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Chinese Classics Series

POEMS OF MAO ZEDONG
Rhymed Versions with Annotations

Translated and Annotated by Gu Zhengkun

辜正坤

译注

汉英对照韵译／汉语拼音标注音

毛泽东诗词

修订版



北京大学出版社
PEKING UNIVERSITY PRESS

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FOREWORD

The poet whom we are to read occupies a curious but assured position in the history of 20th century Chinese literature: curious, because he was one who theoretically advocated with all his heart the development of modern poetry—the free verse written in the vernacular—and even hopefully asserted that the bright future of Chinese poetry lay right in the development of folk-songs, yet in practice, he himself almost never wrote poetry in plain Chinese but in a completely traditional and classical style; assured, because he composed the poetry so well that, at his best, few modern Chinese poets can rival him. To Western minds, he is a political giant who, though shaking old China to its foundation, remains a debatable figure as to his contribution to the creation of a better world. But what captures our attention here is Mao the poet, not Mao the statesman; still politically a subject of controversy at home and abroad, he is, however, almost universally acknowledged as a successful poet of rare talent, even, to a moderate degree, by his sworn enemies.

Needless to say, when we approach this man called Mao Zedong (1893—1976), we will not forget he was the leader of the People's Republic of China, a country teeming with the largest population in the world, as well as a son of a farmer in Shaoshan, Hunan Province. True, as a poet he wrote in a tradition of thousands of years from the ages of *The Book of Odes* through Qu Yuan (340 B.C.—278 B.C.), Li Po (Li Bai, 701—762), Du Fu (Tu Fu, 712—770) to Su Dongpo (Su Shi, 1037—1101). He did, however, distinguish himself from his predecessors; and

what particularly marks him out as a celebrated poet is, as many believe, his enormous breadth of mind, unbounded aspiration and his dauntless daring, which often go beyond the commonly conceived poetic universe. And this alone, I make bold to say, is justification enough to rank Mao among the poets of the first order.

Remember, too, the fact that he was not one of those professional lyrical singers who spend all their lives improving their art, but a fighter as well as a military commander charging and storming fortresses, composing a few lines here and there between life and death. Each piece finished is believed to be a window into his personality, an insight into his whole being, a mouthpiece of his spirit and soul.

To do him justice, as a poet playing upon a traditional lyre, he sings occasionally out of the classical tune, but on the whole, his rhymes sound so pleasant to the ear that during the Cultural Revolution the whole China echoed his songs with a frantic enthusiasm so that he was more quoted than any other poet in any other country in any other age. The great impact of Mao's poetry upon the contemporary Chinese culture, particularly, contemporary Chinese literature, is strongly felt everywhere in the east. And this, as you may agree, justifies rendering Mao's poetic efforts into a foreign language.

To say Mao's poetry is characterized by an enormous breadth of mind and an unbounded aspiration does not mean Mao writes with pure high-sounding slogans; instead, Mao seems deliberately to avoid revealing his ambitions in a straightforward way. Often, he favours the technique that puts landscape and human emotion side by side so that the landscape becomes the exponent of his aspirations. Here are lines from his much-quoted "Snow" that surely make the reader spellbound and serve to exemplify my point:

Ten thousand *li* of the sky is snow-bound.
 Behold! At both sides of the Great Wall
 An expanse of whiteness conquers all;
 In the Yellow River, up and down,
 The surging waves are gone!
 Like silver snakes the mountains dance,
 Like wax elephants the highlands bounce,
 All try to be higher than heaven even once!

Never before has modern Chinese literature had a poet whose description of landscape can rival that of Mao in breadth and power! The endless earth, the unbounded sky, the longest wall, the largest river, the dancing mountains, and boundless highlands, all are submerged in an expanse of whiteness—snow and ice, and meanwhile, all come alive through the strokes of Mao's painting brush, for it is a picture both poetically existing in the eye of poet's mind and realistically seen "on this small globe": realities and illusions overlap and merge themselves, thus one cannot tell whether it is the grand scene that comes in the eye of poet's mind, or the mind that gives birth to the grand scene. If we know that in Chinese "rivers and mountains" usually is a metonymy for political power, we understand what Mao here drives at: "All try to be higher than heaven even once": a possible allusion to cruel strifes for state power on the part of so-called "heroes".

Of course, the poet is not content with just giving a majestic description of the spatial view, further, his mind's eye penetrates through the heavy curtain of time into history gaping for the ambitious adventurers:

With so much beauty is the land endowed,
 So many heroes thus in homage bowed.