cycle. And so that they're not in tension. It's very much like the standard model of the day and night, that as light becomes brighter, it reaches a peak, and then eventually it will start getting dark again. Whereas in Western metaphysics, often what happens is that the model is that of two extremes that are in tension with each other.

The best way to think about yin and yang is really the rhythm of night and day. So as eventually as things become brighter, they have to eventually become darker. And as they become dark-- reach extreme darkness, they have to become bright.

Professor Bol: Let me ask a question about this, because I can understand thinking about the yin and the yang as sort of the cycle of the day, from light to dark, dark to light, and so on. But what happens if you plug this into a different model of male and female, for example? So thinking of the way in which the yin and the yang get joined together with qian and kun, for example, in the Book of Change, which is you have a male versus female, the single versus the double. And treating that as yin and yang as well.

Professor Kuriyama: Well, again, I think it's a question of two extremes that are always constantly mixed together, so that-- just to take the case of male and female, male and female are-- in the case of the male,
the male has more yang and less yin. The woman has less yang and more yin. But neither is pure yang or pure yin, right? And so it's a question of relative proportions.

Professor Bol: But that sort of joins them together-- like night and day is a cycle, than male and female get joined together as a unity of something, a complementary unity.

Professor Kuriyama: Yes.

Professor Bol: So sometimes I've heard the word "polarity" used rather than "opposition."

Professor Kuriyama: Polarity could be misleading, in the sense that it creates this tension between the two. As I say, I think the issue is the question of dynamic limits. One way of looking at the five phases, I think, is simply a more refined version of yin and yang. There are just more sort of propensities involved. But another way, I think, is it ties in this issue of time with the idea of space. And so directionality becomes an important part of, I think, the idea of the five phases.

I'm thinking in particular of the directionality that ties in, let's say, the wood with the east, fire with the south, metal with the west, and water with the north.

Professor Bol: And earth with the center, right?

Professor Kuriyama: Right. So that the dynamics of the world are governed not only by certain rhythmic cycles, but also by orientation in space.

Professor Bol: Wuxing are the five phases. And if you look back to the Han dynasty, for example, we have these sort of-- we can make charts, almost, of correlations between these five phases and different kinds of grain, different directions, different seasons. There are four seasons, but then they somehow plop midsummer into that. Different tastes. Different colors. How should we understand this sort of desire to use these to correlate everything in the world?

Professor Kuriyama: I think one of the problems with the traditional translation, or the early translation, of the wuxing as the five elements, is that it seems to be concerned with the composition of things. Whereas, in fact-- or even the idea of five agents, which is the idea that these are actors-- whereas, I think, the idea of the five phases is the idea of propensities or directionality of change.

What you're able to do by mixing in different elements-- let's say in terms of your diet, right? You're eating a variety of foods. These are affecting the directions of your physical being-- your physical, mental being. By taking in, let's say, a certain grain that has wood properties, you're pushing it in that wood direction. You're taking a fire thing and you're pushing it in that fire direction. But the idea is that there already is this direction in which your body is going. And you're able to affect the flow in which your whole being drifts.

Professor Bol: So in effect, now, all of a sudden we've crossed into the area of Chinese medicine, right? There also-- there's a way of conceiving of this as for the body politics, so to speak-- for the way government works, the universe works, and that the body is-- works for the body too.

Professor Kuriyama: Indeed. Although, I think one of the interesting puzzles with respect to the relationship between the physical body and the body politic, and a puzzle that I think would be a worthy subject for certainly an article, maybe even a dissertation, is really the paradox whereby in the Greek body, where medicine was born in the cradle of so-called democracy, there's always a central ruler that has absolute control. It's sometimes the brain. It's sometimes the heart. There's a central ruling principle.

Whereas in the Chinese body, classical Chinese medicine is born in the era of imperial rule-- basically in the Han dynasty. But there's no real, ruling central force. It's basically a republic of different forces.
Professor Bol: So yin and yang and wuxing, or five phases, are going to be coming up throughout Chinese history as things that people talk about as ways of understanding the natural world and physical processes. And they have, to some extent, a sort of amoral quality to them. This is just how things work. It's not something you can change, but the best you can do is you can say that to be moral is to go with the flow of this.

Professor Kuriyama: Well, I think that's sort of true. But I think there is-- one of the key things to appreciate is the possibility of intervention. But it's an intervention of the sort whereby you insert yourself into the flow and redirect it. So you're not creating something anew, but you always have the possibility of changing the way in which things flow.

Professor Bol: So this actually fits very well with the sort of Qin/Han cosmic doctrine of empire, right-- is that if the emperor can get himself in order and society in order, then somehow the flow of the weather-- nature's cycles will be kept on course, no more natural disasters, everything will be harmonious.

Professor Kuriyama: I think so. And in a way, it makes perfect sense that the universe has these processes of change. If you can just read how it's supposed to be going, or how it is going, and align yourself properly, intervening appropriately to make the proper adjustments, then you're able to tap into this universal force, which is far greater than any individual's power.

Professor Bol: One of the things I know from your work is you've looked extensively at some of the issues about how Chinese and other East Asians read the body-- for example, through pulse taking-- these very complicated ways of taking the pulse. And I'm not going to put you in the position of asking you to read my pulse right now, but does the yin and yang and the five phases, does that get involved in the ways in which pulse-taking diagnosis, medical diagnosis, is done as well?

Professor Kuriyama: So I think one of the characteristics that results from this emphasis on change is the question of how do you analyze the dynamics of change. In the Western body, where things have to initiate, actions are born from nothing. Then, structures become important. Whereas in the dynamics of change of yin yang wuxing, what's crucial is the place-- that different places have different propensities. So it's much more like a field.

Professor Bol: So you're talking about the five organs, for example, and those are different fields doing different things.

Professor Kuriyama: Or in pulse diagnosis, if you look here. Anatomically, this is just one artery. And so you would think that this is just one pulse. But according to Chinese medical theory, there are really six different pulses in this, depending on where you touch, how deeply you touch. The propensities are different.

Professor Bol: You've mentioned-- we've talk about blood and arteries. And the word that's sort of a general term that gets associated with the stuff that flows is this word qi. This comes up again and again. We find it in Mencius talking about how he believes that the will can lead the qi.

We find it, of course, in the Han dynasty. We find it again with neo-Confucians. We find it throughout Chinese history. And in fact, we find it today. It is a subject of academic study, right?

What is this notion of qi? Granted, it's not going to be one single notion that's unchanging, but still, how do we translate this? So I've heard people translate it as energy, matter and energy, material force, breath, pneuma.

Professor Kuriyama: I think there are many ways of translating qi, partly because there are many meanings of qi. But I think the basic way to think about it is it's the stuff that makes up the world. But as we were
talking about earlier, anything that makes up the world is also intrinsically dynamic. This is why you get this matter-energy sort of combination.

What's important, I think, in the case of Chinese medicine, is that there are really two kinds of models for thinking about qi. One is related to yin and yang, and the idea of circulation and constant change. The other is as a vital resource. And so people are born with a certain amount of qi and gradually, as they grow older, that qi gradually diminishes. And at a certain point, you don't have enough to continue living.

Professor Bol: So that actually is a theory of-- we're born with a certain amount of qi, but then-- is it our ability to produce it declines, or is just the very qi that we're born with has expanded as we've grown and then starts to decline?

Professor Kuriyama: No, you're born with a certain finite amount to begin with. And so gradually it's like you fill up with a full tank of gas when you begin your trip. And that's what you have.

Professor Bol: That's what you have? This is awful.

Professor Kuriyama: Well, so--

Professor Bol: How do you get from being a baby to an adult, and then decline?

Professor Kuriyama: But part of it-- you're using part of that up in the process of maturation. And so then the strategy is to husband these resources to delay the exhaustion of these resources as long as possible.

Professor Bol: So one of the things we've looked at, or we see in the medieval era, is this rise of interest in sexual techniques where males can try to regenerate, or try to preserve their qi through having sexual intercourse with women, and doing it in certain kinds of ways. So this is what that's about, is really a search for immortality.

Professor Kuriyama: It's a search for-- at least for long life.

Professor Bol: Long life, OK.

Professor Kuriyama: Similarly, sexual expenditure is probably the most extravagant.

Professor Bol: So sexual activity, actually, from this point of view, for the male is a waste of qi. So if you use up-- if you do this too much, it's not good for you.

Professor Kuriyama: It's definitely bad for you. But even other forms of activities. You're looking at things, you're listening to things-- as you pay attention to them, your qi flows out of your body toward the object of attraction.

Professor Bol: So distraction would be a problem. If you're distracted against your own will, it's sort of like it's a--

Professor Kuriyama: Distraction will diminish your life.

Professor Bol: Well, but wouldn't curiosity too?

Professor Kuriyama: Curiosity may diminish your life as well.

Professor Bol: So we're all going to die?
Professor Kuriyama: Well, we are all going to die.

Professor Bol: Single trajectory, right? Today, there is again-- among researchers, in fact, in the West, there's an interest in qi.

Professor Kuriyama: So I have a theory about this. I mean, it's a complicated-- but basically, if you think about the contrast between Chinese medicine and Western medicine, as we just said, in Chinese medicine, the great concern is preservation. So to prolong the supply of qi to the extent possible.

Whereas in Western medicine, there's this constant concern that the food that one ingests to keep alive is constantly turning to poisons. And so the idea is that food--

Professor Bol: Expel, expel.

Professor Kuriyama: Expelling poisons is a constant concern. This is why bloodletting becomes important-- enemas, purgatives are so crucial to Western therapeutics. But over the course of especially the 19th century, as the theory of energy becomes prominent in Western scientific discourse, then that theory of what's the body and what's not the body gradually is transformed into a theory in which everything is energy.

And essentially, what happens is that Western medicine, as it becomes more modern, becomes more like Chinese medicine. And so that when we're looking at food, we're looking at calories, which is essentially just energy. So my theory is that basically the reason that there's such strong interest in Chinese medicine, or one of the reasons why there's such strong interest in Chinese medicine today, is that in fact it's very similar to Western medicine.

Professor Bol: That's a view that a lot of Western-style medicine doctors in China don't want to hear, it seems.

Professor Kuriyama: But it's true.

Professor Bol: Well, that solves that. In the 11th century, a philosopher named Zhang Zai, a Neo-Confucian philosopher, has a theory that there is a finite-- the world, the universe is one sort of great bag of qi. And we come into being with part of that qi. And then when we die, that qi goes back into the common store, so to speak. And there's very dense qi and very light qi, and our bodies are condensations and the air is very light.

And another Neo-Confucian philosopher, Cheng Yi, disagrees with him. And he says no, no. That can't be so. And Cheng Yi's view is that we can generate what he calls yuan qi, original qi from our body.

And if we can get our minds together, if we can think properly, if, sort of, our minds are working in the right way, then we'll be able to keep generating good qi-- better qi. And the qi of the world will get better.

Professor Kuriyama: Interesting.

Professor Bol: Right? Are there theories which talk about how-- are their issues of interest in how in the Chinese past people thought about the relationship between qi and mental stuff, let's say.

Professor Kuriyama: So I think this goes back to what we were talking about earlier. The idea of the mind in, say, Western philosophy or medicine, is opposed to the idea of matter. And matter is supposed to be essentially inert. And mind becomes an animating principle. If you posit that the body itself is dynamic-- and the mind, obviously, is also dynamic-- then the question is not what animates the matter or the mind
controlling the body in a sense of animating the body, but the mind simply redirecting the propensities of the body.

Professor Bol: So this is why Mencius will say something like the will, the mental will, can lead the qi in a certain direction-- that it flows in a certain direction.

Professor Kuriyama: Right. I think it's very much like education-- that as the etymology of education suggests, the idea of leading, you're education isn't a process of inscribing on a blank slate. Students have certain propensities, and you hope to lead them in ways that are beneficial to them. But it's not a question of simply imposing something into blank.

Professor Bol: One of the things we read in texts is that things that are similar in terms of where they are-- say, in terms of the five phases, or in the yin and the yang, will tend to attract each other. The point is made, for example, that the lodestone pulls metal filings to it, that people will tend to die at night-- which is empirically true, it turns out. And that this is because the yin attracts the yin, the yang attracts the yang.

And from this, you get this notion of stimulus and response-- that one thing can stimulate another, that things will resonate. And so one of the great sort of cosmic theories of Qin and Han has to do with this notion of resonance, that things in different realms, because they're in the same phase, will respond to each other. What makes them alike is the fact that they are in the same phase. Does this makes sense in terms of what you've been talking about?

Professor Kuriyama: I think so. This idea of cosmic resonance is one of the areas where I think there is similarities between the Chinese tradition and certain aspects of Western beliefs. Things are connected to each other not just by physical connection, but also by a certain kind of musical resonance. And so that things which are harmonious literally, in the musical sense, somehow act in concert. And things which are not in harmony often conflict with each other.

Professor Bol: Well, in fact, it turns out to be true, right? If you have stringed instruments tuned to the same string and you pluck the string on one, the others will resonate, right? So those sound waves are doing their work. The cosmic resonance, then, becomes a very large argument being made in Chinese history for some period of time-- and rhetorically, at least, even into modern times-- is that the events that happen in nature are-- the unexpected, unpredictable, off-course, non-harmonious events that happen in nature-- are a result of the behavior of people with political power. They make them happen.

Professor Kuriyama: Yes. There are two critical ways of thinking about human presence. One is this idea of certain people being in critical junctures-- that they have the power to influence greater events in much the same way that, let's say, something like chaos theory works, that a small change in one critical place will produce a vast series of network of changes. The other is this notion of sensitivity, that the superior person has a sensitivity to the whole world of changes that the lesser mortals have.

Professor Bol: Well, you actually used a word that strikes me as being interesting in discussion of Chinese conceptions of how the natural world works, and how physical processes work, which is the notion of relationships. Because it strikes me that so much of the way Chinese conceptions of morality evolve has to do with relationships between people in different roles. And that through our life, we're also moving through a series of relationships, and different roles that we play. And that's our-- this web that we construct around us keeps evolving over time as well.

Professor Kuriyama: Yes. So I think that's a very interesting way of putting it. And it's very much, then, like a member of an orchestra, someone who is able to hear what the other people, other participants, are playing. But also, in a way, contribute in a way that's harmonious and enhances the group.
Professor Bol: Well, we actually have members of an orchestra who are coming to appear very soon in this course too. So people will get to hear both.

Professor Kuriyama: Excellent.

Professor Bol: We've been talking about the way in which we see people, and see physical processes, as evolving and constantly changing, and having propensities and inclinations in certain directions. And it brings us in some ways back to a very Confucian idea that a ritual properly performed is both about the relationships between all those people doing things, but also stirs people and moves people and gets them to behave in certain ways.

Professor Kuriyama: Right. So I think ritual might be a social equivalent of many of these techniques of the body, where it's a form of realigning the flow of forces. It's a very complex flow, but there are certain techniques of re-orienting flow. In society, ritual is one of the most powerful. In the case of the body, there are various forms of mental visualization, breathing techniques, other forms of visualization that allow you to reorient the flow in the body.

Professor Bol: I would actually extend this to gardening. I once read in a gardening manual, I think from around the 12th or 13th century from Japan, that the way you put stones in the garden had everything to do with the flow of energy, of qi, that would go through the garden. And that, in fact, if you put a stone in the wrong place, you would feel uncomfortable in that garden. And it was true. I mean, there's a way in which you can design landscapes so that they're welcoming and you feel you can move-- things are moving through them-- and those that feel they block you and stop you.

Professor Kuriyama: So I think this is, of course, the principle that underlies the logic of geomancy. And if we think about the importance of geomancy in, for example, the rise of the development of the compass, then you can see how the ideas of qi and a flow of energies in the world was actually very influential in world history.

Professor Bol: Influential in world history because--

Professor Kuriyama: Because of the development of the compass.

Professor Bol: Of the compass, I see. So we're bringing the compass back to that. But, I mean, we could also see, even into China today, the idea that the landscape that you're in, the way it's configured, is also a configuration of flows of Qi. And that that has consequences for you and how you will be, how you will live, and what will happen to you in life.

Professor Kuriyama: Yes.

Professor Bol: So that planting yourself in the right position is really essential to how you're going to be in harmony with the world around you.

Professor Kuriyama: One interesting illustration of this with respect to the body in particular is a theory of exercise. So when we think about exercise, we think about muscular exertion and tensing up, and training particular, say, parts of the body, particular muscles.

But if you look at Chinese exercise manuals, it's all about orienting yourself to the particular time of the year. So different seasons require different forms of exercise. It's highly ritualized, but the key is sort of orienting yourself to the flow of the seasons.

Professor Bol: And also, the flows within the body to keep things moving. So a number of years ago, I was in Beijing. It was at an exhibition on Wangfujing, one of the streets, in hope that they would get the
Olympics. And eventually, of course, they did. One is the Chinese Michael Jackson. And it's all external musculature-- very, very clear. And the other is a Tang official playing kickball, with a round sort of stomach and everything smooth.

And as I looked at that, I remembered reading your first book, and said, aha. It's exactly the point that I'm seeing. The Western idea of the muscled man versus the flowing, harmonious, soft Chinese figure. But both being athletes.

Professor Kuriyama: But both being athletes, yeah.

Professor Bol: Tell us something about where you began in terms of your research, and where you're going now. Because we've talked about people going through phases and having propensities. So where were you in the past, and where are you moving to?

Professor Kuriyama: So the basic question that I started with, and, indeed, I'm still interested in a fundamental sort of way, is how is it that we all have the same human body-- whether it's in China or America, whether it's in the 21st century or the second century BC-- and yet, the conception we have of the body is so totally different. And this conception has very concrete implications because, for example, if we believe that muscles are important, then we work to train our muscles. If we don't, then we develop a different kind of technique.

Professor Bol: We train our arteries, so to speak, or--

Professor Kuriyama: Right. Understanding that problem was really the starting point of my research. You mentioned the sort of contrast between the muscular figure and the smooth, more rotund figure. I think that's a good example of the important contrast, where the muscle man reflects the emphasis on agency, the ability to act-- initiate action. Whereas the more rotund figure corresponds, on the one hand, to the ideal of vital fullness, and so the preservation of vitality, and on the other hand, to this idea of smooth flow.

I think one of the things that interests me now is sort of the afterlife of these classical notions. And I think what's very striking is that on the one hand, I think for most Chinese today, yin and yang are ancient, anachronistic sort of concepts, whereas I think many of the ideas that people have of the organs are still influential in terms of the way they think about diet, in terms of how they think of their physical condition.

Professor Bol: So thank you very much.

Professor Kuriyama: Thank you for having me.