

Shǔn Chywǎn-chí (c650-c713)

On an Old Theme

Shown to Chyáu Jǐ-jǐ

Lǐ Jǐ reigned from 650 on. In 654 he brought from the nunnery where she had retired, one Wǔ Jàu, who had entered Lǐ Shǔ-mín's palace at the age of thirteen in 637. She quickly superseded the Empress (her best move involved the murder of her own child), ruled as the Táng "Emperor" from 684, and changed the name Táng to "Jōu" in 690. To consolidate her position, she expanded the civil-service system, thus bringing to court new talent that owed its place to her. Among the new recruits were Shǔn Chywǎn-chí and Sùng Jǐ-wǎn, who passed the palace examinations in 675. They became prominent in the court of "Emperor" Wǔ and her favorites the Jāng brothers, and were the architects of the finished early Táng poetic and prosodic style. This piece, not as fresh as Lù Jàu-lín's, preceding, is on an established ("old") theme: a lonely wife whose husband is away at the wars. The integration of this well-worn theme with the new techniques of tonal balance and couplet structure gives the poem a mixture of dignity and grace which tell us that we have finally arrived at what Táng means in literature: the great culmination of a long poetic development.

The young wife sits within her hall,
 where fragrant incense streams,
 Ocean swallows nest in pairs
 on ornamented beams;
 Ninth month, and the fulling-block
 the falling leaves doth urge,
 Ten years at the battlefield:
 of Eastern Lyáu she dreams.
 From White Wolf River's northern bank
 no more do letters come,
 On Scarlet Phoenix City's edge
 so long the nighttime seems;
 The one for whom her heart is sad
 she cannot see at all –
 Upon her weaving, evermore
 the brilliant moonlight gleams.

Sùng Jī-wèn (c650-712)

Crossing the Dà-yǔ Range
(705)

In 705, Táng loyalists overthrew “Emperor” Wǔ, restored the Táng, and moved against the “Jōu” courtiers. These were not imprisoned, but instead given office in the least desirable of places: the new and miasmal south. Sùng Jī-wèn is here on his way to a post in southernmost China (his colleague Shǔn Chywán-chí, even less lucky, was sent all the way to the north coast of present-day Vietnam). The range in question, which divided older China from its new southern frontier, is also called Plum Range, from its many plumtrees; their blossoming, in line 4, provides a last link with northern scenery. For all the poet’s unhappiness, it is hard for an observer not to feel that separation from court life has a wonderfully concentrating effect on a poet’s literary imagination. The midpoem shift of viewpoint is from the details of present banishment (the southward bird) to the hope of future return (the clearing of the storm). The final couplet achieves spaciousness by emerging from the auspicious haze of the third couplet to the clarity of direct statement. “Cháng-shā,” in the last line, names not his own exile, but that of the Hàn scholar Jyǎ Yí.

Once past this range, I leave the State behind;
I stop the carriage; toward my home I gaze.
My soul is with the southward-winged birds;
My tears are from the northern flower-sprays.
The mountain rain has just begun to clear;
The river clouds will soon be turned to haze –
If only I return again at last,
I will not dare to mind my Cháng-shā days

Sùng Jī-wèn (c650-712)

Crossing the Hàn River

(706)

The banished courtiers returned in the following year, under an amnesty granted by the new emperor. This poem is also attributed to Lǐ Pín, but this may be posterity's way of legitimizing a popular anthology piece (the loyalist feeling against Empress Wǔ's poets still ran high). The Hàn River, a tributary of the Yángdǔ, marks a return to the north. The time progression between the couplets (his exile in the first, and his return journey in the second) is ingeniously managed; the moment of pardon is elided. What wins the public's favor is rather sentiment: so anxious is the poet about his family that, paradoxically, as he comes near home, he cannot bear to ask for news of them.

Beyond the Ranges, letters do not come,
 The winter passes, and the spring drags by;
 The nearer home, the more concerned I grow –
 I do not dare to ask the passersby.

Hv Jf-jāng (659-744)

Returning Home

Hv Jf-jāng, formal name Ji-jvñ, is now remembered only for this poem and for his generosity to Lǐ Bwó in the year 744, but he had a long and distinguished career in office, blazing also quite a trail as a drinker of wine. Like Lǐ Bwó, he could compose brilliantly when under the influence, and in calligraphy, the other art which is improved by intoxication, he was a recognized master. Of this piece we know only what it tells us: it was written on the occasion of a return to his native south after a long absence. Its childlike diction easily incorporates the question of a group of actual children, who do not recognize the returning native, making him feel out of place in his own home (the reverse of the situation in the Hàn lyric on p87, where it is the home that has suffered). Home was important to Hv Jf-jāng, who after an illness in his later years renounced the world, converted his residence into a temple (the emperor personally wrote an inscription for it), and retired to a life of contemplation. The poet, in this piece still in his active years, but perhaps beginning to feel his way toward an exit from his public career, finds that absence has cut him off from his natural human situation.

Young and small I went away,
 old and grown I come,
 My dialect is still the same,
 my hair has suffered some;
 The children, now, all look at me,
 and don't know who I am –
 They smile and ask the visitor
 where he may be from