



CLASSICAL CHINESE POETRY AND PROSE

ELEGIES OF THE SOUTH

TRANSLATED BY XU YUANCHONG



许译中国经典诗文集

楚辞 | 许渊冲 译



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PUBLISHER'S NOTE

Ancient Chinese classic poems are exquisite works of art. As far as 2,000 years ago, Chinese poets composed the beautiful work *Book of Poetry* and *Elegies of the South*. Later, they created more splendid Tang poetry and Song lyrics. Such classic works as *Thus Spoke the Master* and *Laws Divine and Human* were extremely significant in building and shaping the culture of the Chinese nation. These works are both a cultural bond linking the thoughts and affections of Chinese people and an important bridge for Chinese culture and the world.

Mr. Xu Yuanhong has been engaged in translation for 70 years. In December 2010, he won the Lifetime Achievement Award in Translation conferred by the Translators Association of China (TAC). He is honored as the only expert who translates Chinese poems into both English and French. After his excellent interpretation, many Chinese classic poems have been further refined into perfect English and French rhymes. This collection of Classical Chinese Poetry and Prose gathers his most representative English translations. It includes the classic works *Thus Spoke the Master*, *Laws Divine and Human* and dramas such as *Romance of the Western Bower*, *Dream in Peony Pavilion*, *Love in Long-life Hall* and *Peach Blooms Painted with Blood*. The largest part of the collection includes the translation of selected poems from different dynasties. The selection includes various types of poetry. The selected works start from the pre-Qin era to the Qing Dynasty, covering almost the entire history of classic poems in China. Reading these works is like tasting "living water from the source" of Chinese culture.

We hope this collection will help English readers "understand, enjoy and delight in" Chinese classic poems, share the intelligence of Confucius and Lao Tzu (the Older Master), share the gracefulness of Tang poems, Song lyrics and classic operas and songs and promote exchanges between Eastern and Western culture. We also sincerely invite precious suggestions from our readers.

出版前言

中国古代经典诗文是中国传统文化的奇葩。早在两千多年前，中国诗人就写出了美丽的《诗经》和《楚辞》；以后，他们又创造了更加灿烂的唐诗和宋词。《论语》《老子》这样的经典著作，则在塑造、构成中华民族文化精神方面具有极其重要的意义。这些作品既是联接所有中国人思想、情感的文化纽带，也是中国文化走向世界的重要桥梁。

许渊冲先生从事翻译工作70年，2010年12月荣获“中国翻译文化终身成就奖”。他被称为将中国诗词译成英法韵文的唯一专家，经他的妙手，许多中国经典诗文被译成出色的英文和法文韵语。这套“许译中国经典诗文集”荟萃许先生最具代表性的英文译作，既包括《论语》《老子》这样的经典著作，又包括《西厢记》《牡丹亭》《长生殿》《桃花扇》等戏曲剧本，数量最多的则是历代诗歌选集。这些诗歌选集包括诗、词、散曲等多种体裁，所选作品上起先秦，下至清代，几乎涵盖了中国古典诗歌的整个历史。阅读和了解这些作品，即可尽览中国文化的“源头活水”。

我们希望这套许氏译本能使英语读者对中国经典诗文也“知之，好之，乐之”，能够分享孔子、老子的智慧，分享唐诗、宋词、中国古典戏曲的优美，并以此促进东西文化的交流。也敬请读者朋友提出宝贵意见。

2011年10月

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PREFACE

There lies a glassy oblong pool,
Where light and shade pursue their course.
How can it be so clear and cool?
For water fresh comes from its source.

Zhu Xi (1130–1200)

Chinese poetry is a vast ocean where light and shade pursue their course. Its source is *the Book of Poetry* compiled in the 6th century B. C. and *Elegies of the South* composed in the 3rd. *The Book of Poetry* is the earliest anthology of realistic poems written by common people along the Yellow River in North China, including the richest State of Qi in the east, the most thickly populated States of Zheng and Wei in the Central Plain, and the most powerful State of Qin in the west. In the Valley of the Yellow River Confucius and his disciples had rationalized ancient tradition, myth and shamanism, humanized divinities and transformed extraordinary chaos into ordinary world order. On the other hand, *Elegies of the South* may be said to be the earliest collection of romantic poems written by poets of the largest State of Chu along the Blue River or the Yangzi Valley, permeated with time-hallowed tradition, fantastic imagination and violent emotions of a mythical world.

Qu Yuan (340–278 B. C.) was the most important Chu poet who lived at a time when romanticism or shamanism in the South came into contact with realism in the North. He became the greatest lyrical

poet in ancient China as a result of the contact. At first, he had won the confidence of the king of Chu, and held the high post of “left minister”. In view of the danger threatening Chu from the powerful State of Qin, Qu Yuan proposed reform in the government and alliance with the rich State of Qi to ensure the safety of Chu. But the king of Chu was surrounded by self-seekers who, having accepted bribes from Qin’s envoy, not only dissuaded the king from taking Qu Yuan’s advice, but brought about the poet’s estrangement from the king. Therefore, Qu Yuan wrote his autobiographic long poem *Sorrow after Departure*.

This long poem is not only one of the most remarkable works of Chinese poetry, but it ranks as one of the greatest poems in world literature. It describes the poet’s patriotism, his disillusionment with a society fallen into evil ways and his imaginary journeys in a chariot drawn by dragon and phoenix to a supernatural world.

The Moon’s Charioteer goes before, oh!
The curtain-rolling Wind runs after.
To clear the way the phoenixes soar, oh!
The Lord of Thunder bursts in laughter.

By means of rich imagery and skilled similes, the poet expresses his loyalty to the king of Chu referred to as “Fair One” or “Sacred One.”

The Sacred One neglects his duty, oh!
He will not look into my heart.
The Slanderers envy my beauty, oh!
They say I play a licentious part.

Thus he builds up the tradition of using the beauty to symbolize the sovereign, and fragrant plants to represent loyal ministers. He also depicts, directly or indirectly, the social condition of that time and the destinies of the States of ancient China, for example:

The last king of Xia's stormy age, oh!
 Abused all laws and he lost his crown.
 That of Shang burned alive his sage, oh!
 His dynasty was overthrown.

The conflicts between the ruling groups are repeatedly described while the poet affirms his determination to seek his ideal or beauty.

All men delight in what they please, oh!
 Alone I always love the beauty.
 My body rent, my heart at ease, oh!
 Can I change and neglect my duty?

I bid the Driver of the Sun, oh!
 To Holy Mountains slowly go.
 My way ahead is a long, long one, oh!
 I'll seek my beauty high and low.

His love for the ideal or beauty was so passionate that he could not bear the stern reality and finally he drowned himself in the River Milo on the fifth day of the fifth lunar month, which has become a holiday for Chinese people to commemorate his death, when a race of dragon boats is

held, it is said, to the rescue of the drowned poet.

In a certain sense, *Sorrow after Departure* may be compared with Homer's *Odyssey* composed 500 years earlier and with Dante's *Divine Comedy* composed 1,500 years later. Homer describes in *Odyssey* Ulysses' voyage on sea, his wisdom and his physical sufferings on his way back to his native State; Qu Yuan describes in his *Sorrow* his imaginary journey to Heaven, his qualities and his mental sufferings on leaving his native State in quest of an ideal prince or beauty as personified in the Nymphean Queen, the Swallow's Bride or the young prince's fair lady, or embodied in jasper tree, fragrant flower or sweet grass. Dante records in the *Divine Comedy* his moral and spiritual experience of illumination, regeneration and beatitude by describing his imaginary journeys down to the Hell and up to the Purgatory and then up to the Paradise. As Qu Yuan follows the ancient sages and consults the witch and wizard, Dante is guided by Reason in the person of Virgil and then by Beatrice, an incarnation of beauty and virtue, an image of goodness and divine wisdom. In *Sorrow after Departure*, Qu Yuan glorifies the three ancient kings and the founders of the Xia and Shang dynasties, and condemns their last monarchs; in the *Divine Comedy*, Dante glorifies only Christian saints and condemns pagans, including the wise Ulysses and the brave Caesar. But modern attitude toward pagan heroes has changed in the West, while the glorification of ancient sages and the condemnation against evil and vice in China remain unchanged throughout the ages. This shows Qu Yuan's sorrow represents that of Chinese intellectuals down to the present century. Thus we may say *Sorrow after Departure* is no less important in the East than *Odyssey* and *Divine Comedy* in the West.

Other poems attributed to Qu Yuan include *the Nine Songs and the Nine Elegies*. The former are songs dedicated to gods or goddesses. Their form is suggestive of drama, in which a male or a female shaman donned elaborate costume and make-up, and singing and dancing, invited the god or goddess to an amorous encounter. As sacrifices to the gods were occasions for courtship, the mention of love in these poems is natural. Since the Han Dynasty the *Nine Songs* had always been attributed to Qu Yuan, until in recent years some scholars advanced the theory that they were ancient folk songs and not the work of any individual poet.

The Nine Songs can be divided into different types. The first type describes the sacrifice itself, as in *The Almighty Lord of the East and The Last Sacrifice*. The second type describes the god's delight in the sacrifice, as in *The God of the Sun*. The third type describes the love professed by the witch or sacrificial priestess for the god, as in *The God of Cloud* and *The Great Lord of Fate*. It would be interesting to compare Qu Yuan's cloud with Shelley's. The fourth type is a dialogue between two gods, for instance, between the Lord and the Lady of River Xiang paying court to each other. The third and fourth verses to the Lady are beautiful lines:

The autumn breeze, oh! ceaselessly grieves
The Dongting waves, oh! with fallen leaves.

The poet describes the lake rippled by the breeze with fallen leaves and reveals the grief of the Lady waiting for the Lord, in other words, at the sight of the rippled lake, we see not only the face, but also the heart of the grieved lady, that is to say, a discription of the outer world reveals the

inner world of the heroine. Another example of the fourth type is *The God of the River*, dialogue between the God of the Yellow River and the Goddess of River Luo. The fifth type portrays lovesick goddesses, as in the *Young Goddess of Fate*, who says:

None is so sad, oh! as those who part;
Nor so happy, oh! as new sweet heart.

The Goddess of the Mountain portrays the lovesick fairyqueen of Mount Wu waiting for King Xiang of Chu. The first stanza describes the Goddess as follows:

In mountain deep, oh! looms a fair lass,
In ivy leaves, oh! girt with sweet grass.
Amorous looks, oh! and smiling eyes,
For such a beauty, oh! there's none but sighs.

This beautiful lass in ivy leaves can be found in a picture drawn by Xu Beihong (1895–1953), a famous Chinese painter. The last type is the poem praising the fallen warriors:

Their spirit is deathless, oh! although their blood was shed;
Captains among the ghosts, oh! heroes among the dead.

This is the only poem in the *Nine Songs* to make no mention of love.

The Nine Elegies are *Sorrow after Departure* enlarged, said Liang Qichao (1873–1929), a famous Chinese scholar. Of the nine poems *the Hymn to the*

Orange differs in style and mood from the rest and was probably written by Qu Yuan in his earlier days. This ode praises the orange, which is symbolic of the poet's virtue.

Within you're pure; without you're bright,
 Like a man virtuous and right, oh!...
 You stand alone in this world wide,
 Unyielding to the vulgar tide, oh!

The other eight elegies were written during the poet's banishment. Most of them voice the author's extreme anguish. Probably *I Make My Complaint* was the first written just after banishment, followed by *Grieving at the Whirlwind*, *Thinking of the Fair One* and *the Bygone days Regretted*, which is the simplest and clearest of all the elegies.

Though, loyal, I have done no wrong, oh!
 I suffer from slanders in throng...
 I'd drown myself and leave my name behind, oh!
 But to the light my lord's still blind.

Lament for the Chu Capital was probably written in 298 B. C. when the capital fell to General Bai Qi of Qin. Liang Qichao was moved to tears on reading the following epilogue:

Gazing with longing eyes, I stand, oh!
 When may I come back to my homeland?
 A bird flies nowhere but home-bound, oh!

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A dying fox turns its head to its mound.
Guiltless but banished, I take flight, oh!
Can I forget my home day and night?

Of *Crossing the River* the first part is a portrait of the poet himself, the second a realistic description of his journey and the third tells us why he cannot but roam about.

Darkness replaces light;
The time is far from right, oh!
Faithfulness becomes doubt.
How can I not set out? oh!

Sad Thoughts Outpoured tells us his ideal:

He (the king) might imitate the three and five kings, oh!
And I might learn from Peng to do good things.
Is there an end that cannot be attained? oh!
Could a world-wide renown be stained?

Longing for Changsha is believed to be the poet's last work for it ends by the following verse:

I know that none can avoid death.
Why should I grudge my breath? oh!
I declare to those I revere,
I will take you as my compeer, oh!

Asking Heaven is the most extraordinary of Qu Yuan's poems. Reflecting the poet's rational approach to nature and history, this work provides us with rich material on ancient Chinese myths and legends. In this poem Qu Yuan asks questions regarding what existed before the universe, the creation of the heavenly bodies and the structure of the earth. Over one hundred and seventy questions are raised, and none of them answered. From them we can see the poet's concern with nature, and the richness of his imagination and the heights reached by Chinese science in his time. This long poem may be compared with the *Book of Job* in the *Holy Bible*.

The *Far-off Journey* could be described as a Taoist's answer to *Sorrow after Departure*. Without any of the allegory and symbolism of the *Sorrow*, it describes a celestial journey which ends not in despairing gloom but in triumphant fulfilment. Therefore, its authenticity is in doubt. The first part of this poem describes the poet's thoughts before the journey:

Between the boundless earth and sky, oh!
 Forever man must toil, I sigh.
 Beyond my reach are bygone days, oh!
 Can I hear what the future says?

The Taoist thought is revealed in the following stanza:

Empty-minded you may await, oh!
 Do not strive to be first or great!
 Let all things be formed as they may, oh!
 Then you'll find the door to the Way.

The last stanza describes how Unity is attained:

Below it's bottomlessly deep, oh!
Above it's heavenlessly steep.
I look but see not what changes fast, oh!
I listen but hear nothing in space vast.
I transcend Inaction to Purity, oh!
Then I come near the Realm of Unity.

Divination and *the Fisherman* are two narrative poems in which Qu Yuan is described as a rationalist who believes neither in gods nor in divination. This is consistent with *Sorrow after Departure* and *Asking Heaven*. In *Divination* the poet asks:

Which way will lead to weal and which to woe?
Which way should I dodge and which should I go?

In *the Fisherman* the poet says:

When all the world in mud has sunk,
Alone I am clean;
When all the people are drunk,
Sober I'm seen.

But the old fisherman advises him to “adapt himself to the time” and sings the following song.