

# Poetry and Prose of the Han, Wei and Six Dynasties

结庐在人境而无车马喧  
问君何能尔心远地自偏  
采菊东篱下悠然见南山  
山气日夕佳飞鸟相与还  
此中有真意欲辨已忘言



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## Publisher's Note

THIS book is a selection of poetry and prose written between the beginning of the Han Dynasty in 206 BC and the reunification of China under the Sui Dynasty in AD 589. The Han fell in AD 220, and its empire split into the Three Kingdoms of Wei in the north, Shu in the west and Wu in the south. These were reunited in AD 265 by the Jin Dynasty, which was in AD 317 forced to abandon the north to barbarian incursions. The north collapsed into a welter of feuding regimes punctuated only by the relatively unified Northern Wei Dynasty (AD 386-534). The south, however, remained fairly stable, the Jin being succeeded by the Song, Qi, Liang and Chen Dynasties until the last of these fell to the Sui, whose predecessor the Northern Zhou had united the north in AD 577.

As will be seen from the body of the book, the events of the fourth century shifted the cultural axis of China from the valley of the Yellow River south to that of the Yangtse.

The *fu* or verse essay popular in the first half of the Han Dynasty had its origins in the preceding Warring States period (475-221 BC), particularly in the southern kingdom of Chu, and was used principally as a vehicle of political statement, frequently of indignation by statesmen whose advice had been repudiated. *The Owl* by Jia Yi is a good example of this unyielding spirit and re-

fusal to associate with unscrupulous men.

The *yuefu* style took its name from the Music Bureau set up in the reign of the Han Emperor Wu (140-87 BC) to compose music, train musicians and collect songs and became synonymous with the folk-song style of the period. The *yuefu* corpus contains many narrative ballads, one of the best being *The Bride of Jiao Zhongqing*, a long work telling how the feudal ethics of the patriarchal clan system destroyed the happiness of a young couple, who were able to overcome it only in death.

The later Han was not a time of great literary creation, but the influence of the *yuefu* persisted and is evident in the great number of eminent poets who appeared in the reign of Jian An (AD 196-219), among whom were the warlord Cao Cao (who set up the Wei Dynasty) and his sons Cao Pi and Cao Zhi.

During the Wei and Jin Dynasties most scholars tried to escape reality, and interest in metaphysics was prevalent, as exemplified by such talents as Ruan Ji, Zuo Si and Tao Yuanming.

Tao Yuanming grew up during the late Jin Dynasty, when political influence depended less on virtue and ability than on family connections, social position and wealth. Disgusted by the resultant internecine strife, he retired from official life with its chaos and corruption to a pastoral life of farming and writing. He is the archetype of the "hermit poet".

Tao Yuanming, though much influenced in his poetry by Confucian and Taoist philosophy, may also have written ghost stories. Tales of the supernatural had become popular since the fall of the Han and continued in vogue down to the end of the Southern Dynasties. This may be partly ascribed to the growing influence of Buddhism, introduced into China during the Han. The

same period saw much translation of Buddhist works, as well as the appearance of Fa Xian's *Record of Buddhist Countries*. Be that as it may, the supernatural element joined with the traditional folk legend to reflect the loves and hatreds of the people and denounce social inequality in its more preposterous manifestations, especially the licence and cruelty of the ruling class.

Such idle reflection on the conduct of others was encouraged by the political circumstances of the Wei and Jin Dynasties, and is reflected not only in folk literature. The stories from Liu Yiqing's *New Anecdotes of Social Talk* illustrate the scholarly and courtly aspects of this trend.

The last section of our book is devoted to the literary treatise *Carving a Dragon at the Core of Literature* by Liu Xie, whose life extended over the Song, Qi and Liang Dynasties of the south.

Despite the prevalence of chaos during this long period and the high-handed policies which plagued the life of the intellect, there appeared a great number of outstanding writers and significant works. We have been at great pains to cull from the diversity of the period some pieces which will give the reader an intimation of its wonder and its delight.





# Han-Dynasty Verse Essays

THE author of *The Owl*, Jia Yi (201-169 BC), was born in Luoyang in Henan Province during the Western Han Dynasty. Already well-known as a literary talent by the age of 18, he was summoned to court by the Emperor Wen and made a minister for his proposals on political reform and the weakening of the powers of the nobility. Court slander brought about his removal from the centre of power, and he was relegated to the post of tutor to a prince in the south. There, at Changsha, he wrote *The Owl* as a lament for his failure and died of grief at the age of 32.



## The Owl

In the year Chan E, \*  
 The fourth month in early summer,  
 On the Geng Zi day at sunset  
 An owl came to my house and stopped by my seat,  
 Looking thoroughly at ease.  
 Amazed by this strange apparition,  
 I opened the book of oracles  
 To learn what this portended,  
 And there I read:  
 "A wild bird's entry into a house  
 Foretells the master's departure."  
 I asked the owl then:  
 "Where am I to go?  
 Tell me, pray, if good fortune awaits me  
 Or some calamity, if I am ill-fated.  
 Will it come soon or late?  
 Let me know the date!"  
 Sighing, the owl raised its head and flapped its wings.  
 As it could not speak, I could only guess its meaning:  
 All creation changes, nothing is at rest;  
 Ceaseless the flux — progression and retrogression —  
 Matter becoming immaterial in endless transformations,  
 Their infinite subtlety defying description!  
 In calamity lies good fortune  
 And in good fortune lurks calamity,

---

\* 174 BC.

Grief and joy knocking together at the door,  
 Good luck and ill inhabiting the same realm.  
 Wu was powerful yet Fu Chai lost the kingdom;  
 The Yues fled to Kuaiji yet Gou Jian ruled supreme; \*  
 Li Si's travels were crowned with success,  
 Yet he was tortured to death. \*\*  
 Fu Yue, a shackled slave,  
 Became Wu Ding's chief minister. \*\*\*  
 Thus good fortune and bad are interlaced;  
 Fate is unpredictable,  
 And none knows what the end will be.  
 Water forced will spurt out,  
 An arrow drawn taut will fly far;  
 Nature is a ceaseless cycle  
 With everything transmuted, interacting.  
 Clouds gather and rain falls;  
 Endless the universal evolution;  
 None can fathom Heaven or make plans for the future.  
 Who knows how soon or late he must meet his fate?  
 The universe is a furnace stoked by Nature,  
 With the *yin* and *yang*\*\*\*\* as fuel,  
 The myriad things as metal;

---

\* Fu Chai (?-473 BC), the king of Wu, first defeated the Kingdom of Yue but later was conquered by the king of Yue, Gou Jian.

\*\* Li Si (?-208 BC), a statesman of Qin, helped Qin Shi Huang to subdue other states and unify China. After Qin Shi Huang's death, his rival Zhao Gao had Li Si torn limb from limb.

\*\*\* According to a legend, Fu Yue was a slave before becoming a high official in the Shang Dynasty (16th-11th century BC).

\*\*\*\* The dual principles — female and male, negative and positive — of ancient Chinese philosophy.

Gathering, scattering and vanishing,  
 Nothing is ever constant;  
 Countless the permutations  
 Continuing without end.  
 If one chances to be born a man,  
 Why cling to life?  
 And why feel dismay  
 If reborn in a different form?  
 Small minds take a selfish view,  
 Regarding all else but themselves as worthless;  
 Men of understanding take a broader view,  
 Not caring into what form they may turn.  
 The greedy will die for wealth, the gallant for fame,  
 And the ambitious for power;  
 But the vulgar value their lives.  
 Those under stress may race now east, now west,  
 But a great man will not bend  
 And remains constant through vicissitudes.  
 A hidebound pedant is fettered by tradition,  
 But a pure man spurns all things  
 And clings to the Truth alone.  
 The confused multitude are biassed  
 With a million prejudices;  
 A true man is tranquil  
 And rests alone with the Truth,  
 Renouncing intellect and spurning material things,  
 Remaining aloof and unconcerned for himself,  
 He roams at will in the infinite with the Truth.  
 He will flow with the current,

Stop when he reaches a bank,  
And abandon himself to fate with no thought of self.  
His life is like drifting  
And his death like resting,  
Tranquil as a calm, deep pool,  
Untrammelled as a boat adrift;  
For instead of prizing his life  
He floats in a void.  
The truly good man has no impediments  
But accepts his fate undismayed.  
As nothing matters a straw,  
Why should he have misgivings?

*Translated by Yang Xianyi  
and Gladys Yang*

## “Yuefu” Folk-Songs

THE *yuefu* was the Music Bureau set up in the second century BC to standardize court music. Apart from ceremonial pieces composed by scholars, it compiled a corpus of folk-songs drawn from all parts of the country for less stately occasions, and it is this popular element which became known as the *yuefu* style, whose freshness and vitality exercised a great influence on the development of formal poetry.



