

In the Beginning Was Observing: Shao Yong on the Sagely Self, Observing and “Poeting”

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Abstract

The article explores the connection between observing, poetic creation, and sagely perception of reality, as expressed in the writings of the Song dynasty scholar, Shao Yong 邵雍 (1012–1077). Shao, most famous for his fourfold classification of all existing things, claimed that observing things according to structure (*li* 理) was the most direct path to cultivating the sagely state of mind. In addition to being a thinker, Shao was a prolific poet. His poetry collection, titled *Striking the Earth at the Yi River* (*Yichuan jirangji* 伊川擊壤集), contains approximately 1,500 poems written in a distinct poetic style. Basing my inquiry on the *Inner Chapters on Observing Things* (*Guanwu neipian* 觀物內篇) and on the *Striking the Earth at the Yi River*, two authentic works written by Shao, I describe the procedure of the “mirrored observing” (*fangan* 反觀) which, as Shao claimed, allows the observer’s mind to comprehend the object of observing in its wholeness. I further concentrate on the connection between observing and poetic writing, and claim that Shao perceived these activities as mutually connected: Writing poetry assists the process of observing, while gradual development of the right perspective in observing results in a more effortless poetic creation. Both observing and poetic writing assist and sustain one’s search for sageliness. For Shao Yong, poetry was not just a medium for expressing one’s ideas, but also a sagely language enabling one to communicate with the ultimate reality, described by the term “Heaven” (*tian* 天).

Keywords: Shao Yong, observing, structure (*li*), poetry, sageliness

Na začetku je bilo opazovanje: Shao Yong o modrem sebstvu, opazovanju in »pesnikovanju«

Izvilleček

Članek preučuje povezavo med opazovanjem, poetično stvaritvijo ter modrečevim dojetjem resničnosti, kot jo opisujejo dela songškega učenjaka Shao Yonga 邵雍 (1012 – 1077). Shao, ki je najbolj poznan po svoji štiridelni klasifikaciji vseh obstoječih stvari, je trdil, da je opazovanje stvari na podlagi strukture (*li* 理) najbolj neposredna pot do gojenja razuma modreca. Ob tem, da je bil mislec, je bil Shao tudi zelo plodovit pesnik.

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Njegova zbirka pesmi z naslovom *Teptati zemljo ob reki Yi* (*Yichuan jirangji* 伊川擊壤集) vsebuje približno 1500 pesmi, napisanih v posebnem pesniškem stilu. Na podlagi del *Notranja poglavja o opazovanju stvari* (*Guanwu neipian* 觀物內篇) in *Teptati zemljo ob reki Yi*, dveh pristnih del izpod Shaotovega peresa, bom v svoji raziskavi opisala proces »zrcaljenega opazovanja« (*fangan* 反觀), ki, kot je trdil Shao, omogoča opazovalčevemu umu dojeti predmet opazovanja v njegovi celosti. Nadalje se bom osredotočila na povezavo med opazovanjem in pesniškim ustvarjanjem, v zvezi s katero bom trdila, da je Shao dojemal ti dejavnosti kot medsebojno povezani: pisanje poezije namreč pomaga pri procesu opazovanja, medtem ko postopen razvoj prave perspektive z opazovanjem pripomore k lahkotnejšim pesniškim stvaritvam. Tako opazovanje kot pesniško ustvarjanje nam pomagata pri iskanju modrosti in ga tudi napajata. Za Shao Yonga pesništvo ni bilo samo nekakšen medij za izražanje svojih idej, ampak tudi neke vrste jezik modreca, ki je človeku omogočal komunikacijo z najvišjo resničnostjo, ki so jo opisovali s pojmom »Nebo« (*tian* 天).

Ključne besede: Shao Yong, opazovanje, struktura (*li*), poezija, biti modrec

Introduction

One of the salient characteristics of the Chinese worldview is the perception of ultimate reality, designated by the term Heaven (*tian* 天), as silent.¹ Thus Confucius, justifying his wish to imitate Heaven exclaims: “Does Heaven speak? The four seasons pursue their courses, and all things are continually being produced. Does Heaven say anything?” (*Analects* 17:19; Legge 1893). While the *Analects* (*Lunyu* 論語) and many other early literary sources do not conceive of Heaven as a creator, it is often understood as an ultimate moral authority influencing the lives of humans. Heaven does have a will and intentions; however, they are not communicated to humans verbally. To understand the will of Heaven, humans do not need to wait for revelation, but rather take the initiative and try to interpret the reality they encounter, the “four seasons pursuing their course”. Unlocking the messages encoded in visible nature is a process requiring time and patience, but most importantly it requires skills, among them performing mathematical calculations widely used in agriculture as well as in divination. The laws of nature encoded in signs and numbers of the *Book of Changes* (*Yijing* 易經), which in pre-modern China was considered equally rational and magic, could be decoded with the help of that very book. It was believed that the *Book of Changes* provided humans with knowledge unavailable through other sources. This knowledge, profound and far-reaching, was based on observing (*guan* 觀). It was observing that

1 For a discussion of Heaven (*tian* 天) as ultimate reality, see Yan (2009). See also Taylor (1998).

enabled the creation of the *Book* itself, and that became the most important methodological tool in the process of philosophical and scientific enquiry of the world. Thus, *Commentary on the Appended Statements* (*Xicizhuan* 繫辭傳) describes observing as a sagely activity that enabled the sage emperor Fu Xi 伏羲 to design the eight trigrams (*Xicizhuan* II: 2). Moreover, it is observing that empowers the sage “to know reasons and causes of the dark and the bright”, and to comprehend the future, for “the one who knows to observe the judgments of a *gua*, he would think through over half a way” (*Xicizhuan* II: 9; Cheng 1995, 159). As Cheng Chung-ying notes, observing

as both discovery of forms and invention of images is the infinite source of meaning, inspiration, and motivation for all important cultural and civilizational activities. It is what gives meaning to the sage’s quest for his own place and pole and status in the world. In fact, it is the *guan* and its profound uses which only a sage is capable of cultivating and, in this sense, makes a sage a sage. (Cheng 1995, 161)²

This article explores the connection between observing, poetic creation, and sage-like perception of reality, as expressed in the writings of the Song dynasty scholar, Shao Yong 邵雍 (1012–1077). Shao, famous for his fourfold classification of all existing things³ and his reported ability to calculate and predict future events, was considered by later Chinese scholars a founder of the so-called “school of images and numbers” (*xiangshu xuepai* 象數學派). Despite the occasional critique of the philosophical school associated with Shao,⁴ his intellectual abilities and personal qualities made him one of the most popular personalities in the secondary capital city of the Northern Song dynasty, Luoyang. A true luminary of his time, Shao, deemed one of the five founders of Neo-Confucianism,⁵ is most famous for his views on observing things and for his novel approach to poetry.⁶ In what follows, I concentrate on the often-neglected connection between observing and poetic writing and claim that Shao perceived both these activities as a process that

2 Summarizing the meanings of comprehensive observation in the *Book of Changes*, Cheng Chung-ying defines it as follows: “It is totalistic or integrative seeing”; “It is a dynamical and processwise seeing”; “It is positional or organic-contextual seeing”; “It is temporal or transformative seeing”; “It is interactive seeing”; “It is valuational and inventive seeing”; “It is ontocosmological seeing”, “It is ontohermeneutical seeing” (Cheng 1995, 162–63).

3 For the description of Shao Yong’s fourfold classification, see Bol (2013, 287–99); Katz (2020).

4 This philosophical school was not established by Shao, but rather connected to his name by later scholars.

5 For details of Shao Yong’s life, see Birdwhistell (1989); Wyatt (1996); Arrault (2002).

6 For details of Shao’s poetry collection, *Striking the Earth at the Yi River* (*Yichuan jirangji* 伊川擊壤集), see Katz (2013); Deng (2005); Zheng (1998).

facilitates and, at the same time, expresses one's search for sageliness. The analysis of Shao's writings manifests that the connections between observing, poeting,⁷ and the search for sageliness are bidirectional: Writing poetry assists the process of observing, while the gradual development of the right perspective in observing results in a more effortless and richer poetic creation. Both observing and poetic writing assist and sustain one's search for sageliness, while one's growing understanding and intellectual/spiritual progress simultaneously allow a more thorough and all-embracing observing and a freer poetic writing. For Shao Yong, poetry was not just a medium for expressing one's ideas, but also a sagely language enabling one to communicate with "silent" Heaven.

Part 1: Mirrored Observing as a Way of Sagely Perception of Reality

The connection between observing and sagely perception of reality is most solidly established in Shao Yong's Magnum Opus, *Inner Chapters on Observing Things* (*Guanwu neipian* 觀物內篇).⁸ In Chapter 2 of this work, Shao claims that the primary characteristic of the sage, the very feature that makes him unique in comparison with other humans, is the ability of the sage

to observe ten thousand hearts/minds on the basis of one heart/mind,
to observe ten thousand selves [on the basis] of one self, to observe ten
thousand things [on the basis] of one thing, to observe ten thousand
generations [on the basis] of one generation

以一心觀萬心，一身觀萬身，一物觀萬物，一世觀萬世 (Shao 2010, 7)

This sagely ability, according to Shao, is not entirely inaccessible to other humans, since the sage is a human being. Yet, as much as obtaining sageliness is extremely rare,⁹ the ability to acquire ultimate sagely knowledge by means of observing is hardly reachable. However, practicing observing and developing the right

7 The term "poeting", signifying a process of poetic creation both as an integral part of a poet's life and a living poetic dialogue with the audience, is used by a number of poets. See, for example, Knight and Pinsker (2017, 711); Collins (2008, 581); Fletcher (2006).

8 *Inner Chapters on Observing Things* and *Outer Chapters on Observing Things* (*Guanwu waipian* 觀物外篇) are sections of Shao's *Book of August Boundary Ordering the World* (*Huangji jingshi shu* 皇極經世書), which also includes chronological and linguistic tables. Modern scholars agree that the *Inner Chapters* were written by Shao Yong himself, whereas the *Outer Chapters* were most likely compiled by his followers. Shao Yong's poetry collection, *Striking the Earth at the Yi River* (*Yichuan jirangji* 伊川擊壤集) is considered authentic.

9 Shao further claims that sages do not appear in every generation and that he, himself, has not been able to see an actual sage (Shao 2010, 8).

perspective on things is the gateway to one's intellectual/spiritual progress toward the sagely state of mind.

Discussing ontological reality, Shao contends that similar to trees and animals, human beings are things. Yet, he explains that humans are the most refined among things in terms of their intellectual and spiritual abilities. According to Shao, a human being is the “utmost thing” (*zhiwu* 至物). Similarly, the sage is a human being; yet, he is the “utmost human being” (*zhiren* 至人):

If so, a human being is also a thing, the sage is also a human being.

There are things [that can be considered as] one of one, there are things [that can be considered] one of ten, there are things [that can be considered one] of a hundred, there are things [that can be considered one] of a thousand, there are things [that can be considered one] of ten thousand, there are things [that can be considered one] of a hundred thousand, there are things [that can be considered one] of a million. That thing [which is one] of a million, is this not a human being? There are human beings [that can be considered as one] of one, there are human beings [that can be considered one] of ten, there are human beings [that can be considered one] of a hundred, there are human beings [that can be considered one] of a thousand, there are human beings [that can be considered one] of ten thousand, there are human beings [that can be considered one] of a hundred thousand, there are human beings [that can be considered one] of a million. That human being [which is one] of a million, is this not a sage? We should know that the human being is the utmost of things. The sage is the utmost human being. The utmost among things deserves to be called the thing of things. The utmost among humans deserves to be called the human of humans. And so, the thing of things, is called the utmost thing. The human of humans is called the utmost human. From utmost thing becoming the utmost human, if this is not the sage, who then? If someone calls him not the sage, I will not believe it. How is it? It is said [because of] his ability on the basis of one heart to observe ten thousand hearts, [on the basis of] one body/self to observe ten thousand bodies/selves, [on the basis of] one thing to observe ten thousand things, [on the basis of] one generation to observe ten thousand generations.

然則人亦物也，聖亦人也。有一物之物，有十物之物，有百物之物，有千物之物，有萬物之物，有億物之物，有兆物之物。為兆物之物，豈非人乎！

有一人之人，有十人之人，有百人之人，有千人之人，有萬人之人，有億人之人，有兆人之人。為兆人之人，豈非聖乎！

是知人也者，物之至者也。聖也者，人之至者也。物之至者始得謂之物之物也。人之至者始得謂之人之人也。夫物之物者，至物之謂也。人之人者，至人之謂也。以一至物而當一至人，則非聖人而何？人謂之不聖，則吾不信也。何哉？謂其能以一心觀萬心，一身觀萬身，一物觀萬物，一世觀萬世者焉。(ibid.)

In Chapter 12, Shao further clarifies the meaning of the sagely observing of many through the one. According to Shao, sagely observing of things is “not observing them on the basis of [what is seen by] the eye”, nor is it “observing them [on the basis of] [what is perceived by] the heart/mind”, but rather “observing them on the basis of the structure” (非觀之以目而觀之以心也，非觀之以心而觀之以理也) (ibid., 49).¹⁰ This structure/principle (*li* 理) is an integral part of all things.¹¹ Therefore, by “exhausting structure” (*qiongli* 窮理), one can reach ultimate sagely knowledge. As Shao explains, “exhausting structure”, “bringing inborn nature to the utmost” (*jinxing* 盡性) and “arriving at one’s destiny” (*zhiming* 至命)¹² grant humans access to three kinds of true knowledge (*zhenzhi* 真知):

That which is called “observing things” is not observing them with the eyes. Not observing them with the eyes, but observing them with the heart/mind. Not observing them with the heart/mind, but observing them with/according to the structure. [Among] the things under Heaven, there is not one that has no structure (*li* 理), there is not one that has no innate nature (*xing* 性), there is not one that has no destiny (*ming* 命). That which is called structure, to exhaust it, and then it will be possible to know it. That which is called innate nature, to expand it to the limit, and then it will be possible to know it. That which is called destiny, to bring it to the utmost and then it will be possible to know it. These three kinds of knowledge are the real knowledge under Heaven. Even

10 The *Zhuangzi* 莊子 employs a similar linguistic formula with regard to listening: “Not listening to it with the ears, but listening to it with the heart/mind, not listening to it with the heart/mind, but listening to it with the breath/spirit 无聽之以耳而聽之以心，无聽之以心而聽之以氣.” (*Zhuangzi*, chap. 4) The idea of observing “x” on the basis of/with (*yi* 以) “x” was introduced in the *Daodejing*, chap. 54: “Observing [one’s] self on the basis of the self, observing [one’s] family on the basis of the family, observing [one’s] village on the basis of the village, observing [one’s] state on the basis of the state, observing all under Heaven on the basis of all under Heaven 以身觀身，以家觀家，以鄉觀鄉，以邦觀邦，以天下觀天下.”

11 For an insightful study on the idea of structure, see Rošker (2012). On *li*-as-structure in Shao Yong’s thought, see Katz (2020).

12 Reference to the *Book of Changes*, “Treatise of Remarks on the Trigrams” (*Shuogua* 說掛, chap. 1).

the sage has no means to go beyond it, and that which goes beyond it is not the sage.

夫所以謂之觀物者，非以目觀之也。非觀之以目而觀之以心也，非觀之以心而觀之以理也。天下之物莫不有理焉，莫不有性焉，莫不有命焉。所以謂之理者，窮之而後可知也。所以謂之性者，盡之而後可知也。所以謂之命者，至之而後可知也。此三知者，天下之真知也。雖聖人無以過之也，而過之者非所以謂之聖人也。(ibid., 49)

Explaining further the meaning of observing, Shao discerns a sagely ability that he calls “mirrored” observing or “observing in the opposite direction” (*fanguan* 反觀), when the mind of the observer, much like a mirror or water, reflects the observed things/objects.¹³ The essence of this observing consists in neutralizing one’s “I” and developing perspective which is not “I-dependent”.¹⁴ “Mirrored” observing means that once the observer sends his sight to a “thing” (*wu* 物) that is the object of his observing, the “thingness” of that object is reflected back to the observer, who is able to perceive the “thingness” or “objectness” of the thing/object independent of the observer’s own “I”, identity or subjective perspective while being aware of the interconnectedness and interdependence between all things in the world:

That which is called “mirrored observing”, is not observing things on the basis of one’s “I”. Not observing things on the basis of one’s “I”, is called

13 The term *fanguan* has been translated as “reflective observation” by several scholars. See Birdwhistell (1989); Chu (1998, 247). I prefer the term “mirrored” because the term “reflective” can be misinterpreted due to the common understanding of the English term “reflection” as “thinking”, and of “reflective observation” as associated with modern theories of experiential learning (see Kolb 1984). Within the Chinese philosophical tradition, the idea of *fan* 反 as “turning back” or “returning” was articulated by Mengzi 孟子, who suggested that “turning back/returning to one’s self (*fanshen* 反身) and achieving sincerity is the greatest joy (*fanshen er cheng, le mo da yan* 反身而誠, 樂莫大焉)” (Mengzi 2A:4). See also Mengzi 2A:7, emphasizing the necessity “to turn back and to search within one’s self (*fanqiu zhuj* 反求諸己)”. For reference to the connection between *fanguan* and *fanshen*, see Arrault (2002, 394). On the metaphor of the “mirror” in Chinese philosophical traditions, see Ching (1983).

14 As Shao writes, “The reason why the mirror can be clear, is [due to] its ability of not hiding [in itself] the forms of ten thousand things. Even though the mirror is capable of not hiding [in itself] the forms of ten thousand things, it is not as good as the water [that] is able to unite the forms of ten thousand things. Even though the water is able to unite the forms of ten thousand things, it is, in turn, not as good as the sage [who] is able to unite feelings/emotional inclinations of ten thousand things. The reason why the sage is able to unite feelings/emotional inclinations of ten thousand things, is [due to] the sage’s ability to observe in the opposite direction. What is called ‘observing in the opposite direction’, is not observing things on the basis of one’s ‘I.’” 夫鑒之所以能為明者，謂其能不隱萬物之形也。雖然鑒之能不隱萬物之形，未若水之能一萬物之形也。雖然水之能一萬物之形，又未若聖人之能一萬物之情也。聖人之所以能一萬物之情者，謂其聖人之能反觀也。所以謂之反觀者，不以我觀物也。(Shao 2010, 49)

“observing things on the basis of things.” When one is able to observe things on the basis of things, how can there be the “I”/self in between. If so, one knows that “I” is also a human being, a human being is also an “I”. I and humans are all things.

所以謂之反觀者，不以我觀物也。不以我觀物者，以物觀物之謂也。既能以物觀物，又安有我于其間哉！是知我亦人也，人亦我也。我與人皆物也。(ibid.)

“Mirrored observing” allows the observer to comprehend the object of observing in its wholeness and “objectness”, and therefore to observe objectively.¹⁵ This sagely objective observing is possible because humans are not unique in their essence; they differ from other things only in degree of their intellectual and spiritual refinedness (*ling* 靈) (ibid., 6). Human beings are also things. The shared “thingness” of humans and other things makes possible the observing on the basis of things. And it is precisely this shared “thingness” that makes sagely knowledge possible, since the sage is not essentially different from other humans, but only the most intelligent and refined among them. Both a human and a thing, the sage can grasp the deepest mysteries of existence. Developing the all-embracing sagely perspective, according to Shao, is possible only by recognizing the existence of the structure within visible reality and by observing the world according to this structure. Such observing requires one to step outside of one’s own private concerns and preoccupations.

Part 2: Observing the Game, Contemplating Reality, Poeting: The Technique of “Mirrored Observing”

To explain the technique of an all-embracing sagely mirrored observing, Shao employs the analogy of the *weiqi* 圍棋 game, mentioned several times in his poetry collection, *Striking the Earth at the Yi River*. In one poem, Shao compares the world observed from a high mountain to a *weiqi*-board (Shao 2010, 244). In another, he describes the concept of time with a similar image, “ancient and modern times can be summarized on the *weiqi*-board (今古都歸一局棋)” (ibid., 229).¹⁶ Yet, the most thorough and interesting treatment of the theme of observing is

15 On objectivity in Shao’s thought, see Wyatt (2013).

16 In this line, Shao uses the term *gui* 歸 (“to return”), which resonates with the idea of *fan* 反 (“to turn around”): “mirrored observing” of the *weiqi* game, a process that implies a “turning around” (*fan*) of the observer’s perspective, allows one to gain knowledge as all historical happenings “return to” (*gui*) and can be seen on the *weiqi*-board.

found in the long five-syllabic, old-style (*gushi* 古詩) poem, titled “A Great Ditty on Observing a *Weiqi* [game] (*guanqi dayin* 觀棋大吟)” (ibid., 181–85).¹⁷

In the opening lines of the poem, Shao states that the goal of observing the *weiqi* game is to “know creative transformations beyond calculation of gaming chips, and to see the [slightest/invisible] portents outside of [players’] moves (算余知造化，著外見幾微)” (ibid., 181).¹⁸ Phenomenological happenings in the *weiqi* game, such as the moves of chips and different types of calculations made by players, represent only one empirical level of reality. To move “outside” and “beyond” this level means to be sensitive not only to the “visible” developments of the game, but to understand the psychological and philosophical dimensions that are “hidden” and “invisible” at first glance. Beginning his observing with comments on players’ behaviour, Shao describes the process of psychological change initiated by the choice to be involved in the game:

[Even though] their love for victory knows no limits,
 Before the competition begins, intentions are not [yet] not-honorable.
 [But after] the players complete the duties of guests and hosts,
 They treat each other as if they are barbarians.
 [Desires for] wealth and profit are welcomed inside [their hearts],
 Happiness and anger can be seen from [movements] of their cheek-bones.
 Life and death are in their power,
 [Their intentions of] giving and taking are seen in [the wrinkles of] their foreheads.

好勝心無已，爭先意不低。
 當人盡賓主，對面如蠻夷。
 財利激于衷，喜怒見于頰。
 生殺在于手，與奪指于頤。(ibid.)

The players’ desire to win and to profit rapidly overcomes the socially appropriate: Even though players keep the rules of appropriate behaviour externally, their facial expressions reveal hostility in their hearts, accentuating the disharmony between external behaviour and internal motivations:

17 This poem contains 360 lines and 1800 characters. Zu-yan Chen estimates that the poem was written between 1060 and 1077. See Chen (2006, 199, 200n7). For the full English translation of this poem, see Chen (2006, 200–16).

18 For an alternative translation of these lines, see Chen (2006, 201). This section of the article is based on the discussion in my PhD dissertation, see Katz (2009a, 116–31). For an analysis of “The Great Ditty on Observing a *Weiqi* [game]” in the context of Shao Yong’s philosophical thinking, see Patt-Shamir (2021, 111–168).

Tears are not unique for [enemies who are intolerable like] ice and coal,
Harmony does not dwell between [brothers, who should be like] *xun*
and *chi*.¹⁹

Righteousness is not extended to friends,
Feelings do not reach husbands and wives.
Pearls and jades are drawn from the pockets,
But dragons and snakes enter into one's bosom.

戾不殊冰炭，和不侔埴篴。
義不及朋友，情不通夫妻。
珠玉出懷袖，龍蛇走肝脾。(ibid.)

Due to the psychological motivations involving players' desire to win, the game becomes a battle of ambitions, unavoidably bringing pain and destruction:

The wise are hurt by cunning,
The trustworthy are lost in dullness.
Genuine and artificial are mixed,
Names and reality are all destroyed.

智者傷于詐，信者失于椎。
真偽之相雜，名實之都隳。(ibid.)

The selfish desires for profit and achievement of victory affect the game, so that it loses its original meaning and authenticity. In this way, "achieving [becomes] a source of losing (得者失之本)" (ibid.). Such subtle and invisible changes, according to Shao, underlie every dimension of reality: Good fortune can, within seconds, turn into adversity, just as hexagram 11 *Tai* 泰 ("Peace/Prosperity") can be changed into hexagram 6 *Song* 訟 ("Conflict") through "overturn" (*fan* 反) and the change of only one line (ibid.).²⁰

19 *Xun* 埴 is a wind instrument, originally made of clay and shaped like an egg. *Chi* 篴 is a bamboo flute. These two instruments are meant to be played together harmoniously, and are often used as a metaphor for brotherly love.

20 "*Qian* and *Kun* move toward *Song* (*Qian Kun zhi zuo Song* 乾坤支作訟)." Hexagram 11 (*Tai*) is composed from the trigrams *Qian* (bottom position) and *Kun* (top position), while hexagram 6 (*Song*) is composed from trigrams *Kan* 坎 (bottom position) and *Qian* (top position). The movement from *Tai* to *Song* involves "overturning" (*fan* 反) of the hexagram and a change of one line. For an explanation of "overturned hexagrams" (*fangua* 反卦), see Nielsen (2003, 57–58). The expression "overturned hexagram" resonates with the concept of "mirrored" observing (*fanguan* 反觀). The use of the character 支 (*zhi*, "branch") in this line is not entirely clear. It may be that it is used in place of 之 (*zhi*, "moving").

The alternation of rise and fall, based on the principle of change, characterizes not only the dynamics of the game, but also historical reality. Consequently, standards applicable to prior historical periods are not necessarily valid in the present. As Shao writes, “What was correct in the former days,/ Is perhaps incorrect today (前日之所是，今日之或非)” (ibid.). To demonstrate this changeability of values, Shao presents numerous historical examples of sage emperors and tyrannous rulers, epic battles and court intrigues, philosophical currents and government reforms. From these events in Chinese history, Shao concludes that in the process of inquiry of the world, observing a *weiqi* game may be as useful as learning from Confucian scriptures, for “among the books of the past few are reliable (前書略可依)” (ibid., 185). Therefore, “in comparison to them, observing a *weiqi* game is not in any degree less [efficient] (比觀之博弈，不差乎毫釐)” (ibid.).

When emphasizing the value of observing the *weiqi* game as a methodological tool for accessing profound, objective knowledge, Shao did not intend to discredit Confucian scriptures. What harms the process of gaining objective understanding of reality is a narrow vision limited by one’s personal perspective. This perspective of a player involved in the “game” of their historic time and place can be broadened only through stepping out of one’s role as an engaged player by overcoming one’s personal, self-centred needs. The first step toward mirrored observing, therefore, is overcoming one’s self-centred perspective. Shao establishes this point in the “Preface to the *Striking the Earth at the Yi River* (*Yichuan jirangji xu* 伊川擊壤集序)”. Shao testifies that after years of rigorous study, which brought him intellectual satisfaction, he came to experience a deeper joy, the joy of observing. He achieved the level of sincerity (*cheng* 誠) needed for observing things on the basis of things. As a result, he gained the ability to transcend the emotional burdens often connected with one’s personal situation:

From the time of my youth I was engaged with Confucian teaching and experienced only rare moments of what is called “the joy of the people of the world”. Yet, what is called “the joy of the [Confucian] teaching on morality and ethics” was from the beginning [known to me] in its fullness. Moreover, [in comparison to it] the fullness of joy of observing things is doubled! Even though life and death, flourishing and decay, alternate and struggle before [my eyes], as long as they still did not enter into my bosom, what is the difference [between these signs of instability and pain and the signs of joy, like] wind, flowers, snow and moon of the four seasons, [all] passing away in a moment? [I reached the level of] sincerity when [I was] able to observe things [on the basis of] things, so

that [these things] did not harm one another in this [process],²¹ and I was able to forget and shed all the emotional burdens in-between.²²

予自壯歲業于儒術，謂人世之樂何嘗有萬之一二，而謂名教之樂固有萬焉。況觀物之樂復有萬萬者焉。雖死生榮辱轉戰于前，曾未入于胸中，則何異四時風花雪月一過乎眼也？誠為能以物觀物，而兩不相傷者焉，蓋其間情累都忘去爾。(ibid., 180)

“Observing things on the basis of things” is the process through which visible and invisible reality are considered according to categories or, as Shao emphasized, “according to structure” (*guan zhi yi li* 觀之以理).²³ Such observing is possible only by means of cancelling one’s self-centred perspective and gaining a transformed, sagely vision of the self.

Shao believed that it is precisely the lack of self-centredness that allows the sage to gain an all-embracing perspective, comprehending “the many through the one”, and enables the sage to represent Heaven, speaking on its behalf, for he can “use the mouths of [all] under Heaven as his own mouth and there would be nothing that his mouth would not say” (ibid., 49). The same ability that enables the sage “[on the basis/by means of] one heart to observe ten thousand hearts”, enables him “by means of his heart/mind to represent Heavenly intentions, by means of his mouth to represent Heavenly speech” (以心代天意，口代天言) (ibid., 7). Yet, as Shao claims, since Confucian scriptures, although relevant in their day, could not fully transmit sagely insights, there was a need for an alternative linguistic medium: For Shao, this medium was his special style of poetic writing.

Part 3: Mirrored Poeting as Companion to Mirrored Observing

Continuing his personal testimony in the preface to his poetry collection, Shao explains that reaching the state of sincerity and selflessness that allows “observing things on the basis of things” implies an element of “forgetting” and attaining a state of mind emotionally detached from the immediate circumstances of one’s

21 Earlier in the preface, Shao makes it clear that “observing things on the basis of things”, or observing each realm with reference to itself, will guarantee that things will not harm one another (Shao 2010, 179–80). For a translation of this passage, see Chu (1998, 247–48).

22 See also Katz (2009a, 53–55).

23 “Observing things according to structure” means considering them according to the categories they belong to within the framework of the fourfold classification, explained by Shao in his *Inner Chapters on Observing Things* (see Katz 2020, 21–22).

life.²⁴ “Observing things on the basis of things” in its directness is a simple “mirroring” of reality independent of a specific perspective or words. The only activity that accompanied Shao’s practice of observing was his poetry, because like observing it did not follow rules or a premeditated agenda, but rather was “mirrored”, simply reflecting things and situations that Shao encountered:

The only thing that I did not forget was poetry, and even though I say that I did not forget it, in reality it was as if I was forgetting. What does it mean? What [I] do is different from what others do. What [I] do is not restricted to rules and tones, and does not follow [what is] loved and [what is] hated; it is not established on the firm and the necessary, nor does it seek reputation. [It is] like a mirror that reflects the form, like a bell that echoes the sound.

所未忘者獨有詩在焉，然而雖曰未忘，其實亦若忘之矣。何者？謂其所作異乎人之所作也。所作不限聲律，不沿愛惡，不立固必，不希名譽，如鑒之應形，如鍾之應聲。(ibid., 180)

Written in a distinctive, simple style, Shao’s poems were not “composed” or “created” (*zuoshi* 作詩), but rather “chanted” (*yin* 吟). Shao believed that his “chanting” or “poeting” was a natural outcome of a life based on the practice of observing.²⁵ In a long poem entitled “A Ditty of Head-and-Tale” (*shouweiyin* 首尾吟), Shao explicitly states that he does not write poems intentionally. Poetry appears naturally as a result of his experience of observing:

It is not that Yaofu likes poeting,
It is poetry when Yaofu awakes from a sleep.
After a dream old pleasures at first seem all alike,
[When] I sober up after wine, all previous affairs seem barely notable.
Relying on scriptures in life and death the heart does not change,
Although separated [from the world, a person] of rivers and lakes, I do
not lose the path.
This is why [it is possible to look] into this and observe the utmost
structure,
It is not that Yaofu likes poeting.

堯夫非是愛吟詩，詩是堯夫睡覺時。
夢後舊歡初髣髴，酒醒前事略依稀。

24 For the idea of forgetting (*wang* 忘), see *Zhuangzi* (chap. 6).

25 Many poems in Shao Yong’s poetry collection refer to his practice of observing things. See, for example, Shao (2010, 405, 409, 410, 416–21, 423, 435, 438, 442, 453, 456, 467, 470, 479, 510).

任經生死心無異，雖隔江湖路不迷。
因向此中觀至理，堯夫非是愛吟詩。(ibid., 532)

Several poems in “A Ditty of Head-And-Tail”, each of 134 stanzas starting and ending with the phrase “It is not that Yaofu [Shao Yong] likes poeting”, mention the profound silent knowledge from which his poetry arises: “it is not that Yaofu likes poeting,/ It is poetry when Yaofu attains knowledge in silence” (堯夫非是愛吟詩，詩是堯夫默識時) (ibid., 517). In one poem of this cycle, Shao reminds the reader once again that the world is ever changing; therefore, the perspective of the observer should be flexible:

It is not that Yaofu likes poeting,
It is poetry when Yaofu [attains] knowledge in silence.
The sun and the moon go out and come back,
Forests and gardens flourish and wither again.
Although climbing the mountain one can see from above,
Getting close to the water, one does not know whether it is deep or
shallow.
In the world, the matters of profound [depth] have no limits,
It is not that Yaofu likes poeting.

堯夫非是愛吟詩，詩是堯夫默識時。
日月既來還卻往，園林纔盛又成衰。
登山高下雖然見，臨水淺深那不知。
世上高深事無限，堯夫非是愛吟詩。(ibid., 536)

In another poem, Shao reveals that the practice of observing allows him to discern the most subtle mysteries of existence, so that he can “grasp the meaning” (*deyi* 得意):

It is not that Yaofu likes poeting,
It is poetry when Yaofu grasps the meaning.
Things [look] into things and observe the mystery of great importance,
Humans within humans see the most subtle signs.
The mystery of great importance in things is seen by my eyes,
The most subtle signs in humans are known in the heart/mind.
Even if there is gold all these [insights] cannot be bought anywhere,
It is not that Yaofu likes poeting.

堯夫非是愛吟詩，詩是堯夫得意時。
物向物中觀要妙，人於人上看幾微。

物中要妙眼前見，人上幾微心裏知。
且是有金無處買，堯夫非是愛吟詩。(ibid., 539)

The deepest mysteries and the most subtle signs can only be discerned and understood in one's heart/mind, in silence, through mirrored observing. Heaven does not speak and therefore Shao, like Confucius, proclaims that he "would not like to speak". Yet, precisely at that moment when the silent understanding occurs, one's creativity, no longer bound to self-reliant ambitions, gushes like a waterfall, resulting in abundant poems:

It is not that Yaofu likes poeting,
It is poetry when Yaofu grasps the meaning.
At the moment of grasping meaning I rise up and dance,
At the point of wielding a brush I am often able to fly.
In the dark sea of the South, ten thousand miles away,
the Peng-bird first rises up,²⁶
In the Liao Sea, a thousand years old, the crane first comes back.²⁷
How can I stop at writing only one poem?
It is not that Yaofu likes poeting.

堯夫非是愛吟詩，詩是堯夫得意時。
正得意時嘗起舞，到麾毫處輒能飛。
南溟萬里鵬初舉，遼海千年鶴乍歸。
豈止一詩而已矣，堯夫非是愛吟詩。(ibid., 518)

The fact that Heaven does not speak does not leave humans speechless. Sagely humans able to overcome their private self and gain an all-embracing perspective can speak in the name of Heaven:

All things have structure, what about myself?
Although Heaven does not speak, humans act on behalf of it.²⁸
Acting on behalf of Heavenly effort, there is no limit to speaking.
It is not that Yaofu likes poeting.

物皆有理我何者，天且不言人代之。
代了天工無限說，堯夫非是愛吟詩。(ibid., 529)

26 Reference to the *Zhuangzi* 莊子, chap 1.

27 Reference to the crane of Liaodong (Liaodong he 辽东鹤), an immortal who was homesick. See *Classified Collection Based on the Classics and Other Literature* (Yiwen leiju 藝文類聚), juan 78.

28 Reference to the *Book of Documents*, "Counsels of Gaoyao" (*Shangshu* 尚書, "Gaoyao mo" 皋陶謨): "The effort is Heaven's, humans act on behalf of it (*tiangong ren qi dai zhi* 天工人其代之)".

Shao Yong's "limitless" and "unrestrained" poetic words, generated naturally in a process of observing, were the medium for transferring sagely teaching and articulating what is intended by silent Heaven. At the same time, Shao's disciplined engagement with poetic writing assisted his practice of observing. Observing and poeiting complemented each other. In this, Shao Yong's approach to poetic writing was revolutionary: Like observing, it was perceived as a process of poeiting that allowed one to step into the realm of the beyond,²⁹ advancing in the way of becoming a sage. As the Ming dynasty scholar Chen Xianzhang 陳獻章 (1428–1500), who greatly appreciated Shao's personality and poetry, poignantly pointed out, "Before *Striking the Earth* there was still no poetry,/ After *Striking the Earth* [what is considered poetry] can be doubted (擊壤之前未有詩, 擊壤之後詩堪疑)" (Chen Xianzhang 1987, 625).

Conclusion

For pre-Song and Song dynasty Confucian thinkers, achieving sageliness was the ultimate goal of self-cultivation. However, whereas many of them believed that one cultivated moral conduct studying Confucian scriptures, Shao claimed that observing was the most direct path to cultivating the sagely state of mind.³⁰ While Shao did not deny the wisdom revealed in Confucian texts, he claimed that these sagely insights are mere "traces" left by the sagely mind.³¹ Therefore, learning from scriptures, although beneficial, could have only a partial effect: Observing was much more efficient, since it was a technique that granted direct access to a sagely way of perception. Sagely perception, based on the ability to be thoroughly impartial, is possible due to the shared "thingness" of all things: Humans, although the most refined and intelligent, are in their essence things, and even the sage, the most refined and intelligent among humans, is a thing. The recognition of this shared "thingness" is the recognition of the fact that within the multitude of things and phenomena in the world there exists an interpenetrating structure (*li* 理). Observing things

29 The idea of reaching into "beyond" and "outside" of the visible reality was mentioned in the opening lines of "A Great Ditty on Observing a *Weiqi* [game]" (Shao 2010, 181). Philosophically, this realm was signified by Shao as the "before-Heaven" (*xiantian* 先天). For an explanation of this idea in Shao's thought, see Wyatt (1996, 195–207); Wang (2003).

30 On possible philosophical connections between Shao Yong's thought and Ming dynasty Confucian scholar Chen Xianzhang, considered as one of the representatives of the school of heart/mind (*xinxue* 心學), see Katz (2009b).

31 In one of his poems, Shao writes that while sagely persons rely on their heart/mind, worthy persons rely on "traces": "The sage understands heart/mind,/ the worthy understands traces./ Understanding heart/mind one has no limits,/ understanding traces one does not reach the ultimate. (聖人了心, 賢人了跡。了心無窮, 了跡無極。)" (Shao 2010, 408).

according to this structure means observing them “on the basis” of their “thingness”, according to categories, and therefore observing objectively. According to Shao, this kind of observing is “mirrored”: Instead of making judgments, the mind of an observer, like a mirror, merely reflects in itself the observed things.

Absence of deliberate judgment allows the observer to perceive a greater picture: Like the spectator of the *weiqi* game who can simultaneously see the moves on the board and discern the players’ mindset, something impossible for the player engaged in the game, the sagely observer who “observes things on the basis of things” is able to perceive reality in its fullness. Such sagely observing makes it possible, in Shao Yong’s words, “to perceive many through the one” and, even more importantly, to represent Heaven, speaking on its behalf.

That representing Heaven, which does not speak, is the responsibility of the sage was accepted by many Confucian scholars who considered Confucian scriptures as transmitting sagely knowledge and ultimate truths. While Shao Yong accepted this basic premise, he suggested that words recorded in Confucian scriptures cannot fully transmit the sagely mind and grant access to sageliness, because Confucian scriptures only capture fragments of sagely sayings, and therefore do not allow direct access to sagely perception. The directness needed for communicating sagely insights was found by Shao in the poetic word, chanted and written in his special style. Unlike the language of regular Chinese poetic writing, informed by centuries of tradition and regulated by a set of strict rules, Shao’s poetic language was intentionally simple, almost colloquial: While the majority of his poems adhered to a clear structure, he avoided using sophisticated metaphors, allusions and other features that characterize Chinese poetry. He even refused to call his poetic creations “writing” or “composing” poetry, using instead the term “chanting”. Spontaneous and presumably effortless “chanting” or poeting was intended as a direct medium for communicating sagely insights gained in the process of observing and, at the same time, for assisting in this process. Shao’s poeting constituted a new sagely language, most suited for transmitting the sagely mind and representing the otherwise silent Heaven. “Heaven does not speak.” Yet, observing and a poetic impulse, in their inclusiveness, immediacy, and directness, do allow the sagely person to communicate with the ultimate reality, representing it in words. It was observing and poeting perceived simultaneously in their immediacy and in continuity that allowed the Chinese seeker of sageliness to be attentive to the silent voice of Heaven.³²

32 The perception of Heaven (*tian* 天), considered as the ultimate reality in Chinese settings, as silent differs from the perception of the ultimate reality accepted in the worldview influenced by Abrahamic religions, where God is perceived as speaking. Yet, although the Chinese mode of sagely

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communication with Heaven differs from that of the Hebrew prophets to whom divine will is revealed through the spoken word, poetic vision made possible by means of observing and poeting played an important role in both traditions. For the perception of God as speaking, see for example *The Book of Numbers* 12:6. For examples of scholarly discussion on the topic, see Wolterstorff (1995); Levine (1998); Quinn (2001). For the importance of poetic vision as an element of prophetic inspiration, see Kalir (1974). On connections between prophecy and poetry, see Grierson (1937); Rowland (2005). See also Rowley (1956); Strickmann (2005); Yao (2016).

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