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许渊冲译

汉魏六朝诗 一百五十首

GOLDEN TREASURY OF CHINESE POETRY
FROM HAN TO SUI (206 BC - AD 618)

Translated and Versified
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CONTENTS

| | | | |
|---------------------|------|-------|-------|
| <i>Introduction</i> | 〔前言〕 | | (1) |
|---------------------|------|-------|-------|

Han Dynasty (206 BC - AD 220) 〔汉诗〕

Liu Bang (256 - 195 BC) 〔刘邦〕

- | | | | |
|---------------------------|-------|-------|--------|
| 1. Song of the Great Wind | 〔大风歌〕 | | (16) |
|---------------------------|-------|-------|--------|

Xiang Yu (232 - 202 BC) 〔项羽〕

- | | | | |
|-------------------------|-------|-------|--------|
| 2. Xiang Yu's Last Song | 〔垓下歌〕 | | (18) |
|-------------------------|-------|-------|--------|

Lady Yu (? - 202 BC) 〔虞姬〕

- | | | | |
|----------------------|--------|-------|--------|
| 3. Reply to Xiang Yu | 〔和项王歌〕 | | (20) |
|----------------------|--------|-------|--------|

Liu Che (156 - 87 BC) 〔刘彻〕

- | | | | |
|----------------------------|-------|-------|--------|
| 4. Song of the Autumn Wind | 〔秋风辞〕 | | (22) |
|----------------------------|-------|-------|--------|

Si - ma Xiang - ru (179 - 118 BC) 〔司马相如〕

- | | | | |
|----------------------|-------------|-------|--------|
| 5. Songs of the Lute | 〔琴歌二首 (其一)〕 | | (24) |
|----------------------|-------------|-------|--------|

Li Yan - nian (? - 87 BC) 〔李延年〕

- | | | | |
|--------------------------------|---------|-------|--------|
| 6. Song of the Northern Beauty | 〔北方有佳人〕 | | (26) |
|--------------------------------|---------|-------|--------|

Lady Ban 〔班婕妤〕

- | | | | |
|---------------------|-------|-------|--------|
| 7. To an Autumn Fan | 〔怨歌行〕 | | (28) |
|---------------------|-------|-------|--------|

Xin Yan - nian 〔辛延年〕

- | | | | |
|-------------------------|-------|-------|--------|
| 8. Captain of the Guard | 〔羽林郎〕 | | (30) |
|-------------------------|-------|-------|--------|

Su Wu (? - 60BC) [苏武]

9. Su Wu to His Wife [苏武诗四首 (其三)] (34)
10. Fighting South of the Town [战城南] (36)
11. I Long for One [有所思] (40)
12. The Pledge [上邪] (44)
13. Gathering Lotus [江南] (46)
14. East of the Tomb [平陵东] (48)
15. The Roadside Mulberry [陌上桑] (50)
16. A Slow Song [长歌行] (56)
17. Song of the East Gate [东门行] (58)
18. A Longing Wife [饮马长城窟行] (62)
19. On Her Deathbed [妇病行] (64)
20. Song of a Roamer [艳歌行] (66)
21. Song of the White Hair [白头吟] (68)
22. Song of a Butterfly [蛱蝶行] (70)
23. Song of a Crow [乌生八九子] (72)
24. Song of a Dried Fish [枯鱼过河泣] (74)
25. A Song of Grief [悲歌] (76)
26. A Pair of Peacocks Southeast Fly
[孔雀东南飞] (78)
27. You travel on and on [行行重行行] (94)
28. Green, green riverside grass
[青青河畔草] (96)
29. Green, green the tombside cypresses
[青青陵上柏] (98)

30. We keep a feast in spirits high
〔今日良宴会〕 (100)
31. In northwest there's a tower proud
〔西北有高楼〕 (102)
32. I gather lotus blooms across the stream
〔涉江采芙蓉〕 (104)
33. The moon shines bright at dead of night
〔明月皎夜光〕 (106)
34. Frail, frail the lonely bamboo's root
〔冉冉孤儿竹〕 (108)
35. A rare tree stands in courtyard quiet
〔庭中有奇树〕 (110)
36. Far, far away the Cowherd Star
〔迢迢牵牛星〕 (112)
37. I turn my carriage and set out
〔回车驾言迈〕 (114)
38. The eastern wall stands long and high
〔东城高且长〕 (116)
39. I drive my car through Upper Eastern Gate
〔驱车上东门〕 (118)
40. The bygone times are gone farther away
〔去者日以疏〕 (120)
41. Few live as long as a hundred years
〔生年不满百〕 (122)
42. Cold, cold the end of year draws near

- 〔凜凜岁云暮〕 (124)
43. In early winter the cold air comes forth
- 〔孟冬寒气至〕 (126)
44. A guest who came from afar said
- 〔客从远方来〕 (128)
45. How bright are moonbeams shed
- 〔明月何皎皎〕 (130)
46. The Old Wife and the New 〔上山采蘼芜〕 (132)
47. I stroll out of the east gate 〔步出城东门〕 (134)
48. Homecoming after War 〔十五从军征〕 (136)
- Cao Cao* (155 - 220) 〔曹操〕
49. Graveyard Song 〔蒿里行〕 (138)
50. A Short Song 〔短歌行〕 (140)
51. Song of the Cold Endured 〔苦寒行〕 (144)
52. The Sea 〔观沧海〕 (148)
53. Indomitable Soul 〔龟虽寿〕 (150)
- Wang Can* (177 - 217) 〔王粲〕
54. Seven Sorrows 〔七哀诗〕 (152)
- Chen Lin* (? - 217) 〔陈琳〕
55. I water my steed 〔饮马长城窟行〕 (156)
- Liu Zhen* (? - 217) 〔刘桢〕
56. The Pine—to My Cousin
- 〔赠从弟三首 (其二)〕 (160)
- Xu Gan* (170 - 217) 〔徐幹〕
57. A Wife's Thoughts

| | |
|---|-------|
| 〔宝思六首（其三）〕 | （162） |
| <i>Po Qin</i> （? - 218） 〔繁钦〕 | |
| 58. A Woman's Love 〔定情诗〕 | （164） |
| <i>Cao Pi</i> （187 - 226） 〔曹丕〕 | |
| 59. Song of a Lonely Wife | |
| 〔燕歌行二首（其一）〕 | （170） |
| <i>Cao Zhi</i> （192 - 232） 〔曹植〕 | |
| 60. Song of the Harp 〔箜篌引〕 | （174） |
| 61. Song of the Capital 〔名都篇〕 | （178） |
| 62. Song of a Beauty 〔美女篇〕 | （182） |
| 63. Song of the White Horse 〔白马篇〕 | （186） |
| 64. Song to the Prince of White Horse | |
| 〔赠白马王彪〕 | （190） |
| 65. Parting with Ying at Luoyang | |
| 〔送应氏二首（其一）〕 | （196） |
| 66. Seven Poems（IV）〔杂诗七首（其四）〕 | （198） |
| 67. Lament 〔七哀〕 | （200） |
| 68. Written While Taking Seven Paces | |
| 〔七步诗〕 | （202） |
| <i>Ji Kang</i> （223 - 262） 〔嵇康〕 | |
| 69. To My Brother Giving up the Pen for the Sword | |
| （IX）〔赠兄秀才从军（其九）〕 | （204） |
| <i>Ruan Ji</i> （210 - 263） 〔阮籍〕 | |
| 70. 71. Reflexions（I）（Ⅲ） | |
| 〔咏怀诗（其一、三）〕 | （206） |

| | | |
|------------------------------------|----------------|-------|
| <i>Xuan</i> (217 - 278) | [傅玄] | |
| 72. The carriages roll | [车遥遥篇] | (210) |
| <i>Zhang Hua</i> (232 - 300) | [张华] | |
| 73. 74. Love Poems | | |
| | [情诗五首 (其三、五)] | (212) |
| <i>Pan Yue</i> (247 - 300) | [潘岳] | |
| 75. Elegy on my Wife | | |
| | [悼亡诗三首 (其一)] | (216) |
| <i>Shi Chong</i> (249 - 300) | [石崇] | |
| 76. Song of the Bright Lady | [王明君辞] | (220) |
| <i>Lu Ji</i> (261 - 303) | [陆机] | |
| 77. On My Way to Luoyang | | |
| | [赴洛道中作二首 (其二)] | (224) |
| <i>Zuo Si</i> (250 - 305) | [左思] | |
| 78. 79. On History (I) (I) | | |
| | [咏史八首 (其一、二)] | (226) |
| <i>Zhang Han</i> | [张翰] | |
| 80. Thinking of the Eastern Stream | | |
| | [思吴江歌] | (230) |
| <i>Zhang Zai</i> | [张载] | |
| 81. Song of Seven Sorrows | | |
| | [七哀诗二首 (其一)] | (232) |
| <i>Su Bo - yu's Wife</i> | [苏伯玉妻] | |
| 82. Letter to Su Bo - yu | [盘中诗] | (234) |
| <i>Liu Kun</i> (271 - 318) | [刘琨] | |

83. Riding the Wind [扶风歌] (238)
Guo Pu (276 - 324) [郭璞]
84. Song of Immortals
 [游仙诗十四首 (其一)] (242)
Wang Xi-zhi (321 - 379) [王羲之]
85. In Orchid Pavilion
 [兰亭诗六首 (其三)] (244)
Xie Dao-yun [谢道韞] 等
86. Snow [咏雪联句] (246)
Gu Kai-zhi (345 - 406) [顾恺之]
87. Spirit of the Four Seasons [神情诗] (248)
Tao Qian (365 - 427) [陶潜]
88. 89. Spring Excursion [时运] (250)
90. 91. Return to Nature
 [归园田居五首 (其三)] (252)
91. Begging for Food [乞食] (254)
92. Moving House [移居二首 (其一)] (256)
93. Drinking Wine [饮酒二十首 (其五)] (258)
94. Blaming Sons [责子] (260)
95. A Poor Scholar
 [咏贫士七首 (其一)] (262)
96. An Elegy for Myself
 [拟挽歌辞三首 (其一)] (264)
Xie Ling-yun (385 - 433) [谢灵运]
97. Passing My Ancestral Estate [过始宁墅] (266)

98. On Poolside Tower [登池上楼] (268)

99. Written on the Lake, Returning from Stone Cliff

[石壁精舍还湖中作] (272)

100. The Year's End [岁暮] (274)

101. 102. Exchange of Verse on the Stream

[东阳溪中赠答二首] (276)

Bao Zhao (414 - 466) [鲍照]

103. Song of Northern Frontier

[代出自蓟北门行] (278)

104. In Imitation of the Weary Way

[拟行路难 (其四)] (280)

105. The Mume Blossoms [梅花落] (282)

106. Farewell to Secretary Fu [赠傅都曹别] (284)

Xie Tiao (464 - 499) [谢朓]

107. Grief of a Lonely Palace Maid [玉阶怨] (286)

108. A Longing Wife [王孙游] (288)

109. Excursion on Eastern Fields [游东田] (290)

110. River Journey from the West to the Capital

[暂使下都夜发新林至京邑赠西府同僚] (292)

111. Gazing at Dusk on the Capital from the Three Peaks

[晚登三山还望京邑] (294)

Xiao Yan (464 - 549) [萧衍]

112. 113. Midnight Songs [子夜歌二首] (296)

114. Song of the Southern Shore [江南弄] (298)

Fan Yun (451 - 503) [范云]

115. Moored at New Tower
〔之零陵郡次新亭〕 (300)
116. Farewell Town 〔别诗〕 (302)
- Jiang Yan* (444 - 505) 〔江淹〕
117. After Parting 〔古离别〕 (304)
- Shen Yue* (441 - 513) 〔沈约〕
118. On the Height 〔临高台〕 (306)
119. Night after Night 〔夜夜曲〕 (308)
120. Wild Geese on the Lake 〔咏湖中雁〕 (310)
121. Lament for Xie Tiao 〔伤谢朓〕 (312)
- 122—125. Six Recollections 〔六忆诗四首〕 (314)
- Liu Yun* (465 - 517) 〔柳恽〕
126. A Southern Song 〔江南曲〕 (318)
- He Xun* (? - 518) 〔何逊〕
127. Reply to Fan Yun 〔酬范记室云〕 (320)
128. At Parting 〔相送〕 (322)
- Wu Jun* (469 - 520) 〔吴均〕
129. Song of Spring 〔春咏〕 (324)
- Wang Ji* (6th century) 〔王籍〕
130. On River Yoya 〔入若耶溪〕 (326)
- Yin Keng* (? - 565) 〔阴铿〕
131. Crossing Green Grass Lake 〔渡青草湖〕 (328)
132. Leaving New Tower at Dusk
〔晚出新亭〕 (330)
- Chen Shu - bao* (553 - 604) 〔陈叔宝〕

133. Blooming Jade Trees in the Backyard
 [玉树后庭花] (332)
Xu Ling (507 - 583) [徐陵]
134. The Moon over the Mountain Pass
 [关山月二首 (其一)] (334)
Wei Ding (515 - 593) [韦鼎]
135. On Hearing a Blackbird in the North
 [长安听百舌] (336)
Wang Bao (513 - 576) [王褒]
136. Crossing the Yellow River to the North
 [渡河北] (338)
137. Seeing a Friend Off South
 [入关故人别] (340)
Yu Xin (513 - 581) [庾信]
138. Reflections
 [拟咏怀二十七首 (其二十六)] (342)
139. The Moon Viewed from the Boat
 [舟中望月] (344)
140. Parting again with Secretary Zhou
 [重别周尚书二首 (其一)] (346)
Yang Guang (569 - 618) [杨广]
141. The River on a Moonlit Night in Blooming Spring
 [春江花月夜 (其一)] (348)
142. A Field View [野望] (350)

Folk Songs of Southern and Northern Dynasties

〔南北朝民歌〕

Anonymous 〔无名氏〕

- 143. Midnight Song 〔子夜歌〕 (354)
- 144. Spring Song 〔子夜四时歌・春歌〕 (356)
- 145. Summer Song 〔子夜四时歌・夏歌〕 (258)
- 146. Autumn Song 〔子夜四时歌・秋歌〕 (360)
- 147. Winter Song 〔子夜四时歌・冬歌〕 (362)
- 148. Song of the Western Islet 〔西洲曲〕 (364)
- 149. Song of Mu - lan 〔木兰诗〕 (368)
- 150. A Shepherd's Song 〔敕勒歌〕 (376)

INTRODUCTION

I

"Chinese literature," said John Turner, "is the high artistic peak of the most literary, the most artistic, the longest -established civilization that exists." One source of Chinese literature is the Book of Poetry compiled in the 6th century BC, marked by the use of four - character verse form as follows:

When I left here,
Willows shed tear.
I come back now,
Snow bends the bough.
Long, long the way;
Hard, hard the day.
My grief o'erflows.
Who knows? Who knows?

(Home - Coming After War)

Another source is the Poetry of the South composed in the 3rd century BC, marked by the use of six - character verse broken in the middle by the insertion of an exclamation such as "oh" or "eh", for example,

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

In 206 BC Liu Bang founded the Han dynasty. In 196 BC he revisited his native village when he composed the Song of the Great Wind in the same style as the Poetry of the South:

A great wind rises, oh! the clouds are driven away.
His grandson, Liu Che or Emperor Wu of the Han, who founded in 120 BC the Music Bureau to collect folk songs from various parts of the empire, also wrote in this style:

The autumn wind rises, oh! and white clouds sail the sky;
Grass and leaves yellow, oh! and wild geese southward fly.
Orchids and asters, oh! sweeten the chilly air;
But how can I forget, oh! my lady sweet and fair!

In this Song of the Autumn Wind we see Emperor Wu revealed his love for his deceased Lady Li, of whom we find a good description in her brother's Song of the Northern Beauty:

At her first glance, soldiers would lose their town;
At her second, a monarch would his crown.

This description may be compared with that of Duchess Zhuang Jiang in the Book of Poetry:

Her forehead like a dragonfly's,
Her arched brows curved like a bow.
Ah! dark on white her speaking eyes,
Her cheeks with smiles and dimples glow.

We may say the Book of Poetry describes the physical beauty of the

Duchess and Lady Li's brother her spiritual beauty. It would be interesting to remark that Li wrote not in the same style as Liu Che but in the folk song style. The folk songs in the Book of Poetry are lyrical while those of the Music Bureau are narrative. For instance, we may compare Home - Coming After War cited above with a song of the same title selected in this book.

The folk songs of the Han dynasty are characterized by the use of lines of irregular length. They reflect the lives and hardships of the common people. Some deal with their miseries (Song of the East Gate, On Her Deathbed), evils of war (Fighting South of the Town), oppression of feudal society (Song of the Orphan), desertion of woman by man (Song of the White Hair, the Old Wife and the New) etc. Others deal with love between man and woman (I Long for One, the Pledge) and still others with birds and fish (Song of a Butterfly, Song of a Crow, Song of a Dried Fish) etc. The most important folk song is A Pair of Peacocks Southeast Fly, the longest narrative poem written in five - character lines, telling how the feudal system destroyed the happiness of a young couple who were unable to overcome it unless in death.

Nineteen Old Poems are said to be the earliest folk songs written in the five - character line, for example:

You travel on and on ,
And leave me all alone.
Long miles between us lie
As earth apart from sky.

Some poems deal with love (XV . I'll make a quilt for lovers' bed) and marriage (XVI . My far - off husband longs for his dear wife), others with friendship (VI . No friendship is as firm as rock), feasting (IV . We keep a feast in spirits high), or the quest for fame (XI . Let's value

glory more than gold) and fortune (Ⅲ. How splendid is Riverside Town). For the most part they are somber in tone, no doubt reflecting the troubled social conditions of the time, and dwell much on the themes of distance (Ⅵ. The one I love is living far away), separation (Ⅸ. But I'm grieved so long we've parted), and the dreadful brevity (ⅩV. Few live as long as a hundred years) and uncertainty of human life (ⅩⅢ. Life is a journey which can never last/As long as stone or metal).

In short, just as the Book of Poetry is marked by the use of four - character verse and the Poetry of the South by that of six - character line broken in the middle by the insertion of an exclamation, the Han poetry is marked by the rise of the five - character verse which would exercise a great influence on later Chinese poetry.

Ⅱ

Chinese history was marked by unification, division and reunification. Liu Bang unified the country and built up his empire in 206 BC, but the Han dynasty fell in AD 220 and the empire split into the three kingdoms of Wei in the north, Shu in the west and Wu in the south with its capital at Jiankang (modern Nanjing). The dynasty of Wei was set up by Cao Cao (155-220), who was not only a military leader but also a poet who followed the tradition of the Book of Poetry and continued to write in the old four - character verse form.

Cao Pi (186-226), his eldest son who succeeded him on the throne and forced the last emperor of Han dynasty to abdication, followed the tradition of the Poetry of the South but turned the inserted exclamation in the middle of the six-character line into a word or character so that he became the first poet to write in the seven - character line. For instance, we may read the first four lines of his *Lonely Wife in the North*: