

A CLASSIC CHINESE READER

# PROFOUND SCHOLARS' LECTURES ON POEMS IN THE TANG DYNASTY

COMPILED  
BY EDITORIAL BOARD  
OF CHINESE LITERATURE AND HISTORY

TRANSLATED BY ZHANG TIANXIN

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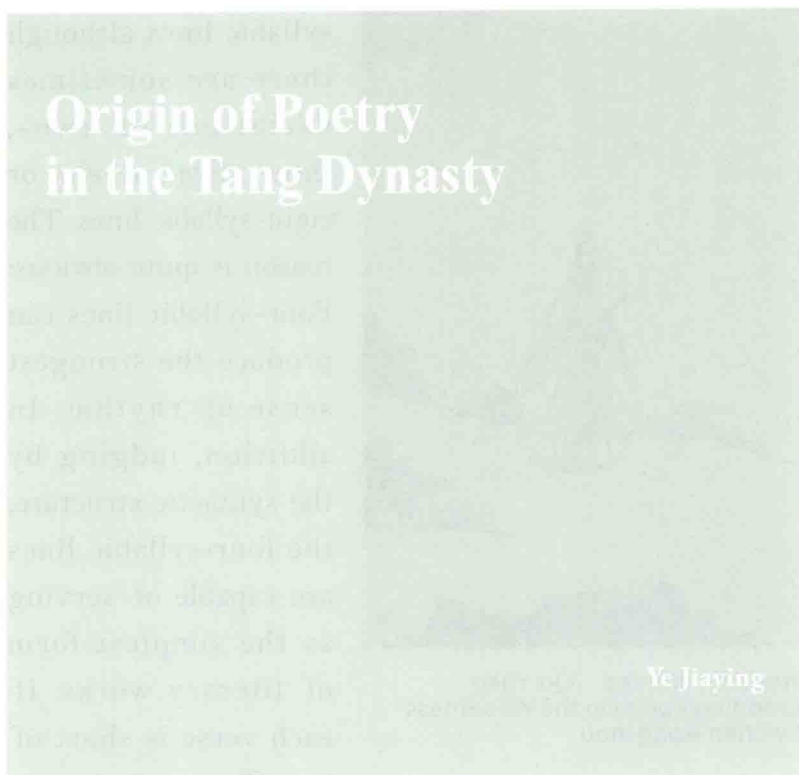
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As the first comprehensive anthology of poems in China, “The Book of Poetry” includes altogether 305 poems composed during a definite era of more than five hundred years ranging from the early stage of the Western Zhou Dynasty to the middle stage of the Spring and Autumn Period. These poems reflect the social landscape in the Zhou Dynasty in a relatively complete approach. Generally speaking, most of the poems in “The Book of Poetry” are made up of stanzas containing four-





Woodcut entitled "Qu Yuan Crooning Poetry in the Wilderness" by Chen Hongshou

syllabic lines although there are sometimes variations of two-, three-, five-, seven-, or eight-syllabic lines. The reason is quite obvious: Four-syllabic lines can produce the strongest sense of rhythm. In addition, judging by the syntactic structure, the four-syllabic lines are capable of serving as the simplest form of literary works. If each verse is short of four Chinese characters,

the syllable would be cursed with excessive shortness of tone inevitably, even the brusqueness of tone as a result. Thus, the masterpieces in "The Book of Poetry", which are widely acclaimed as the earliest poems in China, have naturally constituted the simplest kind of poetic form mainly dominated by four-syllabic lines.

In the wake of "The Book of Poetry", such a brand-new style of verse – The Verse of Chu – began to make its debut in South China as a newly-emerging force. The pieces authored by the representative writers Qu Yuan and



Song Yu predominate within the poetry anthology entitled "The Verse of Chu". Also included in such a collection of poems are a number of pieces by some men of letters of later generations who were committed to modeling themselves on Qu Yuan and Song Yu. In terms of the literary form, "The Verse of Chu" leaves behind two poetic styles which have been exerting the greatest influence upon the later generations, involving the so-called "Sao Style" and "Chu Style of Poems". The poems with the "Sao Style" are named after "Tales of Woe", which is billed to be the masterpiece of Qu Yuan. Although Qu Yuan was renowned for his moral integrity and absolute loyalty to both the motherland and monarch throughout his lifetime, he was unable to "overcome the malicious calumnation" so that he "came all along under suspicion". As a result, Qu Yuan narrated his own sorrow hidden in the depth of his heart caused by his frustrations in "Tales of Woe". In the cream of his poems, Qu Yuan was meant to lay bare his noble character and ideals. Qu Yuan proved to be a dauntless fighter for his ideals who had been upholding fairness without currying favor with anyone all the way. The poet ranted his verses "But e'en if doom'd to die nine deaths, to those which burst/ With beauty I shall cling without feeling distress'd" with a view to giving expression to his spirit quality. In the light of content and sentiment, "Tales of Woe" has an enormous impact on the poets in later generations. Such features in the sphere of content



and sentiment turn out to be a manifestation of his pursuit of ideals, his will of dying without regret in the cause of justice, the metaphor of Beauty and Fragrant Grass. Besides, the above-mentioned features remain a showcase for such emotional thoughts as feeling sad with the approach of autumn and the leaves falling in the autumn winds, and fetching up nowhere. I already presented a very great number of details about all these themes before. So, a merely unnecessary repetition is no good right here. As to the form of poetry, the lines in "The Verse of Chu" are relatively long as a whole. In most cases, the Chinese character "兮" (pronounced as *xī* in Chinese phonetic alphabet) is used to split each line in half with a total of six characters before and after itself on the average. With the expansion of syntactic construction, the length of verse has also been extended accordingly and resulted in prosifying such a kind of verse furthermore. Thus, the so-called "Sao Style" in "The Verse of Chu" has gradually disaffiliated itself from the category of poems, serving as the harbinger of rhyme prose.

Another form of "The Verse of Chu" is the so-called "Chu Style of Poems", which refers to a suite of poems entitled "The Nine Hymns" in "The Verse of Chu". "The Nine Hymns" turn out to be the elegiac songs chanted by both the wizards and witches during the process of worship for ghosts and gods in the state of Chu. These hymns mainly recount a kind of romantic passion fused



with expectation and holy callings in a tone of love affair, naturally enabling the human beings to think of ideals, politics, religion, and so on and so forth. Compared with “Tales of Woe”, both the lines and pieces in “The Nine Hymns” are relatively short. In “The Nine Hymns”, the Chinese character “兮” (pronounced *xi* in Chinese phonetic alphabet) is used to split each line in half with a total of three characters before and after itself. And the most commonplace form does indeed make a difference. The line “New-acquainted friends delight most the heart, While partings constitute the saddest thing!” (“悲莫悲兮生别离，乐莫乐兮新相知”) is a quite good example. In each sub-clause, there exist a total of seven Chinese characters. The rhythm pertaining to each sub-clause reads and sounds in accordance with the so-called model of “four and three”, namely, four characters reading as the one sense-group in front and then three characters as the other in behind. Such a pattern conforms to the rhyme of the subsequent seven-character regular verses, therefore heralding the coming of the seven-character verses in later ages.

In short, the “Sao Style” and “Chu Style of Poems” manifest the two different kinds of poetic forms in “The Verse of Chu”. The difference between them has been mentioned as above. Apart from that, the wide use of the modal particle “兮” in both the “Sao Style” and “Chu Style of Poems” is worthy of being noticed as well. The use of such a modal particle in between adds the enticement of



smartness and elegance to the lines in "The Verse of Chu".

Following the Spring and Autumn Period and the Warring States Period, the state of Qin succeeded in unifying China. However, the Qin Dynasty established by the royal family surnamed "ying" ruled the country for a short time. Needless to say, the poetry composition during the dynasty does not cut a brilliant figure and has nothing to speak of. The poetic creation in the initial stage of the Han Dynasty can be grouped into two categories fundamentally: The first category refers to the four-character verses imitating those pieces in "The Book of Poetry" while the other refers to the pieces imitating the "Chu Style of Poems" in "The Verse of Chu". The four-character verses in the style of those pieces in "The Book of Poetry" were mainly chanted on the occasions of offering sacrifices at imperial courts and temples in ancient times, including "The Poem of Satire and Remonstrance" written by Wei Meng and "The Song from A Chamber" authored by Madam Tangshan. Far removed from the literary works with superb artistic value, these pieces sound relatively solemn and have usually been cursed with the problem with the stereotyped form. The pieces imitating the "Chu Style of Poems" in "The Verse of Chu" involve "The Song of Great Wind" composed by Liu Bang, "The Last Song" chanted by Xiang Yu, "Ode to the Autumn Wind" which is supposed to be authored by Emperor Wudi in the Han Dynasty, and so on and so forth. On the whole,





this kind of poetry is nothing but the impromptu pieces which are procured “on the basis of the feelings stirred up in their inner world and the words bursting unchecked out of their lips”.

The folk-song-styled verses emerged and came into fashion afterwards, removing the ambience of inertia in the poetic circles of the early Han Dynasty at a single stroke, achieving new accomplishments at the same time, and thereby ushering in a new epoch. The original meaning of the folk-song-styled verses refers to no other than the words of songs which are supposed to get in tune with a certain melody. In the narrow sense, the reign of Emperor Wudi in the Western Han Dynasty saw the birth of folk-song-styled verses. According to the historical records, Emperor Wudi ordered that a governmental institution should be established in an attempt to collect folk songs. At that time, a number of people with the expertise were sent to all parts of the country on the mission of collecting the ballads which would be musicalized for the purpose of singing later on. On top of that, the men of letters also commenced to compose some verses which could be set to music with the aim of singing. Both the ballads and verses were known as the “Han folk-song-styled verses” in the later generations. In terms of the form of words of songs, the so-called “Han folk-song-styled verses” include four-character verses growing out of “The Book of Poetry”, the “Chu Style of Poems” starting with “The Verse of Chu”, as

well as the irregular pieces originating from ballads which bring to light the social reality at that time. However, what impresses people most is a certain poetic form of five-character verses which come to light gradually under the influence of a new melodious tune. With the development of mutual exchanges between the Han Dynasty and other nationalities living in the northwestern part of China at that time, the local music prevailing in the Western Regions had been introduced into the central part of China. The music from the outside world exerted an influence upon Chinese traditional music, and therefore a brand-new tune called "New Mutant Music" came into being finally. The original five-character poems result from the words of songs which get in tune with such a kind of "New Mutant Music". Take the poem "Ode to Beauty" written by Li Yannian, an official who was in charge of composing for poetry and rhyme prose under Emperor Wudi.

The poem reads as follows:

*There is a beauty in the northern lands,  
Unequaled, high above the world she stands.  
At her first glance, soldiers would lose their town,  
At her second, a monarch would his crown.  
How could the soldiers and monarch neglect  
their duty?  
For town and crown are overshadowed by her beauty.*



The fifth line of verse contains a total of eight characters after another three characters are inserted into it for balance and euphony. Apart from it, each of the other lines contains five characters without exception. So, it is quite easy for us to find out such a phenomenon that the impact of “New Mutant Music” has given rise to the five-character poetic form gradually. It merely appears to be the tendency towards five-character folk-song-styled verses, though. The reason is quite simple: Such a poetic form had not come to stay completely yet up till then. With the lapse of time, the five-character verses made gradual progress until the five-character poems with relatively regular structure like “She Went to Pick” turned up afterwards. The further development led to the birth of “Nineteen Old Poems” in the end. The five-character verses were not entirely set down in permanent form until the emergence of “Nineteen Old Poems”. As a result of that, people started to call these pieces “old poems” instead of “folk-song-styled verses”. The impact of folk-song-styled verses on the posterity can be mainly grouped into the following categories: First, they exert a significant effect on the forming of five-character poems. Second, they succeed in establishing a platform for a large number of works in the style of “Han folk-song-styled verses” which popped up like mushrooms and cut a fine figure in later ages. For example, Li Bai and other poets once availed themselves of the old titles of folk-song-styled verses to



write his own pieces with new content. Compared with them, Bai Juyi even went further in assigning subjects for the elaborate pieces with new content composed by himself through imitating “Han folk-song-styled verses”, blazing a new trail in creating the so-called “new folk-song-styled verses” as a result.

Since the five-character verses took shape in the Eastern Han Dynasty, the spotlight had been on the world of poetry which was composed of more and more poets adopting such a poetic form. The Jian'an Period witnessed the famous father and sons from Family Cao holding sway over the world of poetry. Greatly affected by these leaders on the literary arena, numerous scholars and men of letters living in the kingdom of Wei followed suit in quick succession. Such a common practice enabled the poetic form of five-character verses to come to extraordinarily grand prosperity. Moreover, the five-character poems had also made great progress with their content expressed in many ways owing to a galaxy of writers of talent coming forth. And all these favorable factors help the five-character verses take their place in the history as a kind of poetic form which has been in use among Chinese poets for more than one thousand years.

Chinese poems entered a new transforming period following the Han Dynasty. To be quite honest, this period covers a time-span ranging from the Wei Dynasty, to the Jin dynasties, to the Northern and Southern dynasties.