

# AI QING Selected Poems

艾 青 詩 選



*Edited by Eugene Chen Eoyang*



**AI** QING, one of China's most celebrated modern poets, was born on March 27th, 1910 in Jinhua, Zhejiang Province. In 1928 he attended the National "West Lake" Fine Arts Institute in Hangzhou, where he studied painting. In 1929 he left Shanghai for Paris, where he worked as an apprentice in a private atelier. It was here he started writing poetry.

Back in China in 1932 Ai Qing joined the Association of Chinese Left-wing Artists in Shanghai. In July that year he was arrested: in prison he wrote "Dayanhe — My Wet-nurse" which was published in 1933 under his pen-name, "Ai Qing". He was released in October 1935. Since his imprisonment Ai Qing has given up painting for poetry. These poems show a gradual maturing in his artistic style, use of language and understanding of life.

In 1941 Ai Qing arrived in Yan'an, where he taught at the Lu Xun Institute of Literature and Art. He joined the Chinese Communist Party in 1945.

After the founding of the People's Republic of China in 1949, Ai Qing assumed leading positions in some organizations.

He was sent to Xinjiang Uygur Autonomous Region for sixteen months in 1958 and returned to Beijing in 1962. The poem, "Red", published in *Wenhui Daily* in Shanghai on April 30th, 1962, was his first poem published after his rehabilitation. Since then Ai Qing has published many poems and has visited West Germany, Austria, Italy and the United States.



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*Edited with  
an Introduction and Notes by*  
Eugene Chen Eoyang

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## 艾 青 诗 选

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欧阳楠、彭文兰、玛丽莱·金译

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## Editor's Introduction

### Ai Qing, A Poet of the People

The silence of a poet, particularly one whose work reflects the sufferings and yearnings of a people, is a terrible recrimination. One feels one owes such a poet not only the attention that is deserved, but the attention that was denied. We wonder about experiences he would have written about, now lost forever. We regret the neglect of feelings the poet would have explored in verse, that his poetry would have imprinted on our imaginations. We cannot help but wonder what the effect would have been, on the course of our lives, on the development of our sensibilities, had this lacuna of the imagination not occurred, when a poet, for whatever reason, falls silent.

The poet who calls himself Ai Qing has been writing poetry for half a century; but in that period of productivity, a break of some twenty years occurred. He first made his mark with a collection published in 1936, when he was 26 years old. He published poetry until the late fifties, 1957, when he was sent to a state farm in northwest China as part of the anti-Rightist campaign. Later, he was transferred to another state farm in Xinjiang. From this experience, he was to emerge, in 1975, blind in his right eye. During this interval of almost twenty years, he continued to write poetry, but all of the hundreds of poems he composed are lost. In order to estimate and to gauge the dimensions of this loss, one can only look at his early poetry. It is direct, without apparent artifice; it is personal, yet accessible, sincere but without

idiosyncrasy; it is dramatic, populated with many characters, some described objectively, some more subjectively. He discovered that in speaking his own mind, in expressing his own feelings, in describing his own experiences, he was not so much reaching an audience as writing their poetry. His requirement of honesty to himself, therefore, took on an added responsibility, for in realizing that his voice happened to speak for the people, to be honest with himself, to himself, was in effect to keep faith with those he spoke for. He has never wavered from that self-dedication and that selflessness.

Chinese literary tradition has always taken seriously the genius of the people: its first classic, the *Shi Jing* ("The Book of Songs") was culled, in large measure, from the folk songs of the people; its lyric tradition was enriched by the lilting *zi-ye* songs of the countryside in the Six Dynasties Period; its *ci* poetry took its roots from the "entertainment quarters" and the singing girls who plied their trade; the legends of the people found their way into such "classic" works of fable and imagination as the *Feng-shen yanyi* ("The Investiture of the Spirits"), the *Xiyou ji* ("The Journey to the West"), and the *Liao-zhai zhi-yi* ("Strange Stories from a Studio"); the great collections of fiction in the late Ming — which made *xiao shuo* respectable as literature — derived much of their material from folk legends and anecdotes.

The poetry of Ai Qing takes its place comfortably in this tradition. He has many followers among the less educated but no less discerning segment of the population. The testimony of a coalminer from Kailuan Colliery is typical of this readership: the coalminer did not understand poetry, he confessed, but he could see his own life reflected in Ai Qing's poems. Ai Qing also has his adherents among the educated. The chairman of a Chinese department at a university in China, himself a specialist in pre-Tang Chinese literature, told me that when he was younger and could afford to buy but one book, that book was a volume of Ai

Qing's poems. To this day, he is still able to recite parts of Ai Qing's early works. It is clear that this reader, appreciating both the immediacy of the *Shi Jing* and its remoteness now, did not look for obscurity as the single hallmark of worthwhile literature. Sales figures of books published in China are not always easy to obtain, but we do know that over thirty thousand copies of the 1979 edition of Ai Qing's *Selected Poems* were sold; the 1957 edition went through six printings and sold over 50,000 copies. These figures indicate that Ai Qing is not a "coterie" poet. Even allowing for the factors of a greater population and a lower list price for books, these figures would still compare favorably with the sales of a successful volume of poetry in America, where 3,000 copies is considered impressive.

The poetry of Ai Qing is about time-honored themes: a beggar woman by the side of the road; the selfless love and devotion of a hired wet-nurse; the sense of desolation that accompanies a heavy snowfall — particularly with the associations of death in the color white for the Chinese. The people in Ai Qing's poetry are authentic; they seem familiar and inevitable. He is unremitting in his dedication to a full expression of true feeling. Readers embarrassed by intense feelings, who regard any hint of emotion as sentimentality, will find Ai Qing's poetry not to their taste. There are few "new" insights here; rare are the phrases that mark the conceit and the contrivance of a "dandy" poet. He takes what might be called "clichés" and sees them through. He would probably agree with the critic who observed that "a cliché is merely a truth rubbed so smooth that it deflects thought". Earlier in his career, Ai Qing was told that he had the ability to write poetry both for the sake of art and for the sake of the people. However forced and false the dichotomy might be, his answer was, nevertheless, unequivocal: given the choice, he would write the poetry of the people. It is true that one hears in Ai Qing's poetry, not



one voice, but many. One sees not the face of one poet, but the many faces of the people. One lives the life not of one man, but of humanity.

Yet for all this ingenuousness, here is a true poet, a voice of passion, one whose eloquence derives from the mainsprings of experience, not rhetoric. His early poetry showed a tendency toward metrical and metaphorical experiment: "Paris", for example, written when he had just returned from Europe in the early thirties, bears the vestiges of Rimbaud's "sonnet, *Voyelles*". His first great success was an autobiographical poem about the woman, a wet-nurse, who raised him. It is written with a ruminative intensity, the rhythms evocative, insistent, the language repetitive — as if recollection were the evidence of feeling, and memory the warrant of emotion. "Dayanhe — My Wet-nurse" both explains and reflects some of Ai Qing's lifelong attitudes: his ambivalent feelings toward tradition, devotion and compassion toward its quiet heroism, distrust and indignation at its backwardness; his outrage at the indignities of the present, and his inextinguishable hope for the future; his abiding faith in the individual. Other poems, like "The Bugler" and "He Dies a Second Time", are evocations of a dramatic scene, which brilliantly combine description with characterization and an uncanny sense of narrative. These poems are more than "set-pieces", for Ai Qing is able to find the meaningful in the commonplace — as in his characterization of the young bugler whose habit it is to stir before sunrise, yet gets up before he needs to. What rouses the young bugler, Ai Qing observes, is "his passionate impatience for the dawn". The phrase reverberates with wide impact. In China today, not only the buglers are passionately impatient for the dawn. In a country of early risers, more dependent on daylight than some more "advanced", energy-profligate countries, the dawn of a new day holds special promise. More recent poems, such as "Hush, a Voice Is Speaking. . . ." and "On the Crest of

a Wave", try to capture the tumultuous events in China of the past decade, and to celebrate that watershed in history, the Tiananmen Incident, which occurred on April 5, 1976. These poems speak for the sacrifice of the young, their disillusionment and their courage, in the face of unspeakable deceptions. Ai Qing continues to write, and — happily — to publish. He can still command a substantial audience. When he spoke on poetry at the Beijing Library on March 14, 1981, thousands turned out to hear him, and to listen to the recitation, by three radio announcers, of "Snow Falls on China's Land", "The Announcement of the Dawn", and "The Cockpit of Ancient Rome" (all translated and included in this volume).

Ai Qing has acknowledged a number of influences: Verhaeren, the Belgian poet, Rimbaud, Yessenin, Whitman, Mayakovsky. Of these, perhaps Whitman is the most apposite: his sympathies and his sensibilities are Whitmanesque, but there is one important difference — Ai Qing lacks Whitman's all-encompassing ego. Where Whitman spoke as the embodiment of the people, the poet *as* the people, Ai Qing has assumed a more modest stance: he has been content to be, from time to time, a poet *of* the people. But he derives his inspiration from the same source. He has been impelled to write when the pressure of circumstances, the sufferings of the populace, and the agonies of his countrymen were so unbearable that they moved him to poetry. He has said that he wrote most of his poems during times of war, but for all that, he is not a war poet, no more than Du Fu is a war poet. Both Du Fu and Ai Qing found many readers during the fighting that has ravaged China, off and on, for the last half-century — the Sino-Japanese War, a struggle for national survival; the War of Liberation, a struggle to found a new nation; to say nothing of the internal turmoil known as the "cultural revolution". The contrasts of style, of language, of form, of diction, could not, of course, be more

striking in the two poets, yet they do not seem as important as their similarities. For both are moral poets, both have large sympathies, both are enormously touched by the lives of other human beings. The Chinese have a special place for poets who speak their suffering, who capture and exalt into art the mundane, mind-numbing grind of daily life, the tragedy and senselessness of war, the simple joys of family life and of that feeling between people which goes by the facile name of "love" in English, but which is not as readily expressed in Chinese. In times of national crisis, it appears that Du Fu among traditional poets and Ai Qing among modern poets have sustained the most readers.

The derivation of the pen-name "Ai Qing", makes an interesting anecdote in itself. According to the poet, when he was in France from 1929 to 1932, he was once mistaken by a hotel manager for Chiang Kai-shek, because the French transliteration of their two names at the time were similar ("Tchiang Kai-tchek" and "Tchiang Hai-tcheng"). Later, when he returned to China and was put in prison by the Kuomintang, he chose a pen-name by crossing out the phonetic in his family name: this left a cross under a grass radical, which in Chinese forms the "word for 'ai'" 艾. The second word in the pen-name was chosen because it was homophonic in his native Zhejiang dialect with "cheng" 澄, the second word in his given name.

Whatever the derivation of the pen-name, readers may retain their own associations. The word "ai" can suggest something, or someone, fine, beautiful, or good, as in the expression "shao ai" 少艾 for "a young beauty". The word "qing" 青 suggests youth and freshness as in the expression "qing-nian" 青年 for "young people". "Ai Qing",<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> The pronunciation of Ai Qing ("eye-ching") may resemble popular mispronunciations of the *I Ching* as "eye-ching" (instead of "ee-jing"). The Chinese for the poet's pen-name is, of course, in no way similar to the Chinese for the ancient treatise on geomancy.

therefore, has a certain buoyant sound. It will not surprise us if a poet who has chosen this pen-name is unabashedly romantic. For all that he deplores, for all that he finds cruel and unjust, Ai Qing loves life. He has looked into the depths of misery and pain, and — far from recoiling in disillusionment — he reaffirms a belief in the ultimate goodness of life and of people. This optimism may be ill-founded in the minds of some, but there are innumerable readers who share with Ai Qing his affirmations of life. It is this buoyant resiliency, this dauntlessness in the face of difficulty and disappointment, that gives Ai Qing's poetry its special appeal. It is the same buoyant resiliency that has enabled individual Chinese, to say nothing of China as a nation, to survive. It is the same buoyancy that China will need if she is to achieve her great objectives by the dawn of the twenty-first century.

### A Word on Translation

The translation of literature, under the best of circumstances, is a hazardous enterprise; the translation of poetry (in light of Frost's famous dictum that "Poetry is what gets lost in translation") even more so. Still, whatever the impossibilities of translation and the inadequacies of translators, the task of transmitting worthwhile literature to readers in other languages is an honorable and laudable enterprise. The preparation of this volume has involved both collaboration and cooperation, and some explanation of this process may be of interest, partly because it provides some background on current activities in translation and partly because that background may herald future developments in translations involving Chinese and English.

The majority of the translations of over fifty poems in this collection were prepared by Eugene Chen Eoyang, who also assumed overall editorial responsibilities for the English

text. New translations by Peng Wenlan and Marilyn Chin have been included, as well as a handful of translations previously published in *Chinese Literature*. In a project of this complexity, involving transoceanic exchanges, the encouragement as well as the advice, to say nothing of the helpful corrections, of colleagues in China and the United States has been essential, and is hereby gratefully acknowledged. As this volume is one of the earliest to be co-published by the Foreign Languages Press in Beijing and the Indiana University Press in Bloomington, it is fitting that consultants at both institutions were actively involved in reviewing the manuscript for the press. At Indiana University, Leo Lee and Irving Lo read early versions of the typescript. Leo Lee, in particular, went over each translation and clarified many points not immediately clear to at least one translator. In Beijing, Sun Zhilong did a lot of work in editing the Chinese text, and Shen Zhen, Bonnie McDougall and Huang Jingying offered their criticisms and suggestions for improvement. Most of the translations are by a single hand, but in those cases where more than one translator made substantial contributions, joint attribution is given. The selection of the poems to be translated was a joint effort, and reflected the consultants of both Presses, the translators, and of Ai Qing and his wife, Gao Ying. Despite this widespread consultation, errors of interpretation and of translation may have occurred. One can rely on reviewers to point them out. For these errors, the translator bears the sole responsibility (except in joint efforts, where it will be duly shared).

The task of publishing modern Chinese written in *baibua* poses certain special problems for the translator. One of these might be characterized as "the unending modifier". In German, long clauses modifying a noun may precede that noun, sometimes deferring it until it is almost forgotten. (The reader of German, it is said, needs a long memory.) This feature is found in much modern *baibua* poetry in

Chinese, but there are two important differences. First, the lines are rarely if ever as long as equivalent phrases would be in German: long modifiers in a *monosyllabic* language will never seem as long as long modifiers in a *multisyllabic* language. Second, the modifiers in Chinese will not be marked with the grammatical declensions found in German, with the result that there is, in Chinese, perhaps less clarity as to what is done to what (or whom) when. In actual practice, however, this does not pose a very serious problem, since context makes the meaning clear in all but a few instances.

The translator, faced with presenting these "unending modifiers" in fluent English, cannot merely adopt the solution of citing the genitives one after another: A of B of C of D, or, in Chinese, D 的 C 的 B 的 A. The solution may be a discreet use of the subordinate clause, the apposite phrase, the parenthetical epithet. Two examples, from Ai Qing's "A Lament for Paris", might serve as illustrations. In a version preserving the original word order, the translation would read: "Is her (*de*) brave (*de*) people's (*de*) blood written with (*de*)."  
The first and third "*de*" function as possessives; the second and fourth as genitives. In fluent English, this emerges as: "Has been written with the blood of its brave people." Another, more convoluted example would be, from the same poem: "It (the time) will give love-freedom, love-democracy (*de*)/France's people be victorious." In a fluent version, this may be rendered: "The time that will deliver victory/To those who love freedom and democracy, the people of France." In this last example, the emphasis on "victorious" in the Chinese at the end of the line (which is also the end of the section), is sacrificed in English. But the alternative, ending the lines with an invocation to "the people of France" perhaps achieves a commensurate effect.

Still, a gain in fluency may suffer two kinds of loss: first, it sometimes loses the almost repetitive force of the structure in Chinese; second, it sometimes elongates the line

unduly with the addition of conjunctions and relative pronouns, to say nothing of repeated subjects. Ai Qing writes free verse that is often impressionistic, generally unpunctuated, so a certain syntactical freedom may be exercised on occasion; however, while the translations may reverse the order of the modifier and the word modified, this reversal extends beyond one line only when more than one line forms a single syntactical unit. The objective is to preserve the fluency in the original, and yet retain the powerful effect of modifiers piled one on top of another until final release is achieved in the last nominal substantive. How well each translation manages this, the reader must judge. (For the reference of specialists, the Chinese text of the poems is appended at the back.)

Special problems relating to individual poems are also glossed at the back in order not to mar the presentation of the translations as poems, not texts. Footnotes are added only when an allusion is considered unfamiliar enough to warrant explanation. The poet's footnotes are printed without markings; the editor's footnotes will be indicated.

The *pinyin* system of transliteration has been used except when time-honored custom sanctions another spelling. But, for the most part, transliterations are avoided in favor of translations, except when the word or phrase is so familiar as to be unrecognizable in any other form (there is no point, for example, rendering "Shanghai" as "On the Sea").

Eugene Chen Eoyang

*Beijing*

*May 1, 1981\**

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In a suburb of Paris, 1929  
在巴黎郊區玫瑰村（1929年）

With a labour model in  
the Shaanxi-Gansu-Ningxia  
Border Region, 1944  
在定邊鹽池和邊區勞模在一  
起（1944年）







In the rostrum of Tiananmen, Beijing, 1949 (*Ai Qing on the right*)  
在北京天安門城樓上 (1949年)



In Beijing, 1950  
在北京 (1950年)