Hán Yẁ (768-824)

Farewell to Poverty
(811)

Hán-shān's austerity has its counterpart in the idiosyncratic Hán Yẁ. He advocated "old-style" prose; he and a few colleagues sought to revive the then neglected Mencius and with it the true style of antiquity. His own poetry is angular rather than ingratiating. All this put him at odds with the literary and political establishment, and led to hardship, both early and late. In this wry self-portrait, he accepts poverty as a greater blessing than wealth.

In the sixth year of Elemental Peace, in the first month, on the second day of the cycle, in the dark of the moon, the master had his slave Syīng-syīng plait willow-fronds to make a carriage, and

Bind grass together to make a boat;
filled them with wet rice and stocked them with dry.
Oxen they tied beneath the yoke:
they hauled the sail to the mast-top high.

Thrice did he bow to the Demons of Poverty, and addressed them after this fashion: "I have heard that a day is set for your departure. This lowly one dares not ask by what route, but

ventures to ready both carriage and boat,
to fill them with wet rice and with dry.
The day is propitious, the hour is nigh,
the augury good where'er you hie.
A bowl of food do you eat up,
a beaker of drink do you drain dry.
Arm around comrade, hand holding friend,
from old may you leave, to new may you wend.
On dust do you ride, with wind do you race,
vying with lightning for pride of place.

There is

No impediment holds you back,

and I in addition have most thoughtfully provided

farewell gifts beside your place.

Will not all of you bethink yourselves of leaving?

He held his breath and bent his ear;
a sound as of voices he seemed to hear.
As though it whistled, as though it cried;
plangently far and stridently near.
The hairs of his head all stood on end,
he squunched his head down low for fear.

He thought there was, or there was not: but then at last the sound grew clear, as though there were someone saying:

We have ever dwelt with you,
all your forty-odd years through.
Since you were a babe in arms,
we ne'er misled you as you grew.
As you studied, as you plowed,
as you strove for honors proud;
You we followed: you alone –
never have we been untrue.
Gods of gates, sprites of doors,
at us have jeered, at us have cursed;
Pursued by slander, weighed with shame,
we have been constant through the worst."
When you were banished to southern wastes
to be baked in the heat and steamed in the wet,
For us it was no native place:
the hundred demons were 'gainst us set.
Four years you taught in Higher School:
leeks at morning, salt at night –
We alone for you did care,
other men ignored you quite.
From the beginning til the end,
by hardships we were not deterred.
Our hearts conceal no other plan,
our lips vouchsafe no parting word;
That we are now about to leave,
from what high source can you have heard?

It must be that

Our honored master to slanders lists,
and wrong intentions has inferred.
Demons are we, not mortal men,
in carriage or boat we do not ride;
Our nostrils know not stench from sweet,
your wet rice and dry you may cast aside.
One and one alone we are,
your "comrades" and "friends" are so much rot.
If you truly know it all, can you number us or not?
If our number you can tell,
then indeed you really know;
If you reveal our circumstance,
we dare not but to turn and go."

The master answered them and said “Are you indeed unknown to me?

You comrades all, you band of friends,
of six you’re shy, past four you reach;
You’d come to ten except for five,
were seven with two more in the breech.
A separate sphere is governed by all,
a secret name is given to each.
You jostle my hand that I spill my soup,
you twist my throat to offensive speech.

Over and over again,

My face and visage you hateful make,
my every word you do impeach –
Such is the lesson that you teach.

The first is named Ethical Poverty:

Haughty and proud and self-aware,
he loathes the round and prefers the square;
To low intrigue he will not stoop,
to do an ill he cannot bear.

The next is named Learned Poverty:

Deep in esoteric lore
plumbing every hidden line;
Overviewing all the names,
grasping the Divine Design.

The next is named Refined Poverty:

Versatile in many arts,
full of idiosyncrasies;
Will not follow fashion’s way:
himself alone he seeks to please.

The next is named Destined Poverty:

Shadow longer than his form:
ugly visage, comely heart;
Given less in recompense,
although he plays a larger part.

The next is named Faithful Poverty:

Flesh he’d gladly sacrifice,
heart he’d vomit for a friend;
Stretch and strain to be of use –
and be discarded in the end.
These five demons I have named
are my five calamities
They keep me hungry, keep me cold,
make me many enemies;

They make me wander from my way,
lost in life's interstices.
At dawn I may regret some act,
but evening brings that act's reprise.
I drive them off but they come back,
like yapping dogs and buzzing bees."

Ere he had done speaking, the five demons all together
Opened their eyes and stuck out their tongues
leaped in the air and fell to earth;
Clapped their hands and stamped their feet,
looked at each other and roared with mirth.

Then they gravely spoke to the master, saying
You know the names of all of us,
and of all our deeds the sum.
To drive us out and make us go,
were little wise and greatly dumb.
Man is born in a single age:
how long, in the end, till that is past?
But we have made a name for you,
a hundred ages long to last.
The mean man and the gentleman:
their hearts within are not the same.
Only by being against your times,
can you achieve a heavenly fame.
You'd take in hand your precious gem,
and exchange it for a fleece;
Surfeited with sweet and fat,
you long instead for gruel and grease.
That o'er the world your name resounds,
to whom if not to us is't due?
Despite the hardships we have met,
we never have grown cold to you.
And if you doubt our promises,
just look within your Shr̄ and Shū."

At this, the master
Hung his head and sadly sighed;
raised his hands and owned disgrace;
Burned the carriage and the boat,
and led them to the highest place.

Hán Yẁ (768-824)

Autumn Thoughts
(c812)

Poverty comes up again in this series of eleven vignettes, in the "old" loose prosodic style which Hán Yẁ is notable for cultivating. This time he cannot find the energy to be humorous; he is instead tired and grumpy. He is gruff about the autumn leaves, like himself being meaninglessly blown from one thing to another. He is short with his little son, who will die within the next few years, because Yẁ's own Ethical Poverty will have hastened his death. It is at the point of hardship to others that affection for poverty can waver. The Analects, in urging readers to any necessary personal sacrifices (p12), had left this aspect of the matter undealt with. This poem deals with it.

8

The swirling leaves are fluttering to the earth,
Wherever breezes blow them, they are shed;
There seems a meaning in their rustling sounds,
As headlong, with no purpose, they are sped.
In empty room the dusk winds down to dark,
I sit in silence; never a word is said;
The boy comes in the room and up to me,
He trims the lamp, and puts it near my head.
He asks a question, but I don't reply,
He brings me dinner; I'm not int'rested;
He goes and sits against the western wall,
He chants along, and several poems are read –
The author isn't of our present age,
A thousand years and more he has been dead;
His words are of the sorrows he had met,
And make me all the more dispirited
I turn around and say to him "You; boy –
Just put the book away and go to bed!"
A grownup has a lot of work to do,
And years of it stretch endlessly ahead.

Memorial on the Buddha Bone
(819)

Years have passed. Hán Yẁ, ardent rediscoverer of the native tradition, here courageously protests the Emperor's plan to receive at the Palace a finger-bone relic of the foreign Buddha. On the sensitive issue of what is "barbarian" and what "Chinese," see the cry of the monk Dàu-jīng (p130). As in his championing of the Mencius, Hán Yẁ is rethinking the balance of the whole traditional culture.

Your subject says: I submit that Buddhism is a way of the Yí and Dí tribes which came to the Central States in late Hàn; it did not exist in antiquity. Of old, the God of Yellow reigned a hundred years; his age was a hundred ten. Shàu-hǎu reigned eighty years; his age was a hundred. Jywǣn-syẁ reigned seventy-nine years; his age was ninety-eight. Emperor Gù reigned seventy years; his age was a hundred five. Emperor Yáu reigned ninety-eight years: his age was a hundred eighteen. The ages of Emperors Shùn and Yw̌ were a hundred. In those days the world was at peace, and people lived to advanced ages in contentment and happiness, and yet the Central States did not yet have Buddhism.

Tāng of Yīn lived to a hundred. Of Tāng's posterity, Tàı-mòu reigned seventy-five years; Wǔ-dīng fifty-nine years. The records do not tell what age they reached, but it cannot have been less than a hundred. King Wʌ́n of Jōu lived to ninety-seven; King Wǔ to ninety-three. King Mù reigned a hundred years. In those days, the Buddhist Law had not yet come to the Central States: it was not through serving Buddha that these things were as they were.

In the time of Emperor Míng of Hàn, the Buddhist Law first appeared. Emperor Míng reigned only eighteen years; in the turmoil of the times he had no successor, nor were his sacrifices long performed. Sùng, Chí, Lyáng, Chʌ́n, and Ngwèı served the Buddha ever more assiduously, and endured for ever briefer spans. Emperor Wǔ of Lyáng reigned forty-eight years. First and last he thrice dedicated his life to Buddha; in rites of shrine and temple he used no animal sacrifices; he ate one meal each day, and that of vegetables and fruit; in the end he was routed by Hóu Jǐng and starved in Táı-chʌ́ng, and his state was soon obliterated. He served the Buddha in search of blessings, and found instead disasters. From this one may know that the Buddha is not worthy to be served.

When Our Founder first received the dynastic sacrifices in succession from the Swéı, he took counsel to do away with it. The ministers of that time were not extensive in wisdom or experience, and could not deeply understand the way of the Former Kings or proprieties ancient and modern, to carry out the Sagely insight and cure this evil; and the matter came to naught. Your servant has long grieved at this. He submits that His Majesty, augustly divine, alike sapient in civil and martial affairs, is inwardly wise and nobly bold, without a peer for thousands of years: at the beginning of his reign he would not let the people become monks or nuns, or build temples and towers. Your servant had always felt that Gāu-dzǔ's intent would certainly be carried out by the hand of His Majesty, or, if this could not then be done, that this evil would at any rate not be made to flourish.

Now one hears that His Majesty has ordered all the monks to welcome the Buddha bone in Fỳng-syáng, and will watch from a Palace tower as it is conveyed to the Inner Precincts; and has likewise ordered the several temples to welcome it with feasting. Though your subject is very stupid, he knows that His Majesty is not deceived by the Buddha, and that he makes this gesture of respect to invoke good fortune, that the harvest be rich and the people happy, and, in accord with the wishes of others to prepare for the residents of the capital an unusual spectacle: a mere plaything. How could there be one as sagely wise as this, who was yet willing to believe this sort of thing? And yet the common people are stupid and dull, easily deceived and with difficulty made to understand; if they see His Majesty do thus, they will feel that in his true heart he serves Buddha. All will say that since the Son of Heaven is a great sage, and since he with all his heart respects the Buddha, who are the common people that they should any longer grudge their lives? They will singe their foreheads and burn off their fingers. In their tens and in their hundreds they will congregate; they will cast off their clothes and scatter their money; from morning till evening they will urge each other on, fearing only lest they should be tardy in so doing. Old and young will rush to abandon their livelihood, and if some prohibition is not made forthwith, they will further flock to the temples, where they will surely hack off their arms and mutilate their bodies in homage, thus injuring usage and ruining custom, and becoming a laughingstock on all sides. This would be no minor matter.

On this last page Hán Yẁ's disgust gets the better of him, and with the phrase "for no reason" he undermines his earlier tact, and directly offends the Emperor by denying him cover for his intended actions. The peachtree has many magical associations (p30, p129), and peachwood wands were used by the exorcists of baleful spirits.

Now Buddha was in origin a man of the Yí and Dí: he knew not the speech of the Central States and his clothing was of a different style: with his mouth he spoke not the Former Kings' approved words, and on his body he wore not the Former Kings' approved garments. He knew not the protocol between ruler and minister, the feeling between father and son. If he were still alive at the present time, and, receiving the command of State, he were to come to pay court in the capital, His Majesty would countenance and receive him, but would do no more than meet him once in audience, entertain him once as a guest, and present him one suit of clothes. Then he would dispatch him from the realm, lest the multitude be deceived. How much less, when his body has long been dead, should this rotten bone, this inauspicious remnant, be received in the inmost palace? Confucius said "Respect the spirits but keep them at a distance." When the lords of old made visits of condolence in their states, they ordered invocators with peachwood wands to conjure away ill omens, and only then did they proceed to condole. Now, for no reason, one takes up this decayed object, and personally observes and inspects it. No invocators precede it, no peachwood wands are used on it. The officials do not speak of the wrong, the censors do not mention the impropriety. Your servant is truly ashamed at this, and begs that the bone be transmitted to the responsible officer, who will throw it into water and fire, and destroy it forever, ending the doubts of the world, preventing the uncertainties of posterity, and letting the people of the world know that the deeds of the Great Sage surpass the commonplace by a myriad myriadfold. Would this not be splendid? Would this not be timely?

If the Buddha has a soul, and is able to wreak vengeance, then whatever retribution there may be for this, let it fall alone upon your subject, and as high Heaven is witness, your subject will not complain.

With utmost gratitude and loyalty, your subject respectfully presents this memorial; truly in trembling, truly in fear.

Hán Yẁ (768-824)

Banished

On Reaching Orchid Pass; Shown to His Nephew Syāng
(819)

Thanks to a strong stand on his behalf by much of capital officialdom, the sentence originally passed on Hán Yẁ for his anti-Buddhist memorial was reduced to banishment to Cháujōu, in the far south. He does not expect to return alive, and at the furthest point where anyone was allowed to accompany him on his journey, charges his nephew to give his remains a decent burial (for Hán Yẁ, a specialist in ritual but with no son still living, this wish is especially strong). A bystander might be disposed to sneer at Hán Yẁ's courage, which had only done him injury. This is not the point. For the point, go back yet once more to the Analects (p55). One does not labor in a cause because it is safe, but because it is necessary. Yẁ's own version of this point (couplet 3) is that he could have pleaded age and illness as a reason for not acting in this risky matter – as it turned out, he had only five years to live – but out of a sense of duty he did not do so. Nor was the protest without later effect. The laicizing of Buddhist institutions in the years 842-845 had economic motives (a significant portion of China's wealth had become immobilized in temple land and property). It had support in the rival schemes of court Dàuists, But it also intended to halt a cultural trend, and for this Hán Yẁ's recklessness had led the way. Those who prefer their poets unsullied by affairs will have their turn presently. Meanwhile, Hán Yẁ has a word for us. A craggy word: a "new"style poem displaying oblique (couplet 1) ane symmetrical (couplet 2) parallelism, as though his stubborn streak still insisted on being heard.

A page of morning memorial,
    at Ninefold Heaven's door,
That eve to Cháujōu I'm assigned,
    eight thousand leagues and more:
The range of Chín is screened by cloud,
    my home somewhere behind,
Orchid Pass is wrapped in snow,
    my horse steps not before;
I wished, for the sake of Sageliness,
    to sweep the filth away:
Could then I grudge these last weak years
    until my life is o'er?
Some reason you must surely have,
    to come with me so far -
The better to gather up my bones
    from the miasmal shore??

Mv̀ng Jyāu (751-814)

Self-Portrait By Night

(792)

Hán Yẁ left no literary progeny. Of his circle of friends, nearly all predeceased him. It is easy to see in this poem, with its demons and its discontent, the weird, sour streak that awakened a response in Hán Yẁ. In Mv̀ng these qualities are contorted into a bitterness that is less than pleasant on the tongue; he was read, but not liked, in later ages. This piece is from a period of depression after two examination failures (the image for examination success, referred to in line 7, was "breaking a cassia bough"). Mv̀ng hints ("no straight bough") that an honest man cannot pass, though he does not go as far as Dù Syẃn-hv̀ will (p332), in abusing those who did pass. Instead, he is largely taken up with his own failure. The poem contemplates suicide (a "shameful death"), but it turns aside at the end, to recall happier days on the deep blue southern rivers of his native Hújōu.

A few years later, in 796, Mv̀ng did at long last pass the state examinations, but poverty and bitterness stayed with him to the end.

I study at night, and do not stop for dawn,
My bitter verse would sadden the demon-spawn;
Why is it that I am not at my ease?
My heart and body are at daggers drawn:
Of shameful death the pain lasts but a trice,
Of shameful life, the shame goes on and on;
The cassia tree has no straight branch to pluck –
I think of azure-river days bygone

Lyǒu Dzūng-ywǽn (773-819)

Preface to the Stupid River Poems (Excerpt)
(c810)

Lyǒu was another associate of Hán Yẁ, and a fellow founder of the new "old" prose style. Surprisingly, for a follower of an anti-Buddhist, he was strongly interested in Buddhism. As a critic of antiquity, he was the first to take the question of the nature of the Analects text farther than had the Hàn commentators; The two mark the beginning of the critical tradition in China. Like Yẁ, he had a troubled career. This much-admired Preface is from his period of banishment to Yǔngjōu in 806; it shows him establishing a home. Like Yẁ (p242), he admits, and thus celebrates, the stupidity (of the old Níng Wǔdž type, p14) which had brought him to this desperately out-of-the-way place.

The journey upstream echoes Táu Chyén (p130). His naming (the word for "dyeing" is "rǎn") is less flamboyant than Lǐ Bwó's (p220), but soon runs wild. This Preface is followed in the original by a reflective essay.

To the north of the Gwàn River there is a stream, which flows eastward until it enters the Syāu. Some say that a Mister Rǎn once lived there, so that the stream was called the Rǎn; others say that it is good for dyeing, and was named Rǎn for this property. Due to my stupidity, I was adjudged guilty, and banished here, north of the Syāu. I took a liking to this stream. I traveled up it for two or three leagues, to its furthest limit, and made my home there.

In ancient times, there was a Vale of Master Stupid. Now that I am living on this stream, I find that its name is disputed, and that the locals are still arguing about it. I cannot but change it to something, so I have changed it to Stupid River. Overlooking Stupid River, I bought a little hill, and made it the Stupid Hill. Going sixty paces northeast from Stupid Hill, one finds a spring; this too I bought for my dwelling, and made it the Stupid Spring. Stupid Spring has six openings, which give onto the level ground below the mountains; it must be fed from above. The six outputs join and zigzag southward; this is the Stupid Slough. I then carried earth and piled stones, blocking it at a narrow place, and made Stupid Pond. East of Stupid Pond, I made a Stupid Hall, and to the south of that, I made a Stupid Pavilion. In the middle of Stupid Pond, I made a Stupid Island. Its fine trees and curious rocks jumbled together, and all these remarkable features of hill and water, will now, because of me, be humiliated with the name Stupid.

Note on Little Stonewall Mountain
(812)

The most influential of Lyǒu's prose pieces are a set of memoirs, written in 809 and 812, of excursions around Yǔngjōu. The other memoirs slide from prose to poetry; this last one is all in prose. Again like Táu Chyén, it begins with a walk upstream, but there they diverge: this piece leads not to a utopia, but to doubt, about the old conundrum of a Maker of the world. It shows Lyǒu's aesthetic and his political instincts at odds with each other: the Maker's inefficiency is still a problem even if we assume his sufficiency. The openly ambiguous last paragraph (often omitted in translation) underscores the uncertainty of the piece.

Crossing Yellow Reed Ridge northward by the West Mountain Road and then descending, there are two roads. One goes westward, and leads to nothing in particular. The other goes north for a little and then turns east; after no more than forty rods the level land comes to an end and the river divides around a tumble of rocks lying sideways from bank to bank. On top, the rocks have the shape of beams and battlements, and from the side there juts something like a screening wall, with a gateway in it. If you peer inside, it is completely black; if you toss a pebble, there comes a hollow splash of water, its echo resonating for a long time before becoming silent again. If you go around to the back you can climb up; the view from the top extends a long way. There is no soil, but fine trees and slender bamboos grow there, more firm and shapely than usual, their spacing and appearance as though some intelligent being had arranged them.

Ah! I have long wondered whether or not there exists a Maker of Things. On finding this spot, I was all the more inclined to consider that there really is. But I also marveled that he did not create these things in the Central Provinces, and arrayed them instead among the savage barbarians, where not in a thousand centuries will they once be properly appreciated. This is surely to labor without any result. It does not seem that a true divinity would behave this way. Is there then, after all, no such being?

Some say it was done as a kindness to the worthy men who might be exiled here; others, that the local spirit can't make great men, but only things like this; hence south of Chǔ there are few men but many rocks. I don't believe either one.

Lyǒu Dzūng-ywǽn (773-819)

River Snow

Lyǒu's poetry is less famous than his prose, but here is an exception. Given his interest in Buddhism, this classic vignette of man in the minimal natural world can be seen as having meditationist overtones. It adds an extra dimension to know that this familiar poem comes sixty years after the Ān Lù-shān Rebellion, when disillusionment with human affairs had become a literary commonplace. Even the usual beauties of nature are blotted out by winter, which covers, attenuates, and purifies. The lone human figure becomes visible for an instant under his straw hat and cape, and then recedes into harmony with the blobs of white on the cold water. "Snow," the theme of this poem, and the answer to its riddling first two lines, appears only as the final rhyme-word. And with that final appearance, the poem comes all at once, as by a stroke of enlightenment, into focus.

The cares of life weigh on all. It is one of the enduring attractions of Chinese poetic tradition to have given voice, and view, to an alternative: peace with nature. These four lines may possibly be the world's favorite Chinese poem.

A thousand hills where birds no longer go,
A myriad paths where footprints do not show;
A single boat, straw cape, straw hat – a man
Fishes alone, in the cold of the river snow

Jyǎ Dǎu (773-819)

Seeking the Hermit and Not Finding Him

The search for longer life in mountains is one of the great themes of the Six Dynasties (p152, p153); there was also the search for the wise individual who because of his higher understanding is living in the mountains (p154). By Táng, there had grown up a specialized variant of the latter theme: the search for a mountain dweller who is so out of tune with the world below that he is not even there to receive callers: an absence more suggestive of deep wisdom than any specific wise words might have been. This theme was crystallized for all time in this poem by Jyǎ Dǎu, a Buddhist monk who had rejoined the world, and who, like Lyǒu Dzūng-ywǽn, was a Hán Yẁ follower.

Here then is the poem; like Lyǒu's, it is a pentameter quatrain. The hermit portrayed, or anyway implied, is the classic gatherer of herbs. The inquirer puts his simple question, and gets his simple answer, which then spreads like the clouds – or like Lyǒu Dzūng-ywǽn's snow – until it covers the whole landscape.

Beneath the pines, I asked the servant-boy,
The master's gone to gather herbs, he said;
But where upon the mountain he might be,
I cannot tell, so thick the clouds are spread.