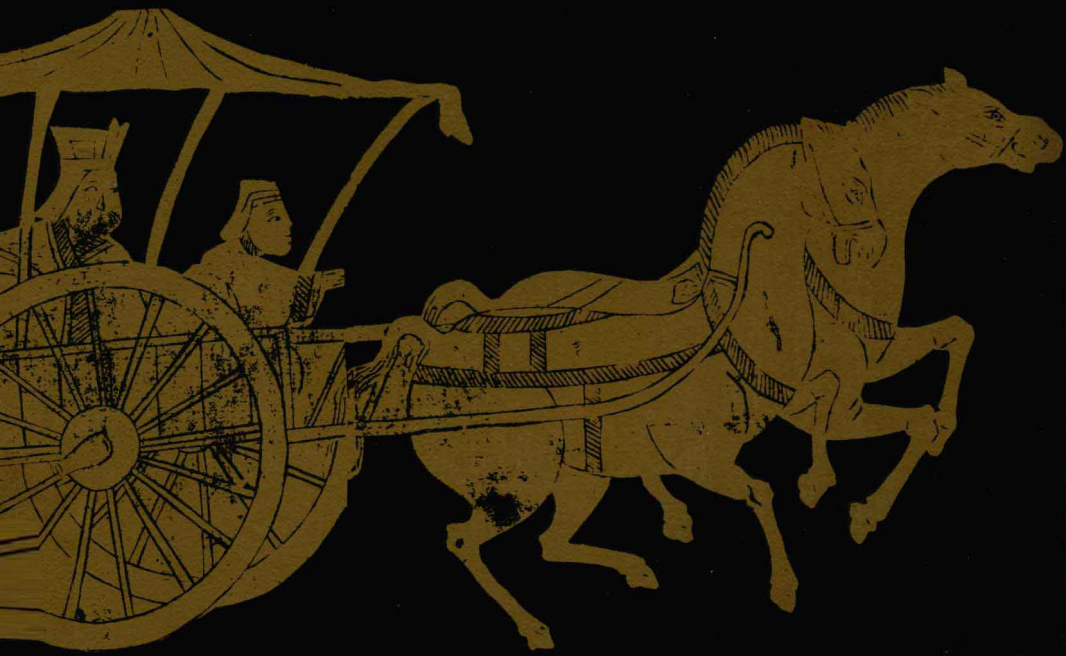
The COLUMBIA Book of CHINESE POETRY

From Early Times to the Thirteenth Century

Translated and Edited by
BURTON WATSON



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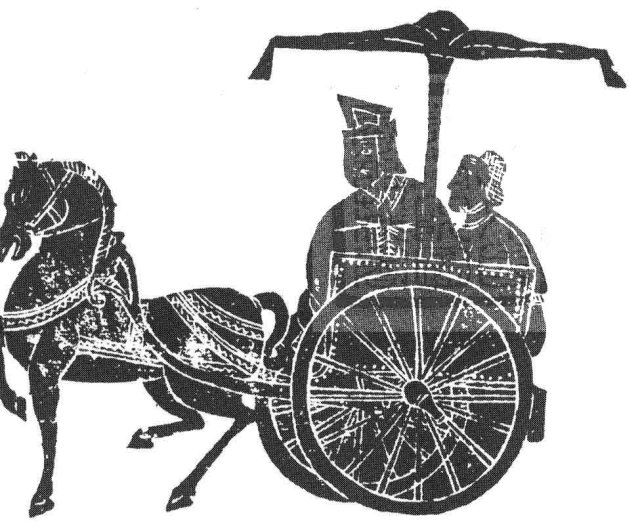

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TRANSLATIONS FROM THE ASIAN CLASSICS

The Columbia Book of Chinese Poetry

PRINCIPAL DYNASTIES OF CHINESE HISTORY

Hsia	2205 – 1766 B.C.	
Shang (Yin)	1765 – 1122 B.C.	
Chou	1122 – 249 B.C.	
Ch'in	221 – 207 B.C.	
Han	206 B.C. – A.D. 220	
Former Han	206 B.C. – A.D. 8	
Later Han	25 – 220	
Wei	220 – 264	Six Dynasties Period
Chin	265 – 420	
Western Chin	265 – 316	
Eastern Chin	317 – 420	
Northern & Southern Dynasties	420 – 589	
Sui	589 – 618	
T'ang	618 – 907	
Five Dynasties Period	907 – 960	
Sung	960 – 1279	
Northern Sung	960 – 1125	
Southern Sung	1127 – 1279	
Yuan	1234 – 1368	
Ming	1368 – 1644	
Ch'ing	1644 – 1911	

CONTENTS

	Principal Dynasties of Chinese History	*x*
	Introduction	*1*
ONE	The *Book of Odes*	*15*
TWO	The *Ch'u Tz'u*	*45*
THREE	Early Songs, Poems in Rhyme-Prose Form, and *Yüeh-fu* Ballads	*67*
FOUR	Poems of the Han and Wei	*93*
FIVE	T'ao Yüan-ming	*123*
SIX	Chin, Six Dynasties, and Sui Poets	*145*
SEVEN	Major T'ang Poets I: Wang Wei, Li Po, Tu Fu	*197*
EIGHT	Major T'ang Poets II: Han Yü, Po Chü-i, Han-shan	*235*
NINE	Other T'ang Poets	*269*
TEN	Two Major Sung Poets: Su Tung-p'o, Lu Yu	*295*
ELEVEN	Other Sung Poets	*331*
TWELVE	Lyrics in *Tz'u* Form	*353*
	Glossary	*373*
	Selected Bibliography	*377*
	Index of Poets	*383*

INTRODUCTION

POETRY has been many things to the Chinese over the long centuries of their history — a hymn to ancestral spirits, a celebration of the beauties of nature, an expression of friendship or a pleasant accompaniment to a social gathering, a medium for airing political criticisms, for venting grief, for advancing a courtship. It has been composed by emperors and their ladies-in-waiting, by monks and generals, city dwellers and farm folk, but above all by the scholar-officials, men who had received a thorough education in the classics of the language and who, often after passing the civil service examinations, were assigned posts in the complex bureaucracy that governed the vast nation. Whatever level of society it may have sprung from, poetry is woven into the life and history of the Chinese people, and perhaps no other facet of their traditional culture possesses such universal appeal.

Two things about the Chinese poetic tradition are immediately striking — its great antiquity and its remarkable continuity. The earliest works in my selection are taken from an anthology compiled around 600 B.C., and may well date back several centuries earlier. Moreover, they draw upon an oral tradition whose origins are probably as old as the Chinese people themselves. Though there are few works from the centuries immediately following this early anthology, for the period from around 300 B.C. down to the present century, the stream of poetic output is virtually unbroken. The discovery in the first century A.D. of a method of making paper, and the invention of printing about seven centuries later, greatly aided the dissemination and preservation of literary works, with the result that, the Chinese being among the world's most indefatigable com-

pilers and transmitters of texts, the volume of poetry handed down from the past is truly staggering.

To attempt to cover the entire span of such a lengthy and voluminous poetic literature in a single anthology seemed imprudent, and I have instead chosen to deal only with the earlier period, from the time of the oldest extant works to the thirteenth century. I have ended my selection with the thirteenth century because by that time the *shih,* the principal poetic form in use in the early period, had clearly passed the zenith of its development and inspiration. In later centuries, though poetry in *shih* form continued to be written, the focus of interest tended to shift to other poetic forms or to other genres such as drama and fiction.

The history of this early period of poetic development will be outlined in the introductory essays to the individual chapters of the anthology, which will also provide information on major poets and other background material needed by the reader to appreciate the selections. Here I would like first to describe the outstanding characteristics and themes of Chinese poetry as a whole, and then proceed to examine its principal forms in the early period.

One of the first things that is likely to strike the Western reader about Chinese poetry is its remarkable degree of accessibility. To be sure, like any great poetic tradition with a long history of development, that of China has its particular conventions, some of which may seem strange to the reader at first. For example, its treatment of romantic love — a theme it takes up rather less frequently than does the poetry, say, of Europe or Japan — tends, particularly in later centuries, to be presented almost exclusively from the woman's point of view and to place great emphasis upon the pathos and helplessness of her situation. Another set of conventions is found in poetry dealing with the imperial court, in which the ruler is likened to Heaven, his ladies-in-waiting to fairy maidens of the sky, and his favor to the life-giving rain or dew.

In addition to such conventions and stereotypes, Chinese poetry, like that of the West, has its body of myths and legends that it draws upon, and is especially fond of employing allusions to the famous events and personages of the nation's lengthy past. All such

mythical and historical allusions, of course, require some degree of explanation to be intelligible to the foreign reader.

But, as has been so frequently remarked, the Chinese poetic tradition is on the whole unusually humanistic and commonsensical in tone, seldom touching on the supernatural or indulging in extravagant flights of fancy or rhetoric. For this reason, even works that are many centuries removed from us in time come across with a freshness and immediacy that is often quite miraculous. The Chinese poetic world is one that is remarkably easy to enter because it concentrates to such a large degree on concerns that are common to men and women of whatever place or time.

Closely allied to this tone of reasonableness that marks Chinese poetry is its air of restraint and decorum. There are no epic poems in the language, and little of the ebullient celebration of heroic deeds and feats of arms that we associate with the epic poetry of India or the West. War and violence are rather seldom touched on, and when they are, it is more often to deplore than to glorify them. Erotic themes likewise are treated in a highly restrained manner. Sexual appeal is suggested by descriptions of dress, makeup, or articles of personal use rather than of the body itself, and anything approaching the indecent is so heavily cloaked in euphemisms that it could be titillating only to the highly initiated. All of this reflects the pervading influence of Confucianism, with its emphasis upon civil rather than military arts and virtues and its somewhat puritanical outlook.

Another important characteristic of Chinese poetry is its frequently personal and occasional nature. The Chinese have for the most part regarded poetry not as the product of any one particular group in society or personality type, not as the fruit of rare genius or divine inspiration, but as something that almost anyone with a grasp of the rules of prosody and a genuine desire for self-expression can compose. Particularly among scholars and government officials, poetry was an indispensable accompaniment of daily life. Poems were customarily composed as part of the entertainment at banquets and outings or exchanged among friends at times of parting. At other times, one might write poems to describe the events of his daily life, to record the scenes of a journey, to give vent to grief or

frustration, or simply to dispel boredom or polish up one's literary skills. The practice of drawing lots to determine what rhymes one was to use when composing poems with a group of friends, or of "harmonizing" with the rhymes of someone else's poem — either employing the same rhyme categories as the original poem, or using the exact same rhyme words — added an element of challenge to the composing of poetry and gave it a gamelike quality.

Chinese occasional poetry — that is, poetry inspired by or written to commemorate a particular occasion — is much like the occasional poetry of the West. But whereas the Western poet in such circumstances usually tries to invest his poem with some sense of a universal truth transcending the occasion, the Chinese poet is more often content to try to capture the particular truth or sentiment that came to him on that occasion. For this reason, he frequently prefaces his poem with a headnote describing the precise time, place, and circumstances that prompted its composition. There is less sense than in the West of a poem as possessing a life of its own apart from that of its creator, more of the poem as a form of autobiography, shedding light on the life of the poet and at the same time yielding up its full meaning only when read in the context of that life. The poem is the voice of the poet not self-consciously addressing posterity or the world at large, but speaking quietly to a few close friends, or perhaps simply musing to himself.

But, although there is this very important personal and intimate side to Chinese poetry, and it is the side which, because of its engaging understatement and freedom from pretension, is likely to appeal most to present-day Western readers, there is also a more public side to poetry in China. The earliest anthology of Chinese poetry, the *Shih ching* or *Book of Odes,* was believed to have been compiled by the sage Confucius, who made clear that what he valued in poetry were its moral and didactic elements. From early times, Confucian scholars have seen poetry as playing a vital role in the ordering of the state, functioning as a vehicle through which the officials and common people might celebrate the virtue of a just ruler or, as is more likely to be the case, decry the hardships inflicted by an unjust one. This view of poetry as a medium for social and

political complaint has led to the composition of many moving and impassioned works, realistic descriptions of the griefs of the tax-burdened farmers, outcries against military conscription and the ills of war, and attacks on social injustice in its many guises.

According to Confucian theory, the ruler was expected to welcome such complaints as expressions of loyal concern on the part of his subjects. But in an authoritarian governmental system such as that of imperial China, reasonable complaint was in practice all too often interpreted as treasonable impertinence, and countless officials found themselves summarily demoted and "exiled" to minor office in some remote province as a result of their poetic criticisms. It is a tribute to the courage and integrity of the Chinese poet-officials that, in spite of such risks, so many of them continued over the centuries to pour out their remonstrances in poetry.

The fondness of the Confucian scholars for poetry of didactic and political import at times led them to discover political meaning in places where it was almost certainly never intended. Thus, for example, they interpreted the simple love and courtship songs of the *Book of Odes* as allegories of the loyal minister's devotion to his sovereign, or saw in the crude ditties sung by children in the street the prophecies of impending events in the world of politics. On the other hand, countless Chinese poems were in fact intended to have political significance, even though it may not be immediately apparent in the surface meaning of the poem. Thus, for example, the poem by Chiang Lu on p. 191 seems to be no more than an objective description of a wrecked riverboat. But the poet's biography in *Nan shih,* chapter 36, reveals that in fact it was written as a rueful comment on the writer's own frustrated official career. Such allegorical levels of meaning are often difficult to identify, particularly at this far remove in time. But it is well to keep in mind that a seemingly ingenuous poem of objective description may have had a quite different significance for the poet and his associates. Most Chinese poets of early times wrote not for the reading public at large, but primarily for the members of their own coterie, and it was enough if the members of that group grasped the full import of the work.

Another important theme of traditional Chinese poetry to be

touched on here is that of the beauties of nature, particularly as seen in remote mountain areas, a theme that is of prime importance in Chinese painting as well. Here again there are conventions and symbolisms at work which we should be aware of. Thus, to give a few examples at random, pines and cranes are traditionally suggestive of longevity; orchids — the modest, unshowy Oriental variety — stand for the retiring gentleman of upright character; plum blossoms, because they open so early in the spring, symbolize fortitude; bamboos symbolize integrity, etc.

In the very early period of Chinese history, when large areas of the country were still in a state of wilderness, the natural landscape was often looked on as dark and threatening, the abode of fierce beasts and nature spirits of doubtful benignancy. But as more lands were opened up for cultivation and population pressures built up, the more isolated mountain and valley regions came to seem increasingly inviting. In contrast to the cities, which represented wealth, power, and the corrupting influences that seem inevitably to accompany them — the world of "red dust," as the Chinese call it — the mountains offered a realm of safety, serenity, and freedom from care, where one might savor the unspoiled grandeur of the landscape, pursue the life of a Taoist or Buddhist practitioner, or search for medicinal herbs to prolong life. It is no wonder that the poet-officials, shackled to their posts and ever in danger of encountering sudden reversals of fortune or even execution, should have dreamed so often of escaping to these carefree realms. And when, as frequently happened, civil strife erupted in the nation or foreign invaders swept down from the north or west, flight to the hills became almost the only hope for survival.

All these connotations — safety, longevity, spiritual peace, emancipation — underlie the traditional Chinese attitude toward nature and the life that is lived in the midst of natural surroundings. And added to these, as in the West, is an element of mysticism and religious feeling, a sense that in such a setting one is on the threshold of the supernatural. But, whereas the Western poet customarily looks upon nature as the eloquent handiwork of a Supreme Being who exists above and apart from his creation, the Chinese poet, imbued

with the nondualism of Taoism and Buddhism, sees nature as the embodiment of the Absolute itself. Every element in the landscape, from the most sublime to the lowliest, is equally a manifestation of the Tao. And man, far from being the lord and caretaker of creation, is simply another one of the elements in it.

Finally, a word must be said about the theme of death. Though the poems in the *Book of Odes,* as will be noted later, are almost superstitious in their avoidance of the subject, by Han times the terrifying brevity and uncertainty of human life and the fear of death — the "claw coming out of the earth," to borrow Robert Payne's striking phrase[1] — had become a major theme in Chinese poetry.

In the face of such fear, many writers could only urge that we make the most of the little time given us. As one of the famous series of anonymous poems known as "The Nineteen Old Poems of the Han" puts it: "If the day is short and you hate the long night,/why not take the torch and go wandering?" In time, however, more thoughtful poets came forward with three possible ways to solve, or in some sense alleviate, the problem of human mortality.

The first, drawing upon ancient beliefs of the folk religion, particularly those associated with popular Taoism, suggests that, through the use of rare herbs or other semimagical means, one can attain the status of a *hsien* or immortal spirit, or at least greatly prolong the span of life. The art and literature of early China abound in descriptions and depictions of such immortals, cavorting in the mountain fastnesses that are their habitat or winging to the sky on the back of a white crane.

Confucianism, with its stress on humanism and rationalism, understandably took a dim view of such beliefs. Confucian-minded writers offered in their place more sober and socially responsible kinds of immortality, that achieved biologically through the perpetuation of the family, and the less certain hope of being remembered by posterity because of one's outstanding deeds or character. "A shining name — let that be the prize!" declares another of the poems in the series just mentioned.

1. Robert Payne, ed., *The White Pony: An Anthology of Chinese Poetry* (New York: The New American Library, 1947), p. xi.

But virtue, as the poets themselves glumly noted, too often fails to receive its just recognition, and the Chinese annalists, for all their proverbial diligence, can hardly be counted on to get down all the names of those who deserve remembrance. Thus in time a third solution to the problem began to take shape, one that is far subtler than the others and founded on the Taoist and Buddhist concepts of nondualism already alluded to above. The individual is indeed fated to perish when his allotted years come to an end. But if he can somehow transcend or set aside his individuality and merge himself with the ceaselessly recurring life of nature as a whole, he can in a sense free himself from bondage to the conventional concepts of life and death and become as eternal as the universe itself.

Sometimes, as in T'ao Yüan-ming's poem "Substance, Shadow, and Spirit," such philosophical ideas are set forth in a systematic manner, though more often, particularly in the case of the last view mentioned, they are merely hinted at. Many Chinese poems are frank celebrations of the sensual pleasures of life, albeit conscious of how fleeting such pleasures may prove to be. Others are works of high moral and artistic seriousness, intended in some way to better the state of mankind, and at the same time to insure a measure of literary immortality to the author. But others — often among the finest works in the language — are quite different from these in nature, exercises in quietude and anonymity in which the poet deliberately seeks to divest himself of his personality, even of his humanity, in an effort to become one with the countless other forms of being around him.

The question of just how satisfactory any of these solutions I have outlined may have been to the poets who embraced them is outside the scope of our inquiry here. But we ought to be aware of these varieties of philosophical orientation so that we can properly appreciate the tenor of a given poet's work, and not look for moralizing from someone who is concerned only with sensibility, or displays of ego from one whose whole aim is the shedding of ego.

Having noted some of the principal themes and characteristics of Chinese poetry, I would like to say something about its forms.

Nearly all the works contained in the present anthology, which covers the first two thousand years of Chinese poetry from about 800 B.C. to A.D. 1200, employ the *shih* form, a term we have already encountered in the title of the earliest anthology, the *Shih ching* or *Book of Odes*. It was originally a song form, and continued in later centuries to be essentially lyric in nature, though at times employed for narrative and descriptive poetry as well.

In its earliest form in the *Book of Odes,* it customarily uses a line made up of four characters. Since one character represents one syllable, and since classical Chinese is basically monosyllabic, this means in effect that there are usually four words to a line. Lines tend to be end-stopped, with few run-on lines except in the final couplet, so that the effect is of a series of brief and compact utterances or images.

In later centuries, the old four-character line of the *Book of Odes* for the most part dropped out of use, being replaced by versions of the *shih* that use a five-character or seven-character line. Rarely, poems with a three-character or six-character line are found, as well as those in the so-called "mixed line" form that uses lines of varied lengths. In the headings to the poems in the anthology that follows, form and line length will be noted.

End rhyme is employed from the earliest times, usually appearing at the end of the even-numbered lines. Occasionally rhymes on the odd-numbered lines are also used, as well as rhymed couplets. In short poems a single rhyme is customarily used throughout; in longer poems the rhyme may change as often as the poet wishes. In addition to end rhyme, much use is made of alliteration, internal rhyme, and onomatopoetic words descriptive not only of sounds but of actions and moods as well.

Though Chinese was probably a tonal language from very early times, we are not certain what role tone played in the prosody of ancient Chinese poetry. From around the sixth and seventh century, a new type of *shih* poetry evolved that took careful account of the tone of the words used in composition. This new, tonally regulated type of verse came to be known as *chin-t'i-shih* or "modern style *shih*," and the older, unregulated type was referred to as *ku-shih* or

"old style" *shih*. (For these and other technical terms, see the glossary on pp. 373-375.)

For purposes of prosody, the four tones of medieval Chinese were classified into two categories: level tones, in which the voice remains on an even level, and deflected tones, in which the voice dips or rises in pronouncing the syllable. The rules for tonal regulation, or tonal parallelism, as it is sometimes called, are highly complex and need not be described in detail here. In principal they decree that a single line shall not have more than two, or at the very most three, syllables or words in succession that belong to the same tonal category, and that in the second line of a couplet the words in key positions shall be opposite in tone to the corresponding words in the first line of the couplet. This latter results in the second line of the couplet producing, in terms of tone, a mirror image of the first line.

All of these rules and devices no doubt insured that traditional Chinese poetry had a highly patterned and pleasing aural effect. However, because of the extensive changes that have taken place in pronunciation over the centuries, it is difficult to reconstruct the exact effect today.

Along with such euphonic devices as rhyme and tonal parallelism, Chinese poetry employs numerous rhetorical devices such as simile, metaphor, personification, etc. in the manner of Western poetry, though usually with greater restraint, and makes extensive use of verbal parallelism. Such parallelisms customarily appear in the form of couplets in which both lines follow exactly the same syntactical pattern; thus nouns, verbs, adjectives, etc. in the upper line are matched by identical parts of speech in the lower line, number words are matched with number words, color words with color words, etc.

Let me illustrate some of these points by quoting a typical poem in *shih* form. It is by Liu Tsung-yüan (773-819), a well-known T'ang official, poet, and prose writer, and is entitled "River Snow." The poem is in the *chüeh-chü* or quatrain form, one of the "modern style" or tonally regulated forms which consists of four lines made up of five, seven, or in rare cases six characters each. This particular ex-