

100 Classic Chinese Poems

Translated by Qiu Xiaolong
英译·裘小龙

经典中国诗词100首



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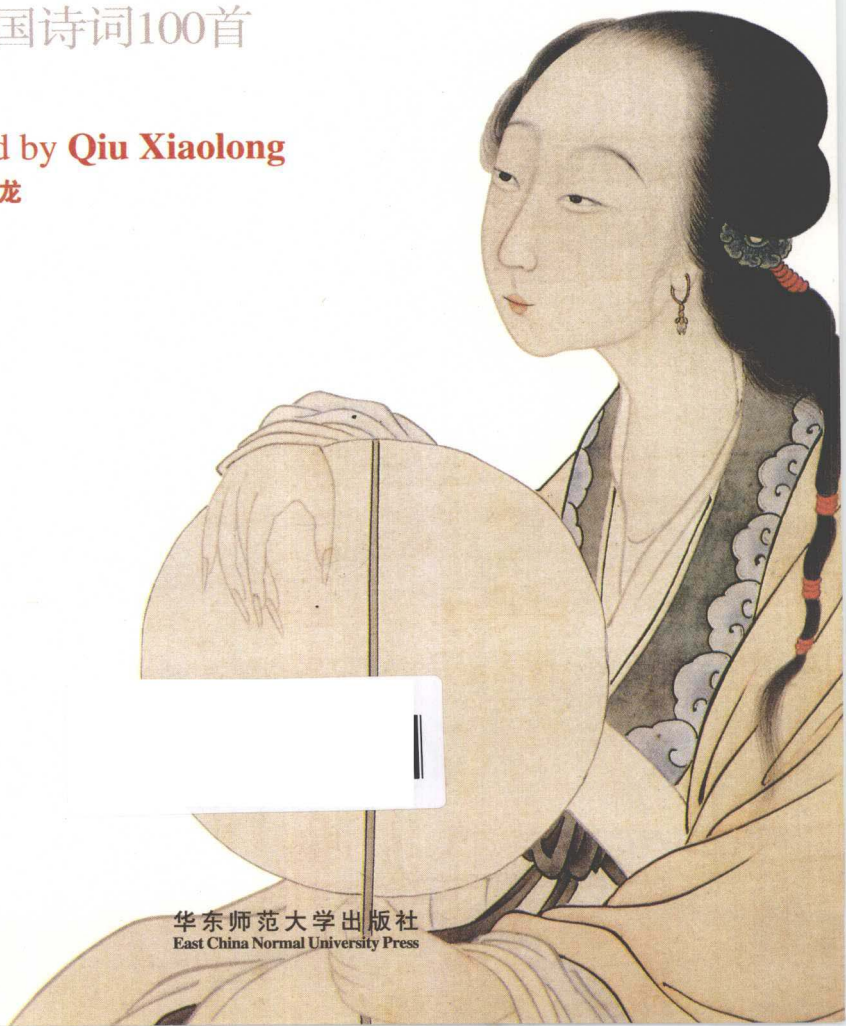
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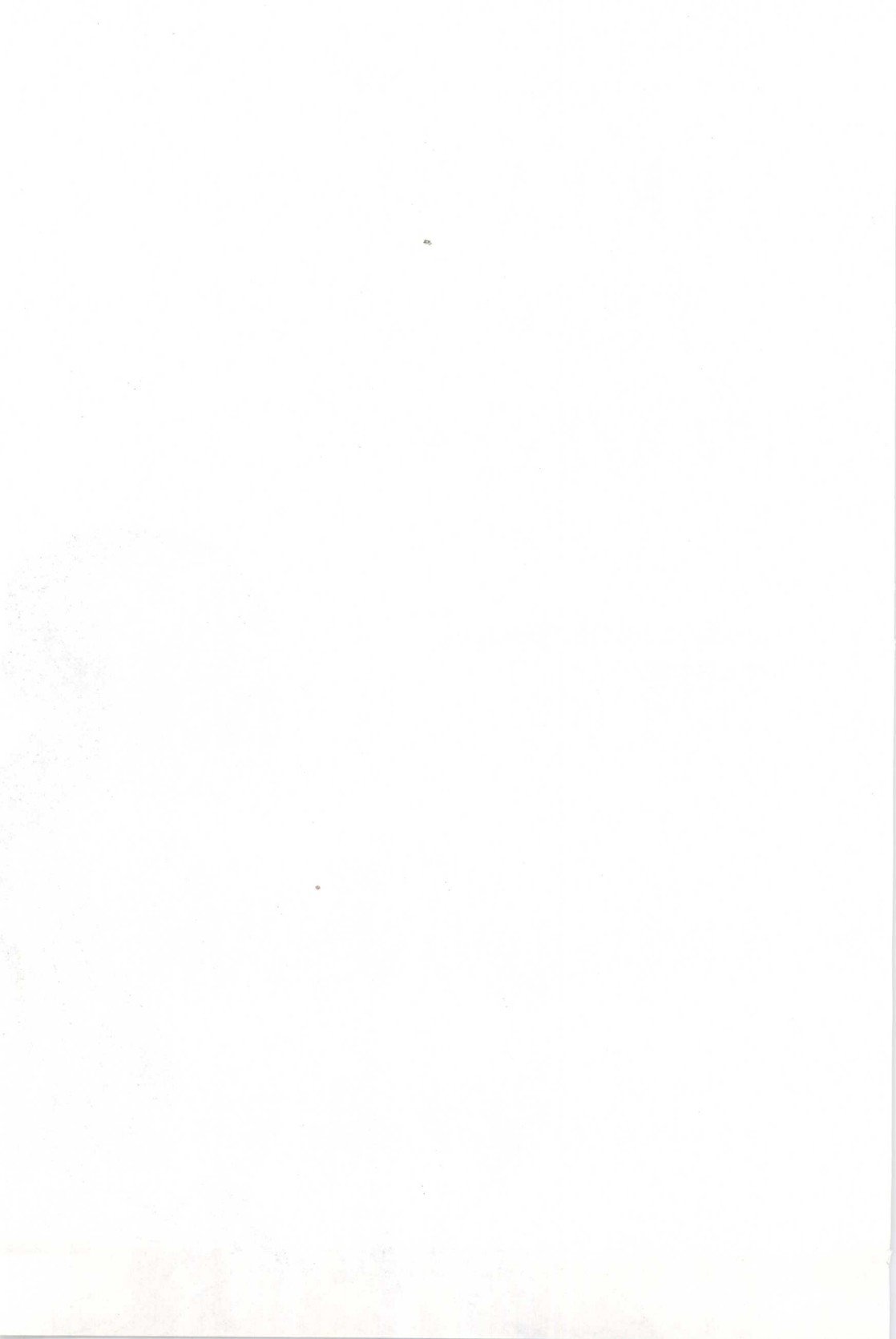
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Praise for Qiu Xiaolong's Poetry Translation



Qiu Xiaolong is extravagantly qualified for translating these poems, having as a citizen of China won prizes for his poetry and for translating T. S. Eliot and other English American poets into Chinese and, more recently, as a citizen of the United States, won prizes for his own poetry and fiction in English. To my mind, the “Changgan Song” in this collection rivals Ezra Pound’s justly famous, loosely translated version, “The River Merchant’s Wife.” These renderings have a limpidity of the language and metaphor and a subtle rhythm, and Qiu has a poet’s sixth sense for when (occasionally) to lift the line with a less direct and more evocative word: we are thus rescued from the flatness of some translations of early Chinese poetry. This is a generous book and a very welcome addition to the poetry from our “Significant Stranger,” the Chinese Nation.

—Mona Van Duan, U.S. Poet Laureate

The Tang and Song lyrical poems in this volume are carefully selected. With a poet’s eye and ear, Xiaolong Qiu rendered them into poetry in English. The translations are elegant, supple, evocative, and above all, remarkably faithful to the original. Together they make a marvelous book.

—Ha Jin, Author of *Waiting*

Qiu Xiaolong’s lines echo with the distilled beauty and emotion of the most magical epoch of Chinese poetry. Wu Wenying asks: “Why should the heavens be so mean, holding back the message of the spring?” In rendering this glorious art, we have lost as little as possible in translation and are fortunate to have a translator who holds nothing back.

—Howard French, The New York Times Shanghai Bureau Chief



It is one of his purposes, as he has told me, to present a translation that, while faithful to the original in images as well as in meaning, will also prove to be as enjoyable as to the reader here as is contemporary poetry written in English...It is my view, however, that he brings to this project an extraordinary combination of scholarly understanding and a poet's sensibility to produce new renditions that are as vibrant as the original.

—Robert E. Hegel, *Liselotte Dieckman Professor, Washington University in St. Louis*

Qiu Xiaolong's graceful translations of these classic poems of the Tang and Song dynasties retain the evocative imagery and haunting beauty of the originals, yet make them accessible to anyone who wants to delve into China's remarkable poetic tradition. These poems reveal a rich inner world of personal sentiment and feeling in a bygone era, addressing eternal themes such as the joy of reuniting with old friends, sorrow at parting from them, loneliness and homesickness while on the road, and of course, love.

—Cameron Campbell, *Professor of Sociology, UCLA*

Qiu Xiaolong's renderings of these poems are elegant, spare and satisfying. Reading them, I feel I'm hearing from the original poet, not a translator. In a sense that's the highest praise I can offer a translator: that he's disappeared and only the work remains.

—SJ Rozan, *author of The Shanghai Moon*

The authenticity and sensitivity with which all poems in this collection are rendered is quite obvious to a bilingual reader like me. Majority of the poems selected here have long been translated into English, mostly by academics whose emphases tend to be on the literal truthfulness to the text and the Chinese poetic tradition,

but, inevitably, at the expense of the “poetic quality” of the oeuvres. This book diverges from that path and is primarily concerned with the sensibilities and textures of the poems. They are rendered as poetry first and then as Chinese poetry with its distinct conventions. Unlike its predecessors that serve well the scholarly concerns about Chinese poetics as contrasted to or compared with the Western one, this album, put together principally for everyday poetry lovers, strives for the commonality of poetry across diverse traditions. It opens doors for untutored readers to the beauty and delicacy in Chinese poetry, which, under different translation treatments, may have appeared to be too foreign and stiff.

—Leslie Cheng, *Author of Lolita Jailed in Tehran*

[Qiu Xiaolong] is also one of few translators of Chinese poetry into English whose native language is Chinese but whose mastery of the subtle nuance of the English language is truly extraordinary. A published poet and acclaimed author of a series of mystery novels set in modern-day China written in English, he is eminently qualified to bring these ancient poems to life yet again. Qiu Xiaolong’s lucid and graceful translations...are a most welcome addition to world literature in translation.

—Beata Grant, *Author of Red Brush: Writing Women in Imperial China*

A beautifully designed collection of poems...translated into English by the renowned mystery novelist and poet Qiu Xiaolong. The poems appear in traditional Chinese characters on the left, facing Qiu’s very contemporary English translations. Poets such as Du Fu, Wang Wei, and Li Shangyin come back to life, sounding very much like us in their intense, mostly short poems on friendship, nature, aging, sexual temptation, travel, and the seasons... Readers will warm to it at once.

—Catherine Rankovic, *Author of Fierce Consent*





Also by the Author

FICTION

Death of a Red Heroine

A Loyal Character Dancer

When Red Is Black

A Case of Two Cities

Red Mandarin Dress

The Mao Case

Don't Cry, Tai Lake

SHORT STORY

Years of Red Dust

POETRY TRANSLATION

Evoking Tang: An Anthology of Classical Chinese Poetry

Treasury of Chinese Love Poems

POETRY

Lines Around China

Preface



The poems of the Tang dynasty (618-907) and the Song dynasty (960-1279) mark the twin peaks in classical Chinese literature. Even today, poets such as Li Bai, Du Fu, Wang Wei, Bai Juyi, Li Shangyin, Su Shi, Xin Qiji and Li Qingzhao are still commonly read as an integrated part of Chinese culture.

A number of characteristics and factors contribute to the significance of the Tang and Song poetry, but one of the most salient lies in the evocation and suggestion through its organic imagery structure. In traditional Chinese poetics, it is “*yijing*”, which practically defies translation, but it may be said as something close to “the world of meanings through images.” Most of these poems are short, with only four or eight lines in length, and each line consisting of five or seven characters, but it is through the subtle, suggestive, and substantial images—with the syntax flexibility and in the spatial form, whether juxtaposed with statement or not—that the Tang and Song poetry succeeds in speaking through the centuries, echoing with inexhaustible responses from readers in China, as well as elsewhere in the world.

At the beginning of the twentieth century, for instance, a group of American and British poets, including Amy Lowell, Ezra Pound, H.D., Richard Aldington and some others, launched the Imagist movement with their own “discovery” of classical Chinese poetry. A long way they went indeed, after the Tang / Song fashion, presenting hard, concrete images, and blazing an alternative trail through the traditional Western poetics. Such an effort is exemplified in Ezra Pound’s famous poem “The River Merchant’s Wife”, which, usually anthologized as an English poem in the twentieth century, is actually a loose translation of Li Bai’s “Changgan Song” in the Tang dynasty. An unqualified sinologist, Pound redeems himself, paradoxically, by being loyal to the imagery structure in the original. Little wonder that T. S. Eliot claimed Pound “invented”





Chinese poetry for his generation.

However, Pound's effort is not without precedent. According to one criterion in ancient China, there must be painting in poetry, and vice versa. In other words, a poem speaks, first and foremost, through its imagery, which also serves as my personal poetics as a bilingual writer. So for the present volume of translation, I set myself the dual object: while being faithful to the original meaning, sensibility, texture, to transplant the imagery that suffers no linguistic boundary; and to make a poem translated as enjoyable as one written in the English—across linguistic conventions, formal characteristics, or academic exegesis.

Out of many discussions with Ruan Guangye, my editor at East China Normal University Press, we also decided on a special feature for this collection. Each of the poems here is matched with a classical painting, corresponding to the poetic "*yijing*". It was an arduous job to select all these matching paintings, an effort I sincerely appreciate. Such a practice is not exactly our invention, though. The idea initially came to me several years ago when I came across a dust-covered album entitled *Ming and Qing Paintings for Tang Poetry* in an old bookstore in Shanghai. Apparently, the Tang poems appeared so evocatively inspiring that the painters in the later Ming and Qing dynasties recaptured the poetic visions through their own media. Needless to say, the paintings in the present volume of ours are by no means illustrations in the common sense, and it is not necessary, nor desirable, for a reader to confine his or her imagination to them, which serve as only one of the infinite entrances into the world of the Tang and Song poetry.

It was probably in the same year as I discovered the above-mentioned album in Shanghai, that I had another unforgettable encounter with the classical Chinese poetry in St. Louis—in the company of my non-Chinese-speaking readers. I was giving a reading of my Inspector Chen series there. To my surprise, an American reader stood up and recited from her memory all the Tang and Song poems quoted in the novel.

She said that she could not carry with her a library copy of the novel that day, but that she loved Inspector Chen because of these poems, so much that she memorized all of them. I was more than touched. She wished that I could translate more and put them into a volume. I forgot her name—so sorry about that, but I forget not her request. Now the collection is being published by the university (where I studied about thirty years ago) in Shanghai, on the occasion of the World Expo, for Chinese and Western readers alike, what more can I possibly say while staying thousands of miles away? Nothing, perhaps, except to quote once more a favorite Tang poem of mine, “The bright moonlight / in front of the bed / appears like frost / on the ground. I look up / at the fair moon, and / lowering my head, / I think of home.”



Qiu Xiaolong
July 2009, in St. Louis



Li Shangyin in English I *

The fragrance of the jasmine in your hair
and then in my tea cup, that evening,
when you thought me drunk, an orange
pinwheel turning at the rice-paper window.
The present is, when you think
of it, already the past. I am desperately
trying to quote a line from Li Shangyin
to say what cannot be said,
but the English version at hand fails
to do justice to him (the translator, divorced
from his American wife, drunk, found English
beating him like a blind horse), any
more than the micaceous mist
issuing from a *Lantian* blue jade
to your reflection.

 Last night's star,
last night's wind—the memory of trimming
a candle, the minute of a spring silkworm wrapping
itself in a cocoon, when the rain
becomes the mountain, and the mountain
becomes the rain...

 It is like a painting
of Li Shangyin going to open the door,
and of the door opening him
to the painting, that Tang scroll you showed me
in the rare book section of Beijing Library,
while you read my ecstasy as empathy
with the silverfish escaping the sleepy eyes

of the full stops, and I felt a violent wonder
at your bare feet beating, lightly,
a *Bolero* on the filmy dust of the ancient floor.
Even then and there, lost in each
other's interpretations, we
agreed.

The horn is honking
outside the window. I am going
to a lecture on Lacan: floating duckweed
of selves. Poetry makes no jasmine petals
fall. Here, an empty tea cup.



* Li Shangyin (813-858), a celebrated Tang dynasty poet.





Li Shangyin in English II

The tenderness of the tea leaf between her lips.
Everything is possible, but not pardonable.
Propped up against a couple of pillows,
I am studying an English version
of Li Shangyin's poem. It is strange
to find a rich allusion transformed
into a cliché, as if undressed,
unimaginative in nakedness.
Still it puzzles me that in his poems,
love always comes in the bell
of illusion, the smell of jasmine
drifting in an incense-veiled bronze mirror.
"A zither, for no reason, has its fifty strings
broken, and across a stubble of pegs, a cuckoo
is pecking for the lost years--
a tear-holding pearl, sea-blued."
What can be recaptured in memory if one
was lost then and there? Master Zhuang awakes
wondering if it is he who dreamed
of being a butterfly, or if it is
a butterfly that dreams of being
Master Zhuang. Now the *zoom...zoom*
of the dryer she is applying to her hair
after the bath, or the distant sound
of guns the soldiers are firing
among the people in the square.
I begin making decisions: to go into exile,
not to compromise on the Chinese original,
to do justice to Li Shangyin. And she
comes to bed, turning off the light.

Acknowledgements

No book is an island, entire of itself, but is involved in others, more so for such a translation, in all the masterly voices coming from the Tang and Song dynasties in ancient China, and in all the wonderful help I have received in and out of China, among which, particularly, Mona Van Duyn and Jarvis Thurston, with their unwavering support for my poetry translation, Wang Yuanlu, with his warm encouragement on a rainy day at his apartment in East Gate, an American reader whose name I don't know, with her reciting the Tang and Song poems from memory at a reading I gave in St. Louis, and of course, Ruan Guangye, the editor of the East China Normal University Press, with his tremendous effort in selecting all these classical paintings for the poems, and making it such a beautiful volume.





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