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许渊冲译

# 唐宋词 一百五十首

GOLDEN TREASURY OF  
CHINESE LYRICS

Translated and versified  
by Xu Yuan Zhong

北京大学出版社  
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## INTRODUCTION

Tang poetry is recognized as a gem of classical Chinese literature. When the regulated Tang verse could no longer express adequately man's more refined and delicate feelings, the tuned lyric of irregular line-length took its place. The lyrics were originally songs written to a certain tune by unknown authors for beautiful songstresses to sing in wine shops or at farewell banquets, so their theme is usually parting and sorrow of lonely woman. When poets of the educated class frequented the entertainment districts in the course of their social life, they developed an interest in this form and also wrote about parting sorrow (e. g. Li Bo) and solitude of abandoned woman (e. g. Wang Jian).

Wen Tingyun (812—870?) was the first important lyric poet who transformed the tuned lyrics from mere songs of entertainment to verse of high literary quality. For example, he describes a beautiful woman in the following stanza:

*See golden light and shade play on the double peaks;  
Her temple cloud sails across the snow of her cheeks.  
Idly she rises to pencil her brows;  
Slowly she makes up, feeling still the drowse.*

The first two lines describe the appearance of a sleeping beauty,

but instead of saying straight forward that her hair covers her white cheeks, the poet uses the words *cloud* and *snow* to heighten the poetic effect. In lines 3 and 4 the theme of love is implied through the woman's reluctance to rise and begin her make-up. This is a very delicate feeling which Tang poets had never expressed in the regular verse. Perhaps that is the reason why Wang Guowei (1877—1927) says: "Regular verse is broader in scope, the lyric deeper in expression."

Wei Zhuang (836—910), on the other hand, is not so implicit as Wen. His lyrics have a quiet charm, a subtle enchantment which is more lyrical and more touching than Wen's objective description of beauty and love. For instance, he wrote the following stanza to his favorite mistress who was ravished by the sovereign of the Kingdom of Shu:

*Not knowing that my heart is broken,*

*I follow you in dreams unawakened.*

*None knows how sad am I*

*But the moon in the sky.*

Here we see the simplicity and beauty of his diction, naturalness and elegance of his style, and poignancy in his expression of love, separation and remembrance of the past.

Feng Yansi (903—960), prime minister of the Kingdom of Southern Tang, has combined the qualities of Wen and Wei, that is to say, his lyrics are as suggestive and associative as the former's and as lyrical and touching as the latter's. What Wei describes is usually a concrete event while what Feng does is an

abstract state of mind. For example, he describes his grief in spring as follows:

*Who says my grief has been appeased for long?*

*Whene'er comes spring,*

*I hear it sing*

*Its melancholy song.*

*I'm drunk and sick before the flowers from day to day*

*And do not care my mirrored face is worn away.*

What was his grief in spring? As prime minister, he should worry about the destiny of his weak kingdom doomed to fall a victim to invasion from without. Here we see another difference between Feng and Wei: Wei makes the reader sympathetic with his personal destiny and Feng with the tragedy of his kingdom.

So far as tragedy is concerned, Feng is overshadowed by Li Yu (937—978), the last sovereign of the Kingdom of Southern Tang, who capitulated to the first Emperor of Song. A captive in the Song capital, he wrote his lyrics not in tears, but in blood.

*When will there be no more autumn moon and spring  
flowers*

*For me who had so many memorable hours! ...*

*If you ask me how much my sorrow has increased,*

*Just see the overbrimming river flowing east!*

Here we see the contrast not only between the longevity of the universe and the brevity of human life, but also between beauty of nature and sorrow of man. We find the tragedy not only of a kingdom, but also of humanity as a whole, and Li Yu's sympathy

goes not only to human beings, but to all beings, including trees and flowers.

*Spring's rosy color fades from forest flowers*

*Too soon, too soon!*

*How can they bear cold morning showers*

*And winds at noon!*

He is really a poet of feeling, whose emotions burst out like his *overbrimming river flowing east*.

On the other hand, Yan Shu (991—1055), prime minister of the Northern Song, as says Professor Chia-ying Yeh, is a poet of intellect. His style is smooth as pearls and pure as crystals: there is no strong emotion, no striking language — neither color to dazzle nor vigor to impress. His emotions are like a placid pool and his intellect is always reflecting on his own experience, examining his own feelings and keeping them under control. For instance, when he saw flowers fall in wind and rain, he wrote the following verse:

*How can I bear the fallen blooms in wind and rain?*

*Why not enjoy the fleeting pleasure now again!*

He tried to keep his emotions under control by persuading himself to enjoy the present pleasures instead of grieving over the fallen flowers. In other words, he knew how to borrow a winecup from someone else to drown his own sorrow.

Both Yan Shu and Ouyang Xiu (1007—1072) were influenced by Feng Yansi of the Southern Tang, but Ouyang was so exuberant that he refused to be depressed by sorrow. For

example, he wrote the following stanza to a singing girl before parting from her:

*Don't set to a new tune the parting—song!  
The old has tied our heart in knots for long.  
Until we've seen all flowers on the trees,  
It's hard to bid goodbye to vernal breeze.*

That is to say, if we have seen all flowers on the trees, then it would not be so hard to part from spring. Here we see Ouyang possessed a certain *joie de vivre* (joy to live) and knew how to seek emotional satisfaction in lyrics. Perhaps that is the reason why he could enjoy the beauty of West Lake even when

*All flowers passed away, West Lake is quiet,  
The fallen blooms run riot.  
Catkins from willow trees  
Beyond the railings fly all day like mist in breeze.*

Yan Jidao (1030?—1106?), the youngest son of Yan Shu, was, unlike his father, an emotional poet who responded to life passively and registered experience as pure feeling. His lyrics conveyed emotion but lacked thought. For instance, he described his reunion with his beloved songstress after a long separation as follows:

*How many times have I met you in dreams at night!  
Now left to gaze at you in silver candlelight,  
I fear it is not you  
But a sweet dream untrue.*



His lyric, light and ethereal, seems to have a dappled grace like that of a dragonfly skimming over the water or a still lake rippled by a slight breeze. It excels in lilt and charm, helped in this by its metrical irregularity.

Yan Shu, Ouyang Xiu and Yan Jidao were good at writing short lyrics, restricted in form and in content. It was Liu Yong (987—1053) who began to compose long lyrics or slow tunes whose length ranges from 70 to 240 characters and which afford sufficient room for undulation and amplification. In his lyric, says Feng Xu, he is capable of complementing the complicated with the straightforward, the dense with the sparse, and the swift with the becalmed. He is able to describe what is difficult to describe and express what is difficult to express and make everything appear natural. What is more, he is skillful in fusing the extended narrative and descriptive passages and the concentrated lyrical expressions. For example, he wrote:

*Shower by shower  
The evening rain besprinkles the sky  
Over the river,  
Washing cool the autumn air far and nigh. ...  
From her bower my lady fair  
Must gaze with longing eye.  
How oft has she mistaken homebound sails  
On the horizon for mine?  
How could she know that I,*

*Leaning upon the rails,  
With sorrow frozen on my face, for her I pine!*

If the development of the lyric in form may be attributed to Liu Yong, then its growth in content must be credited to Su Shi (1037—1101). Su creates the lyric in the mode of Tang poetry and in so doing, broadens its scope and elevates its status. His style is exuberant and spontaneous, characterized by his viril quality and unrestrained nature. His philosophy represents a combination of Confucianism and Taoism. *To serve the Crown and to attain great renown* is his Confucian ideal and *to retire as times require* and to be detached from personal gain and loss, his Taoist ideal. When Liu Yong combined the sublime with the graceful, he merged in the grand scenery, but still he could not forget his gain or loss, nor could he leave behind the description of feminine charm and amorous feeling. When Su Shi wrote at **Red Cliff** the following well-known verse:

*The endless river eastward flows;  
With its huge waves are gone all those  
Gallant heroes of by gone years. ...  
Life is but a passing dream.*

*O Moon, I drink to you who saw them on the stream.*

he merged not only in the moonlit and wave-washed scenery but also in the history of great heroes so that he became careless about gain and loss alike. Such unworldly aspiration and upright personality in him, like winds in the sky and rain on the sea, could nowhere be seen in Liu Yong's lyrics. His images of natural set-

tings appear to be larger in scale and more expressive in function than Liu's typical elaboration of descriptive details. In a way, he combines Liu's structure and Li Yu's images in constructing his poetic world. Liu lacks the kind of penetration and imaginative power to produce such lines as the following:

*Both the past and the present are like dreams,  
From which we have ne'er been awake, it seems;  
There's left but pleasure old or sorrow new.*

That is perhaps the reason why Su is considered as the greatest poet of the Northern Song dynasty.

If Su is a great poet, then Qin Guan (1049—1100), one of his followers, is a pure lyricist. Qin neither deals with ideal nor aspiration in his verse but describes the most subtle, the most delicate feeling. For instance,

*The carefree flowers fly at ease as light as dreams;  
Fine threads of boundless rain drizzle like tearful  
Sorrow.*

*The curtain idly hangs there, waiting for the morrow.*

In this perfect fusion, says Professor Miao Yueh, emotion and setting enhance each other like pearl and jade in a necklace. This lyric may be compared to a gathering of beautiful ladies and young maidens in a garden pavilion, too selected not only for commoners but even for scholars and hermits. Its exclusive quality enables it to capture the subtle fragrance, the ineffable essence of an experience, and in reading it we feel transported to a purer and more mysterious realm, and our heart is filled with an almost

unbearable melancholy. Qin Guan has created with delicate imagery a unique world embodying his intimate personal experience. The words are tangible, but their ultimate meaning is elusive. Though small and delicate in themselves, they have the power to suggest something much larger.

Zhou Bangyan (1056—1121) has summed up the lyrical achievement of the Northern Song. Follower of Liu Yong, he inherits the form from the master while at the same time surpassing him in aspiration. In his lyrics, personal emotions are felt by various objects; that is to say, the images of seemingly independent objects are in fact the symbolic extension of his private feeling. For example, he wrote about the willow:

*How many times has the ancient Dyke seen  
The lovers part while wafting willow down  
And drooping twigs caress the stream along the town! ...  
The setting sun sheds here and there its parting ray.*

In fact, the ancient Dyke, the wafting willow down, the drooping willow twigs, the setting sun's departing rays, all share the poet's parting grief. Thus, he has opened up a new era for such important Southern Song lyricists as Jiang Kui and Wu Wenying. It was not until his appearance that the Northern Song lyrics flourished and reached its apex.

Li Qingzhao (1084—1151?), who lived in the intervening period between Northern and Southern Song, was the most remarkable poetess of the Song dynasty. Her lyrics recollect nostalgically her happy life in the North and reveal her distress in

the South. Direct in diction and honest in tone, she could be both bold and delicate, languid and boisterous. "Her attempt was to establish life in words: poetry was for her a stay against time, a surety to blot out oblivion. She tried to capture the past" (**Sunflower Splendor**) so as to while away the present. This may be illustrated by the following verse:

*Sitting alone at the window, how  
Could I but quicken  
The pace of darkness that won't thicken?  
On plane's broad leaves a fine rain drizzles  
As twilight grizzles.  
Oh, what can I do with a grief  
Beyond belief!*

Her grief over her deceased husband, would last as long as Bo Juyi's **Everlasting Regret**.

In 1125 the Song dynasty was forced by Jurchen invaders to move its capital from the North to the South, and that was the beginning of the Southern Song. Many patriots spoke out against the humiliation and called for military action to recover the lost land, so the Southern Song verse was marked by a patriotic fervor, of which General Yue Fei's **River All Red** was typical.

Lu You (1125—1210) was the best-known patriotic poet of the Southern Song. His poetry rises above narrow concerns and reveals an independent mind. Patriotic sentiments permeate a significant part of his verse. For instance, his everlasting regret is revealed in the following stanza:

*The foe not beaten back,  
My hair no longer black,  
My tears have flowed in vain.  
Who could have thought that in this life I would remain  
With a mountain-high aim  
But an old mortal frame!*

Xin Qiji (1140—1207) was the most important lyric poet of the Southern Song dynasty. Successor to Su Shi, he took the content over from him while at the same time putting a tighter rein on prosody than his master. But, unlike Su who had, under the influence of Taoism, a spirit of detachment when he was in exile, Xin could not, even when he lived in retirement, detach himself from his patriotism, which is revealed even in such a lyric as the lament of the departing spring:

*How much more can Spring endure of wind and rain?  
Too hastily it will leave again. ...  
But I've not heard  
Spring say a word.  
Only the busy spiders weave  
Webs all day by the painted eave  
To keep the willow down from taking leave.*

The late Spring is a symbol of the precarious Song dynasty, the wind and rain symbolize the corruption within and the aggression from without, and the busy spider is an image of the poet himself, who tried in vain to keep the Empire from its downfall. So it is said that with his appearance the lyric of the Song dynasty flour-

ished and reached its apex, and he is regarded as the most important poet of the “powerful and free” school of lyrics.

On the other hand, Jiang Kui (1155—1221) was considered as the most important lyric poet of the school of “delicate restraint” of the Southern Song. Successor to Zhou Bangyan, he had some common features with his predecessor, such as the painstaking choice of words and phrases, the great attention paid to music and the description of subtle feelings. But even in his finely chiseled verse we can find the patriotic sentiment of Southern Song poetry. For example, he wrote the following verse after he visited Yangzhou overrun by Jurchen invaders:

*It's now overgrown with wild green wheat and weeds.  
Since Northern shore was overrun by Jurchen steeds,  
Even the tall trees beside the pond have been war-torn.  
As dusk is drawing near,  
Cold blows the horn;  
The empty town looks drear.*

Overgrown weeds, overrun shores, war-torn trees, cold horns, empty towns, all reveal the deep grief of a patriotic mind.

Wu Wenying (1200—1260) was one of the last remarkable Southern Song lyric poets. In him we see the lyrical achievements of the Northern and Southern Song combined. He is as delicate and restrained as Zhou Bangyan and as powerful and moving as Xin Qiji. Read the following verse:

*Where willow branches hang like thread,  
Each inch revealing*

*Our tender feeling.*

Will you not find it as beautiful as Zhou Bangyan's **Willow**?

Read another verse of his:

*O Willow twigs, long as you are,  
Why don't you gird her waist and bar  
Her way from going afar?*

Will the willow twigs not remind you of Xin Qiji's busy spider trying in vain to retain the departing Spring?

"To those born with a sensitive spirit and an appreciation of subtle beauty," says Professor Miao Yueh in **Songs Without Music**, "lyric verse can bring delight and release, it can be a source of peace and strength. And this aesthetic sensitivity, if coupled with a sincere cultivation of character, can greatly enhance the quality of a man's everyday life and of his literary and scholarly pursuits. Many human activities coexist, many paths lead to the same goal. The lyric, an expression of the human heart and mind, and of human perception of the world, is one path leading to an understanding of beauty and goodness." If this book could lead to a better understanding of the beauty of the Chinese lyric verse, I would feel, as Edmund Spenser says in **Fate of the Butterfly**,

*What more felicity can fall to creature  
Than to enjoy delight with liberty.*

Xu Yuanzhong

Peking University

August 18, 1989



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