

Preface

It was a typical morning in the Chinese class. Teacher was explaining how the background, the personal sensibility, of these poets was different from ours, how we needed to feel ourselves into their world in order to understand what they wrote; how names like Caesar and Cleopatra were replaced by others, and how, when those poets looked up at the sky, they saw different constellations. One student, in a corner of the room, was taking this in with an air of intensity. He said later that it “blew his mind.”

Well it might. It was supposed to.

Chinese poetry lives in its own world; a world made up of persons and events of its own past. A Chinese past. The poems and prose pieces in this book are designed to populate the mental world of the reader with specimens of this background: with tragic heroes (Syàng Yǔ) or heroines (Green Pearl), with dynastic founders (Tsáu Tsāu, Lǐ Shì-mín), and with master spirits both elusive (Táu Chyēn) and exuberant (Lǐ Bwó), which the poets and their readers knew. If someone tires of hearing about Wáng Jāu-jyŵn, we can only reply that the tradition does not; that she represents the tragedy of all neglected talent and the shame of any foreign domination, just as concubine Green Pearl is an emblem of duty and ultimate devotion, whether female or male.

The world of the Chinese poem is also made up of earlier Chinese poems. This is a virtuoso tradition, both aware of itself and varying its previous selves. To appreciate poem C, it thus helps to have read the earlier poems A and B. This book seeks to provide a sense of what it is like to read a poem that way.

It also seeks to show how the poems themselves work: what they sound like, how they are arranged to make a certain literary effect. Chinese word tone cannot be brought into English without undue ingenuity, but features with available counterparts, such as rhyme, meter, and parallelism, *are* preserved. This much, it seems to us, readers have a right to expect.

The resulting translations might not get by a modern editor, in this age of the postformal poem. But our question is this: If we start by lying about *poems*, where shall we stop? Carl Sandburg, in the preface to his book *Wind Song*, justifies his nonuse of rhyme and meter by the example of the Chinese poets who would here be spelled Lǐ Bwó and Dù Fǔ. Sandburg may have been misled by some translations he had read, but whose prefaces he had skipped, about the kind of poems Lǐ Bwó and Dù Fǔ actually wrote.

The reason a modern Western reader picks up a book of Chinese poems, one imagines, is to get something a bit different. In this book, the differentness of the Chinese poems which it includes has been, as far as possible, respected.

Otherwise, why bother?

This is not a History of Chinese Poetry, which would have to be larger and more representative. This book must be short, not to weary its readers, and yet include enough examples to fulfil its purpose. The result is a group of mostly short poems (the long rhapsody fù 賦, the typical court poem of Hàn, is absent), in which, of necessity, certain standard themes and subjects will often reappear: the soldier on campaign, the hermit, the lonely wife, the amorous courtesan. The treatments of Shǔn Ywē (the virtual inventor of Chinese poetry) and of some Táng and Sùng figures may suggest what the book would have been like, had it been long enough to do better justice to its poets.

The earliest Chinese poems are those in the classic Shī 詩 court repertoire. Fù rhapsodies and popular lyrics (ywèfǔ 閼府) typify the unified Hàn. Poetry advanced in technique (with input from popular traditions) in Six Dynasties. Táng was the acme of the shī, the poem with the same number of syllables in each line. The polymetric verse (tsz 詞) became popular in Sùng. The aria (chyǔ 曲) was the mainstay of Ywǎn (Mongol period) opera. There were no major formal innovations after that, which is why this book concludes there. That and a certain sense of, well, attenuation in the last Ywǎn poems.

To make Chinese names less opaque for readers with English alphabetic reflexes, we spell them by the old rule “consonants as in English, vowels as in Italian,” plus *a* as in at, *v* as in up, *r* as in fir, and *dz* as in adz; *w* is “umlaut u.” Diacritics represent tone contours: hīgh, rísing, lǒw, fàlling. Book names are given in angle brackets (*Analects+); fictive persons in quotes (“Hán-shān”).

Headnotes for each poem or prose passage give personal background and literary connections. In dates, *c* is for “circa,” the *most likely* year; “xm” is the date some little-known figure passed the highest civil-service examination. Dates “AD” are given as the mere number; “BC” ones with a prefixed zero; thus 0221 = 221 BC; 317 = 317 AD.

Metrical formulas are provided when needed. The heptameter quatrain, with seven syllables in a line, would be 7777. In the 77737 variant, the short line creates a pause, a tiny emphasis, before the end. Extrametrical syllables preceding the counted ones are indicated by superscripts, for example ³3³7755 (p173, Lí Bwó). For an effective use of these incipits, see Lí Chīng-jàu (p338).

We owe much to fellow students; to our guiding spirit Hellmut Wilhelm (to whom this book is affectionately dedicated); to our own students in later years, who may be amused to see sections of their old textbook in these pages; and to criticisms from many friends in still later years. Now that these efforts have become a book, we hope that readers will find something to interest them, and that the poets it includes may find new friends in the new century.

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10 December 2019