

Sandra A. Wawrytko\*

## **The Interpenetration of Art and Philosophy in East Asian Poetry: The Metaphysical Threat to the Platonic Hierarchy**

### Abstract

Why should art matter to a philosopher? In the context of Asian philosophy it is clear that a distinctive aesthetic underlies artistic expression encountering reality in such diverse art forms as Japanese haiku, Chinese landscape paintings, contemporary Korean cinema, and even Bollywood films. Art has informed and guided politics in Asia, where artist philosophers continue to function as reformers and revolutionaries challenging the status quo en route to connecting with reality. This is especially true in the case of Asian poets. In sharp contrast, the Euro-centric tradition of philosophy has tended to marginalize and even denigrate the arts. Plato famously observed 'there is an old quarrel between philosophy and poetry' (*Republic*, 607b5–6), seeking to circumscribe the role of poets in his ideal state. This essay will focus on East Asia, both in terms of its historical embrace of poetry and contemporary manifestations. Special emphasis will be given to Buddhist poets from China, Korea, and Japan who wield poetry as a form of *upāya* or skillful means to evoke, provoke, or document awakening. Buddhist epistemology challenges and dissolves the dualistic preconceptions that assume the existence of an insurmountable divide between 'self' and 'other,' inner and outer, human and Nature. This may also yield important insights into why Plato and his followers have been so obsessed with the inherent power of the poet to undermine their vision of philosophy and the task of the philosopher.

### Key words

Buddhism, China, Japan, Korea, philosophy, poetry

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\* Department of Philosophy  
San Diego State University, United States of America  
Email: wawrytko@mail.sdsu.edu

## Introduction

Why should art matter to a philosopher? In the context of Asian philosophy it is clear that a distinctive aesthetic underlies diverse artistic forms of expression tracking encounters with reality. Li Zehou demonstrates that an ‘inner connection between the Chan philosophy and landscape painting [...] provided the ideological background for the development and maturity of landscape painting in China.’ (1994: 183) It has been argued that Bashō’s Zen Buddhist approach to the haiku form, both in composition and teaching, was ‘a unique epistemological methodology of perceptual revolution to see reality clearly.’ (Wawrytko 2011: 10) Contemporary art forms display similar tendencies. Korean cinema has tackled complex philosophical themes in such works Bae Yong-kyun’s ‘Why has Bodhidharma Left for the East?’ (1993) Scholars have presented evidence that ‘Sanskrit drama is the aesthetic forebear of Hindi cinema.’ (Joshi 2004: 23)

Philosophically grounded art has informed, guided, and not infrequently plagued the self-proclaimed upholders of law and order in Asia. From the artist-philosophers known as the Seven Sages of the Bamboo Grove (*zhu-lin qi xian* 竹林七賢) to Ai Weiwei 艾未未 (1957–) and Yue Minjun 岳敏君 (1962–), the status quo continues to be challenged by those who posit and present alternate views of reality. Thus Yue, who identifies with Daoism, has described his enigmatic, smile-infused paintings as ‘not a denial of reality but a questioning of it.’ (Bernstein 2007)

Among Asian artists, poets have been especially active opponents of authority figures touting the virtues of their version of ‘natural’ law and order. In sharp contrast, the Euro-centric tradition of philosophy has tended to emulate Plato, who famously asserted in the *Republic* that ‘there is an old quarrel between philosophy and poetry’ (607b5–6). This led him to marginalize the role of poets in his ideal state, by controlling, circumscribing, and even denigrating the artistic process. I will argue that Plato’s assumed conflict between philosophy and poetry is in fact a conflict between different approaches to philosophy. His dualistic metaphysics gave priority to noumenal abstractions, thereby dooming poets for their associations with phenomenal ‘imitations’ of the Forms. It also mandates an epistemology grounded in logocentrism as well as anthropocentrism.

Alternative metaphysical and epistemological approaches, such as found in East Asian philosophies, are often dismissed as mere mysticism.

Yet the nondualistic openness of philosophical poets to both noumena and phenomena spawned visions of a salutary co-creativity between humans and Nature that influenced political aspirations. We will demonstrate the historical embrace of poetry by philosophers of East Asia as well as contemporary examples of activist artists. Special emphasis will be given to Buddhist poets from China, Korea, and Japan who wield poetry as a form of *upaya* or skillful means to evoke, provoke, and document awakening. Representative samples of poetry will document how Buddhist epistemology challenges and dissolves the dualistic preconceptions predicated on the existence of an insurmountable divide between 'self' and 'other,' inner and outer, human and Nature. In exploring why Plato and his followers have been so obsessed with the inherent power of the poet to undermine their vision of philosophy, we may come to a broader understanding of the philosopher's presumed task in Asia as well as globally.

### **Plato's Metaphysical Hierarchy: Poets as Mere Imitators**

What is the source of poetry's potential potency, which makes Plato fear it as a threat to the forces of philosophy? To be more precise, poetry threatens Plato's version or vision of philosophy. He is only prepared to acknowledge his own dualistically-driven version of Idealism as legitimate philosophy, and hence defensively rejects any approaches that unmask his metaphysical assumptions. Friedrich Nietzsche, of course, has masterfully tracked the emergence of Plato's 'True World' in *Twilight of the Idols* under the heading 'The History of an Error': 'The true world – attainable for the sage, the pious, the virtuous man: he lives it, *he is it*. (The oldest form of the idea, relatively sensible, simple, and persuasive. A circumlocution for the sentence, "I, Plato, *am* the truth.")' (1968: 485) Indeed, Nietzsche refers to his work as 'a great declaration of war' in which he would wield his hammer to sound out philosophical idols, thereby exposing their hollowness. (1968: 466) Perhaps this exposure is what Plato feared from the poets, most especially Homer, as competing sources of wisdom that he regarded as an invitation to chaos. The perceived threat level of the Asian poets reviewed here, I will argue, would have been heightened inasmuch as their poetry is consciously presenting a philosophical position in many ways antithetical to Platonic assumptions.

If Nietzsche seems to exaggerate Plato's dogmatic turn, recall that the upper portion of his Divided Line metaphysics was inspired by the Pre-So-

cratic philosopher Parmenides (c. 515–445 b.c.e.), a poet whose ‘diction was Homeric through and through’ (Henn 2003: 1) According to philosopher of science Giorgio de Santillana, through Plato Parmenides has become ‘enshrined in the realm of pure philosophy, as the First Metaphysician’ and equally foundational to the emergence of science. (1961: 95) In *On Nature (Peri Physeos)* Parmenides set forth the philosophical dualism of phenomena and noumenon under the respective headings of ‘the Way of Opinion’ (*doxa*) and ‘the Way of Truth’ (*aletheia*).

Significantly, in the poem Parmenides is allowed to pass through ‘the gates of the way of Night and of Day’ with the assistance of ‘Justice the Great Avenger’ (presumably Dike). (de Santillana 1961: 90) Then he is warmly received by an unnamed goddess who enlightens him about the truth of Being. The accommodating goddess/guide often has been identified as Themis, the embodiment of Law and Order, originally in the sense of social custom, but later extrapolated to include eternal, cosmic Law. Considered by some to be a manifestation of the Earth goddess Gaia, Themis belonged to the ancient race of the Titans, who predated the Olympian deities. In keeping with this primal origin, she has been described as the binding force of the social imperative, ‘herd instinct, custom, convention slowly crystallized into Law and abstract Right.’ (Harrison 1912: 485) Harrison also astutely explains the paradoxical birth of Dike, ‘natural order,’ from Themis, ‘social order,’ by qualifying the former as ‘man’s conception, his representation of that order.’ (1912: 533) As to their mutual appearance in the poem, ‘Parmenides may be supposed to have meant that insight led him to justice of right action [Dike], from which he passed to the mother or source of justice [Themis], which explained everything to him.’ (Davidson 1870: 11)

As the facilitator of metaphysical insight, first in Parmenides and later in Plato, Themis deserves closer attention. A fascinating connection exists between the Greek word ‘themis,’ law, and the English word ‘doom’ derived from it. Although doom now denotes a dire situation, it originally conveyed a positive notion of something ‘set, fixed, settled,’ in the sense of social consensus. (Harrison 1912: 482) In the early context established order seemed infinitely preferable to chaos and uncertainty, just as common sense and English common law came to define socially acceptable behavior. This crucial ability to instill order and regulation in human interactions may explain why Themis is described by Homer as having sole power to convene the assembly of gods and offer the first drink at their feasts. (*Iliad* xx 4–6) Themis also is identified in many myths as a close advisor to Zeus, often offering prophetic warnings to the other deities. Harrison goes as far

as to claim that Themis is 'the substratum of each and every god [...] above and below each and every god.' (1912: 485) Her power extends to human life and death in that her daughters, the three Fates (Moirai), determine human destiny by spinning, measuring, and then cutting off the threads of individual lives. They are depicted performing these functions in the reincarnation story told by Plato at the end of the *Republic* (620).

The very amorphousness of Themis would seem to facilitate the evolution from the personification of an abstract concept of justice and order to what Plato would deem a pure abstraction, imbued with the highest degree of reality in the metaphysical hierarchy. The triumph of abstraction in Greek philosophy begins with Parmenides' grounding in Pythagorean ruminations on the metaphysical status of numbers. This prepared the way for his uncompromising championing of abstract thought in defiance of contradictory sense data, for 'it is the same to be thought and to be.' (de Santillana 1961: 91)

In the *Republic* Plato focuses his attention on the abstract sense of Justice (*dikaisyne*), particularly as it applies to an idealized social structure. In the course of the discussion of justice, Plato uses Socrates to build his case against the poets by depicting them as consummate imitators, and in fact dealing in 'imitations thrice removed from the truth.' This attack in Book Ten is clearly grounded in his metaphysical assumptions concerning a hierarchical dualism between phenomena and noumena, outlined in his famous Allegory of the Cave in Book Seven. Prisoners chained in the cave mistake mere shadows (art; imagination, *eikasia*) cast by puppets (physical objects; belief, *pistis*) as reality. The philosopher is awakened from his phenomenal slumbers by daring to leave the darkness of the cave and experience the dazzling light of the dialectic. Socrates summarizes the epistemological framework in hierarchical pairings: '*As being [of Parmenides] is to becoming, so is pure intellect to opinion. And as intellect is to opinion, so is science to belief, and understanding to the perception of shadows.*' (1971: 398)

## The Philosophical Poet: Power and Political Threat

The political aspirations of Plato have engendered ongoing debates. He has variously been credited with inspiring the Third Reich, Fascism, and Communism based on 'the idealization of absolutism in the *Republic*.' (Morrow 1971: 144–145) He has been both accused of and absolved from promoting a totalitarian political philosophy (Leys 1971; Popper 1945), and even characterized as a non-political or anti-political thinker. (Sparshott 1971) In the

present context we will assume Plato does espouse political goals, defined in a broad sense, as set forth by George Orwell: 'Desire to push the world in a certain direction, to alter other peoples' idea of the kind of society that they should strive after.' (1946) Certainly Plato, as a philosopher and following the role model set by Socrates, is intent on changing the way his fellow citizens think about their society toward the end of modifying its structure.

The core of the argument against Homer rests on his failure to render any public service, as a legislator or victorious warrior, or even as a private teacher. Socrates imagines a cross-examination of Homer, daring him to prove his credentials as a maker: 'if you are only in the second remove from truth in what you say of virtue, and not in the third – not an image maker or imitator – and if you are able to discern what pursuits make men better or worse in private or public life, tell us what State was ever better governed by your help?' (1971: 429) In the absence of a clearly defined goal that has been in some way realized through poetry, Homer stands defenseless before his Platonic interrogator.

When Plato goes on to proclaim that the imitative art 'is only a kind of play or sport,' Chinese philosophers would not necessarily disagree. (1971: 431) And yet Zhuang Zi characterizes his own philosophizing as 'leisurely strolling' (*xiao yao you* 逍遙遊) in the opening chapter of his eponymous work. Inspired by Zhuang Zi, philosopher Thomé H. Fang (1899–1977) has compared the philosopher's task to that of a child flying a butterfly kite. (Fang 1981: 14) Fang effusively transforms Plato's condemnation into a benediction:

To play the sport of bliss in lyrical enchantment, to enter into a sympathetic unity with the soul of men and things, to set forth rhythmic vitality in unison with the soul of men and things, to make men great in the achievement of beauty and the sublime: these are the Perennial efforts of Chinese art. (Fang 1957: 235)

A dualistic macrocosm is matched by a dualistic microcosm in which feeling is at war with reason (even identified as womanly part vs. manly part respectively); the soul is presumed to possess inherent forces of good and evil – 'to see her as she really is, not as we now behold her, marred by communion with the body and other miseries, you must contemplate her with the eye of reason, in her original purity.' (1971: 436) However the hedonistically-oriented poet, in thrall to phenomena, is not motivated 'to please or to affect the rational principle in the soul.' (1971: 432) Rather the poet incites rebellion of feeling against reason, while 'poetry feeds and waters the passions instead of drying them up.' (1971: 433)

The corrupting influence of the poet extends beyond the individual soul, and 'he who listens to her, fearing for the safety of the city which is within him, should be on his guard against her seductions and make our words his law.' (1971: 434) This demands that we limit poetry in the ideal state to 'hymns to the gods and praises of famous men.' (1971: 433) Plato cites common phrases characterizing (caricaturing?) poets as 'yelping hound howling at her lord'; 'mighty in the vain talk of fools'; 'the mob of sages circumventing Zeus'; no more than 'beggars.' (1971: 434) Justice, however, 'has been shown to confer reality, and not to deceive those who truly possess her.' (1971: 436) Such vigilance will be rewarded with an orderly state as well as the eternal life of the soul.

Many Asian poets promote an idea of society that deconstructs anthropocentric absolutes and political authoritarianism. Just as Shakespeare's wouldbe usurpers in *Henry the Sixth* decide 'The first thing we must do is kill all the lawyers,' (II,4-2,71-78), tyrants throughout history have felt the need to control artists – or crush them. Emperor Augustus commissioned Virgil to memorialize and legitimize him in the *Aeneid*. Joseph Stalin's propaganda campaign utilizing Socialist Realism permeated the Soviet Union. Mao Zedong promoted literature and art during the Cultural Revolution as a 'powerful weapons for uniting and educating the people and for attacking and destroying the enemy.' (1972: 301) More recently, the Taliban has sought to exert dictatorial power over people's lives by destroying Buddhist monuments and banning music.

Artists have taken note of this tendency, sounding the warning in works about fictional dystopias. Ray Bradbury's *Fahrenheit 451* and George Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four* present us with political regimes that have declared war on free expression as subversive to their interests, giving us the incendiary jargon of doublethink, the thought police, and Big Brother. Viktor E. Frankl, a prisoner of the Nazi death camps, even traced the Holocaust to academia, arguing 'If we present a man with a concept of man which is not true, we may well corrupt him. [...] I am absolutely convinced that the gas chambers of Auschwitz, Treblinka, and Majdanek were ultimately prepared not in some Ministry or other in Berlin, but rather at the desks and in the lecture halls of nihilistic scientists and philosophers.' (Frankl 1973: xxi)

Art and poetry have been deemed a threat to those intent on imposing their versions of law and order because they also have the power to thwart their schemes. John F. Kennedy noted 'When power leads man towards arrogance, poetry reminds him of his limitations. When power narrows the area of man's concerns, poetry reminds him of the richness



and diversity of existence. When power corrupts, poetry cleanses.' (1963) China has a long history of such cleansing poetry, beginning with the ancient Chu poet and court official Qu Yuan 屈原 (b. 340 b.c.e.). His suicide by drowning in the Mi-Luo River to protest government corruption has been rewarded posthumously with a yearly observance on the fifth day of the fifth month of the lunar calendar, now known as the Dragon Boat Festival. Centuries later the poet-musician Xi Kang 嵇康 (223–262), an outspoken critic of Confucian hypocrisy, was executed on charges of moral depravity. In the twentieth century the much-lauded poet Ai Qing 艾青 (1910–1996) was persecuted by both the Guomintang and the Communist Party. In Russia poet Anna Akhmatova (1889–1966) ran afoul of the Stalinist government, suffering censorship and constant threats.

### Rehabilitating Phenomena: Poets As Co-Creators of Reality

As discussed above, Pre-Socratic philosophy initiated the obsession with pure abstraction that led to the privileging of the noumena and corresponding devaluation of phenomena in Plato's metaphysical hierarchy. While Heraclitus of Ephesus (d. 460 b.c.e.) expressed doubts about the veracity of sense data, he assumed that human participation in 'universal reason' (*logos*) allowed us to decode reality – 'Eyes and ears are bad witnesses to men, if they have souls that understand not their language.' (de Santillana 1961: 49) Parmenides went even further, decisively rejecting the testimony of the senses in favor of the testimony of reason and logic. Since Plato associates phenomena with 'confusion,' 'the art of conjuring and of deceiving [...]having an effect upon us like magic,' the poet's continued dependence on phenomena necessarily relegates them to the lowest reaches of his metaphysical hierarchy. (1971: 431)

However, from the perspective of Buddhist philosophy, the magic (*maya*) is produced by the mind itself, not the phenomena. The opening chapter of the *Lankavatara Sutra* conveys this epistemological analysis in its depiction of the Buddha conjuring up jeweled mountains and magical beings after emerging from the depths of the sea. When these glorious visions abruptly vanish, Ravana, the Lord of Lanka, is 'immediately awakened, feeling a revulsion (*paravriti*) [transformation] and realising that the world is nothing but his own mind; he was settled in the realm of non-discrimination [...] obtained the faculty of seeing things as they are.' (Suzuki 1978: 9) As Suzuki explains, Ravana's 'intellect is no longer snared in the



meshes of dualistic logic, he intuitively perceives that the world of particularization is no more than a reflection of his own mind.' (1999: 100) In other words, 'all of magic, every little sleight, is really happening in our minds.' (Macknik & Martinez-Conde 2010: 259)

The figure of Ravana is itself philosophically significant. It seems odd that the king of the *raksasas* or demons (literally those to be guarded against), who is also the villain of the *Ramayana*, would serve as interlocutor in the *sutra*. This role usually is assumed by the Buddha's closest disciples, such as Shariputra in the *Lotus Sutra* or Subhuti in the *Diamond Sutra*. At one level the choice of Ravana supports Mahayana Buddhism's advocacy of 'wisdom embracing all species,' as emphasized in the *Lotus Sutra*. In terms of Buddhist epistemology the choice of Ravana is significant in that his name means 'clamorous, demanding.' (Soothill & Hodous 1937: 472) This is the same quality found in the inquiring mind of a philosopher. More specifically, Buddha informs Ravana that 'the world is like an image magically transformed,' an insight that has escaped the grasp of 'philosophers and the ignorant.' To see the truth we must see through the magic show conjured up by the discriminating mind that makes us 'cling to dualism.' (Suzuki 1978: 20) These mentally constructed shadows cause us to misinterpret reality.

Based on this epistemological assessment, the natural order implied by Themis, whether put forth by a philosopher such as Plato or a post-modern scientist, is merely a construct grounded in human evaluations of orderliness. Moreover, anthropocentrism imposes its own glass ceiling. The human preference for unchanging and static laws, including the fixation on eternal perfection, explains the privileged position of the Platonic Forms (*Eidos*) as a form of wish-fulfilment. Contemporary neuroscience validates the skepticism of Buddhist philosophers here. For example, visual sense data is not the source of the 'corruption' described by Plato. Rather our flawed data is the product of the interpreting mind, such that 'the richness of your visual experience is an illusion created by the filling-in processes of your brain.' (Macknik & Martinez-Conde 2010: 13)

The dualistic vision of a passive mind misled by external phenomena nonetheless underlies Plato's depiction of the poet. When William Shakespeare describes the end of the player's art 'to hold, as 'twere, the mirror up to nature' (*Hamlet* III:2:18–19), he is simply echoing the Platonic view of artists as imitators that had become grained in classical thought since the time of the Greeks. The passivity of the artist is highlighted in the *Phaedrus* (244–245), where the Muses are credited with inspiring poets

by means of a divine madness that is compared to the madness of prophets and those besotted by love. Similarly, Shakespeare observes ‘The lunatic, the lover, and the poet, / Are of imagination all compact!’ (*A Midsummer Night’s Dream* V:1:7) In the *Apology* Socrates, Plato’s presumed source for this view, reports on his disappointing interaction with the poets when he sought someone wiser than himself: ‘Then I knew that not by wisdom do poets write poetry, but by a sort of genius and inspiration; they are like diviners or soothsayers who also say many fine things, but do not understand the meaning of them.’ (1971: 202) The priority of law and order in quelling chaos comes to the fore yet again in *Laws* Four where the contrasts between poet and legislator are laid out. The poet ‘when he sits down on the tripod of the muse, is not in his right mind; like a fountain, he allows to flow freely whatever comes in,’ which stands in stark contrast to the revered ideal legislator, who wields the dual tools of ‘persuasion and force’ to accomplish his crucial social task. (1971: 684–685)

Although the imagery of a reflective mirror was invoked by Buddhist philosophers, it rests on a dynamic interaction between mind and Nature. In the *Lankavatara Sutra* Buddha compares the discriminating, dualistic mind to ‘seeing one’s own image reflected in a mirror, or one’s own shadow in the house, or hearing an echo in the valley.’ (Suzuki 1978: 20) In the mind mirror we can both see the reality of buddha-nature and be seen as that reality, as explained by Tian-tai Master Zhi-yi 智顓 (538–597) (*Stopping and Seeing Mohe zhiguan* 摩訶止觀, *Taisho shinsho Daizokyo* 46:12c):

Reflections in a mirror do not come from outside and do not arise from within; one spontaneously sees one’s features because the mirror is clear. Insofar as the practitioner is physically pure, what is there is pure: wishing to see Buddha, you see Buddha. [...] Think to yourself. Where does Buddha come from? Not that I am going anywhere. I only see what I think of: mind makes Buddha, and mind itself sees the mind seeing the Buddha mind. This Buddha mind is my mind seeing Buddha. (Wang 2005: 262, 264)

Similarly, the *Prajnaparamita Sutra* includes an evocative use of the mirror as the point of intersection between ourselves and the Buddha, reflecting the shared buddha-nature:

This pure presence, without any second reality or subreality, is not located anywhere, nor does it come from anywhere, nor does it belong anywhere, much less is it going anywhere or evolving in any way. It is precisely because this pure presence does not belong anywhere that it is total and simple. (Hixon 2004: 129–130)

Like the mirror image, this 'pure presence' exists outside of both time and space. Neither the mirror image nor buddha-nature can be attained or evolved, each simply is what it is. Only when dust distorts the surface of the mind is the reflection compromised.

Since Nature is part of what is reflected in the mirror mind, the phenomenal image is not to be degraded or summarily rejected, but rather used as a means to the end of comprehending reality, an end shared with reason's noumenal approach. In an influential philosophical passage that pays tribute to Zhuang Zi, Neo-Daoist philosopher, Wang Bi (226–249 c.e.) explains the intertwining roles of language and image:

Image (*xiang*) reveals the meaning (*yi*), and speech (*yan*) clarifies the image. To exhaust the meaning nothing is better than the image; to exhaust the image nothing is better than speech. Speech arises out of images, and we can thus divulge the meaning through the image. [...] Therefore, speech is what clarifies the image and must be forgotten once the image is grasped; image is what preserves the meaning and must be forgotten once the meaning is grasped. [Speech is] like a snare used to catch a rabbit; the snare is to be forgotten once the rabbit is grasped. [Image is] like a net used to catch a fish; the net is to be forgotten once the fish is grasped. Thus, speech is the snare of image, and image is the net of meaning.

This assessment of images differs considerably from the Platonic notion whereby images 'by interpreting the real nature of their objects, try to suggest something of the world of Ideal Being, but [...] never belie their irrational origin and the limitations of their medium.' (Verdenius 1971: 272)

Poets are adept at letting go of the snare and the net of language. Contemporary artist Ai Weiwei (son of poet Ai Qing) observes, 'Poetry for me is almost like a religious feeling [...]. Poetry is for keeping our intellect in the stage before rationality. It brings us to a pure sense of contact with our feelings. [...] to the innocent stage in which imagination and language can be most vulnerable and at the same time most penetrating.' (Foster & Obrist 2009: 21–22) Ai also dismisses the idea of humans competing with Nature as 'basically a western idea. As a Chinese, you're always part of your surroundings. Nature can be man-made or an industrial postmodern society.' (Foster & Obrist 2009: 29)

## **The Buddhist Poet's Middle Path: Evoking, Provoking, and Documenting Awakening**

If the source of our deluded views of reality is the discriminating mind, what could be the antidote? Neuroscience suggests an approach similar to Buddhist philosophy's nondualism, which assumes a continuum between reason and sensory intuition rather than a dualistic dichotomy. Thus one needs to 'cast your attentional spotlight over each detail [...] even if some initially appear insignificant or ephemeral.' (Macknik & Martinez-Conde 2010: 259)

Nietzsche, a poet in his own right, sounded out Plato's 'true world' using his philosophical hammer en route to obliterating the 'true world' and the 'apparent world' simultaneously. He regards this as 'Noon: moment of the briefest shadow; end of the longest error; high point of humanity; INCIPIT ZARATHUSTRA.' (1968: 480) Despite the benefits of Nietzsche's project, he has yet to escape the lingering shadow of humanism that threatens to perpetuate the magic mind show without fully penetrating its source. Martin Heidegger offers a fuller explanation of Nietzsche's mission: 'What is needed is neither abolition of the sensuous nor abolition of the nonsensuous. On the contrary, what must be cast aside is the misinterpretation, the deprecation, of the sensuous, as well as the extravagant elevation of the supersensuous.' (2010: 128) As stated, this seems to be a form of the very nondualism being discussed here. However, when Heidegger goes on to call for 'a new hierarchy' the similarity begins to fade. Perhaps that is because he associates 'overturning Platonism' with 'a twisting free of it.' (2010: 128) As Nietzsche's Zarathustra recognized, there is a crucial difference between the reactive Lion and the Child's 'new beginning.' (1968: 139)

What if there were no need to twist free? No addiction to Platonism to be overcome? The Middle Path of Buddhist epistemology is more radical in the sense of getting to the root of the self-imposed *maya*. Guided by the methodology of 'skillful means' (*upaya*), Buddhist philosopher-poets are able to extricate themselves from the snare and net of language, without rejecting language entirely by a skillful use of imagery that is both phenomenal and noumenal. Moreover, Buddhists apply the meditative techniques of 'stopping' (止 *zhi*; Sanskrit *samatha*) and 'clear observation' (觀 *guan*; Sanskrit *vipasyana*) to first recognize and then see through the magic trick of the mind by suspending the automatic pilot of concepts, constructs, expectations for direct insight into reality (Such-

ness, 眞如 *zhenru*; Sanskrit *tathata*). This allows us to transcend the limits of reason identified by Immanuel Kant, who famously assumes that his equivalent of Suchness, the thing-in-itself or *Ding-an-sich*, remains ever elusive, something we can think but never know. (1961: 27) The appropriate starting point, as reflected in the Eightfold Path, is Right Understanding and Right Thought, seeing clearly what is there to be seen.

We will conclude our exploration of the philosophical-poets by analyzing examples of nondualism manifested in their poetic output. Also in evidence will be the self-reliance that eschews dependence on the authorities and hierarchical structures so esteemed by Platonic law and order advocates. From China we will sample the work of Layman Pang Yun 龐居士 (740–808), a Tang Dynasty Confucian scholar-official who became the Patriarch of a Chan quartet including his wife, daughter and son. Soen Master T'aego 太古 (1301–1382), a National Teacher in Korea's Goryeo Dynasty, was known for both his poetry and his engagement in the court. Finally in Japan we will encounter the idiosyncratic Red Thread Zen of Master Ikkyu Sojun 一休宗純 (1394–1481), multi-faceted artist as well as political reformer in the transitional Muromachi Period. None of them can be dismissed as mere imitators who have been seduced by the hedonistic corruptions of appearance. Each recognizes the continuum that exists between noumena and phenomena, responding with a freshness and spontaneity that resonates with the Buddha's reaction in the *Lankavatara Sutra* as he casts us wisdom-eye on his own magic show: he 'laughed loudly and most vigorously like the lion-king.' (Suzuki 1978: 13)

## Layman Pang Yun

Pang represents a trend during the Tang Dynasty away from humanistic Confucian values and toward the alternative offered by Buddhism. In his own life he turned away from the status quo and toward personal meaning to address an existential vacuum. The traditional social priorities of career, family, and wealth, grounded in the social institutions of government and Confucian ritual, were no longer satisfying. Social hierarchies and role distinctions were supplanted by the egalitarian principle of a shared buddha-nature. Gone were the delusions that fixated on a conventional sense of security. The priority now became awakening to true reality through everyday mindedness, transcending the final dichotomy between life and death.

Among Pang's most quoted poems is this expression of everyday mindedness that contrasts his past life of social constraints with his new sense of liberation:

My daily activities are not unusual,  
 I'm just naturally in harmony with them.  
 Grasping nothing, discarding nothing,  
 In every place there's no hindrance, no conflict.  
 Who assigns the ranks of vermillion and purple? [official rank] –  
 The hills' and mountains' last speck of dust is extinguished.  
 [My] supernatural power and marvelous activity –  
 Drawing water and carrying firewood. (Sasaki, Yoshitaka & Fraser 1971: 46)

The poem is a response to a query from Chan Master Shi-tou, who approved of the poem and extended an invitation to join the monastic ranks. Pang declined the offer with its possible entanglements in institutional structures.

It is useful to read the next poetic selection from Pang in the context of Plato's *Laws*. Book Four indicates that the first law to be promulgated by the legislator should concern matters of birth and hence marriage as 'observing the order of nature.' (1971: 685) It is reasonable to assume that Plato would be horrified by Pang's defiance of what he regards as natural law and the flaunting of family hierarchy:

I have a boy who has no bride,  
 I have a girl who has no groom;  
 Forming a happy family circle,  
 We speak about the Unborn. (Sasaki, Yoshitaka & Fraser 1971: 47)

Pang seems very contented with his 'happy family,' although it defies the primacy of the 'gift' of propagation recognized by Plato. This point is underscored by the reference to 'the Unborn,' eliminating any need for the immorality that Plato declares 'the human race naturally partakes of.' (1971: 685) Moreover, Pang's relationship to his wife and children is an egalitarian one, each being a Dharma Friend or Dharma Companion of the others. We can presume that his words would be equally shocking to his Confucian contemporaries and were intended to be so.

Another poem addresses the illusion of time and how we should respond to its deconstruction. The past is gone and cannot be regained; the present is fleeting and cannot be grasped; the future, being non-existent, does not merit any forethought. Hence 'Whatever comes to eye leave it

be.' Pang denies the existence of obligatory commandments or laws. Contrary to Plato, he does not believe there is any filth or corruption to be cleansed. Accordingly,

With empty mind really penetrated,  
The dharmas [mental constructs] have no life.  
When you can be like this  
You've completed the ultimate attainment [realization]. (Sasaki, Yoshitaka & Fraser 1971: 85–86)

All dualistic tensions dissolve in nondualism.

Finally, the efficacy of language is often questioned by Pang, as in an exchange with a disciple of Ma-zi, Ben-xi. When Pang is asked 'What was the first word Bodhidharma spoke when he came from the West?' he immediately replied 'Who remembers!' (Sasaki, Yoshitaka & Fraser 1971: 64) Thus, echoing the *Vimalakirti-nirdesa Sutra*, Pang declares 'I go the non-Way,' that is, the way of no way, a way without definitive and static laws. (Sasaki, Yoshitaka & Fraser 1971: 80)

## Master T'aego

A poem by T'aego entitled 'How Can I Speak?' poses a ubiquitous question in Buddhism concerning the ultimate efficacy of language:

All phenomena are beyond names and forms  
The sounds of the streams and the colors of the mountains are closest  
What is 'closest'?  
You can only please yourself: how can I speak? (Cleary 1988: 145)

To deny the applicability of names and forms to phenomena does not dismiss their existence. Instead it reasserts the underlying relevance of appearances, without privileging them over linguistic constructs. In doing so, the Platonic hierarchy is not simply reversed, but enriched by nondualism.

In 'Moonlight Pond' T'aego skillfully reveals the interpenetration of phenomena and noumena by interweaving images of light and water with Buddhism's philosophical insights. The 'round light' of the moon, a familiar representation of awakening, floats in 'the great expanse of silent sky.' The noumenal moon/awakening is able to reflect the phenomenal 'myriad waves [...] without omitting a single one.' Similarly, 'wondrous profound



depths' encompass 'the hundred streams'; the moonlight effortlessly 'penetrates a galaxy of worlds.' In doing so, it reveals nondualism of both/and, neither/nor logic:

The pond reflects the moon: they are not the same  
 Not different, not the same: this is Buddha  
 [.....]  
 Eternal night, pure sky  
 Wind in the cool pines cool and strong  
 This is the moonlight pond, a spirit land where there's no 'attainment'  
 It's not just the one color of an autumn midnight (Cleary 1988:135)

Even in his Dharma talks to members of the ruling elite, T'aego demonstrated his upayic expertise in melding the concrete with the abstract. Addressing the Korean royal court at the Temple for the Protection of the Military in a time of war, he mixes Confucian platitudes with Buddhist calls to action and self-reliance. With Soen directness, he challenges the audience to 'collect your minds and listen. [...] If you're stuck in thinking what to do, you won't accomplish the noble task' (Cleary 1988: 94) He concludes, not with static absolutes or rigid laws but 'the one phrase that accomplishes the great enterprise [...] the true imperative whole [...] cutting down stubborn stupidity.' (Cleary 1988: 96)

Following in the footsteps of T'aego is contemporary Korean poet Ko Un (1933–), a former Soen Buddhist monk, former political prisoner, and ongoing activist. 'A Stone Between Two Fields' evokes the interdependence of appearance and deeper reality:

Aha, real Buddha's out of doors  
 The future world  
 Should be opening like this:  
     no distinction between inside and outside.  
 And all the long day  
     cuckoos chant prayers. (2008: 93)

Updating the core Buddhist recognition of *pratitya-samutpada*, Ko Un mixes current scientific terminology with a mundane example, 'The Drunkard':

I've never been an individual entity.  
 Sixty trillion cells!  
 I'm a living collectivity.  
 I'm staggering zigzag along,  
 Sixty trillion cells, all drunk! (2008: 39)

Ko Un has thought deeply about the function of poetry, concluding ‘Sorrow is the mother of poetry.’ (Donegan 2006: 2) As for the poet’s role, ‘the poet is not the teacher of other people, but a friend. When other people are sad or sick, if there is no poet to speak about it, then what is there?’ (Donegan 2006: 3) He characterizes Zen as ‘truth without the words,’ while poetry is ‘the truth with words.’ Given the silence that punctuates all poetry, ‘all poetry is related to Zen, to meditation [...] Although we read the words, [...] between there is the silence.’ (Donegan 2006: 5) He identifies both human and buddha-nature as inherently poetic, while ‘The great masters of Zen meditation are all in some sense poets.’ (Donegan 2006: 7) More specifically he regards Soen as ‘an intense act of mind liberated from the established systems of speech and writing, a new and completely unfamiliar leap’ adding ‘Perhaps all poems are in fact Seon poems.’ (2008: 17)

## Master Ikkyu Sojun

Ikkyu’s personal motto is perhaps the best example of his seemingly counterintuitive insight. Scrawled on a scroll in his distinctively bold calligraphy are the words ‘Entering the realm of the Buddha is easy, entering the realm of the devil is difficult,’ the size and force of the characters diminishing as they descend from the top to the bottom. (Stevens 1993: 28) The noumenal/nirvanic realm of the Buddha is similarly diminished in comparison to the elusive phenomenal/samsaric realm of the devil. The same message is conveyed in a poem that has Ikkyu escaping the confines of the temple, driven by the primal instincts of ‘the red thread,’ to enjoy the temptations of the fish stall, sake, and brothel forbidden to monastics. (Stevens 1993: 22)

Another poem questions daily practice as ‘priests minutely examine the Law [Dharma]’ and chant Buddhist *sutras* ‘endlessly’; instead he advises them to ‘Read the love letters sent by the wind and rain, the snow and the moon.’ (Stevens 1993: 25) Ikkyu also excelled at performance art, such as when he welcomed the New Year by parading around with a human skull on a bamboo pole to stimulate awareness of death (a common focus of Buddhist meditation), proclaiming

Of all things  
There is nothing  
More felicitous  
Than this weather-beaten  
Old skull! (Stevens 1993: 27)

On another occasion he brandished a wooden sword to demonstrate the impotence of Buddhist institutions, observing ‘As long as this sword is in the scabbard, it looks like the real thing and people are impressed, but if it is drawn and revealed as only a wooden stick, it becomes a joke.’ (Stevens 1993: 29) Perhaps Ikkyu’s most poignant artistic flourish with a philosophical intent involved the death of his pet sparrow, eulogized as ‘Honored One of the Forest.’ He conducted a funeral service for his feathered friend and even compared it to the historical Buddha. (Stevens 1993: 32)

Inevitably the combative Ikkyu was challenged by someone attempting to best him in his own arena. When he demanded to know ‘What is Buddhism’ Ikkyu responded, ‘The truth within one’s heart.’ His antagonist then threatened to cut out Ikkyu’s heart to ‘have a look.’ His defense came in the form of a poetic counter-challenge:

Slice open the  
Cherry trees of Yoshino  
And where will you find  
The blossoms  
That appear spring after spring? (Stevens 1993: 33)

In other words, the truth both is and is not within the heart, just as the blossoms both are and are not within the cherry trees; the noumena both are and are not within the phenomena.

## Conclusion

Our discussion has argued that the poet is not a threat to philosophy, but rather that the philosopher-poet offers an alternative to the metaphysical hierarchy presumed by Plato and his followers. Denigrating phenomena as a corrupting influence on the eternal soul casts the noumena as privileged manifestations of reality. Asian philosophy, however, approaches appearances as legitimate means of access to reality. The nondualism of Buddhist philosophy is particularly effective at revealing the interpenetration of noumena and phenomena. Unlike the Platonic stereotype of the poet as mere imitator, the Asian philosopher-poet engages in a dynamic and co-creative interaction with Nature that allows us to awaken not simply to reality, but as reality.

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