

# Chinese Poetic Closure

Yang Ye

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## **Table of Chinese Historical Dynasties**

Han       206 B.CA.D. 8         Hsin (Interregnum)       9-24         Eastern Han       25-220         Three Kingdoms       220-265         Chin (Western Chin)       266-316         Southern Dynasties       317-420         Eastern Chin       317-420         Sung       420-479         Ch'i       479-502         Liang       502-557         Ch'en       557-589         Sui       589-618         T'ang       618-907         Period of Five Dynasties and Ten Kingdoms       907-960         Sung       960-1279         Yüan (Mongol)       1279-1368         Ming       1368-1644         Ch'ing (Manchu)       1644-1911	Chou (Period of Springs and Autumns) Period of Warring States Ch'in	770–476 B.C. 475–221 B.C. 221–206 B.C.
Hsin (Interregnum)       9-24         Eastern Han       25-220         Three Kingdoms       220-265         Chin (Western Chin)       266-316         Southern Dynasties       317-420         Eastern Chin       317-420         Sung       420-479         Ch'i       479-502         Liang       502-557         Ch'en       557-589         Sui       589-618         T'ang       618-907         Period of Five Dynasties and Ten Kingdoms       907-960         Sung       960-1279         Yüan (Mongol)       1279-1368         Ming       1368-1644	Han Westers Her	206 D.C. A.D. 9
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		1644–1911

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## **Contents**

	Table of Chinese Historical Dynasties	ix
	Note on Transliteration of Chinese Characters	xi
1	Introduction	1
2	Scenic Closure in Tu Fu's Poetry	19
3	Book of Songs: Ending in the Beginning	37
4	Continuation and Variation: A Diachronic Survey of Poetic Closure Through the High T'ang	65
5	Scenic Closure in Chinese Literary Criticism	89
6	An Open Ending: Towards the Western Horizon	115
	Glossary	141
	Selected Bibliography	149
	Index	163

## Introduction

### POETIC STRUCTURE AND POETIC TEXT

A study of poetic closure is primarily a study of the structure of a poetic text. The English word structure, like its equivalents in European languages (the French la structure and the German die Struktur), has derived from the Latin word struere, i.e., to construct or to put things in order. Likewise the English word text shares its origin with the word texture in the Latin participle textum, which means "that which is woven." Understood in this sense, what we discuss as poetic structure here includes the different means of constructing or weaving a poetic text. Obviously, the structure of a poetic text involves many and various elements or units of the text. As a literary term, however, the word structure has more frequently been used as an equivalent for prosody, which as a matter of fact is only one of the many aspects of that construction.

A basic concept of the Russian Formalist critics can help further elucidate the use of the term *structure* in this study. In his extensive discussion of plot construction, Viktor Sklovskij has formulated the distinction between *fabula* and *sjuzet*: the former refers to the raw material of a story, i.e., its basic causal-temporal relationship; and the latter, the arrangement and presentation of that basic stuff at the hand of the author.<sup>1</sup>

Although Sklovskij's discussion was originally made in the context of narrative prose, the concept of *fabula* and *sjuzet* has been applied to literary composition in general with some variation. In the light of this concept, the study of poetic structure may also be understood as the study of the *sjuzet* in its manipulation and presentation of the *fabula*, which may be illustrated by the following comparison of two texts (*sjuzet*) based on a similar subject or origin (*fabula*). Dorothy Wordsworth's journal recorded that on Thursday, April 15, 1802, she

and her brother William, the poet, took a walk along the Lake, during which they saw some daffodils. She wrote as follows:

It was a threatening, misty morning, but mild. We set off after dinner from Eusemere, ... The wind was furious, ... The wind seized our breath. The Lake was rough, ... When we were in the woods beyond Gowbarrow Park we saw a few daffodils close to the water-side. We fancied that the lake had floated the seeds ashore, and that the little colony had so sprung up. But as we went along there were more and yet more; and at last, under the boughs of the trees, we saw that there was a long belt of them along the shore, about the breadth of a country turnpike road. I never saw daffodils so beautiful. They grew among the mossy stones about and about them; some rested their heads upon these stones as on a pillow for weariness; and the rest tossed and reeled and danced, and seemed as if they verily laughed with the wind, that flew upon them over the Lake; they looked so gay, ever glancing, ever changing.<sup>2</sup>

Two years later, under her brother's pen, however, the trip was transformed into the poet's solitary walk:

I wandered lonely as a cloud That floats on high o'er vales and hills, When all at once I saw a crowd, A host, of golden daffodils;

5 Beside the lake, beneath the trees, Fluttering and dancing in the breeze.

Continuous as the stars that shine

And twinkle on the milky way,
They stretched in never-ending line
Along the margin of a bay:
Ten thousand saw I at a glance,
Tossing their heads in sprightly dance.

The waves beside them danced, but they
Outdid the sparkling waves in glee;
A poet could not but be gay,
In such a jocund company;
I gazed—and gazed—but little thought

What wealth the show to me had brought:

For oft, when on my couch I lie
In vain or in pensive mood,
They flash upon that inward eye
Which is the bliss of solitude;
And then my heart with pleasure fills,

And dances with the daffodils.

Placed side by side, the two texts show quite a few differences in addition to that between prose and poetry, even though they obviously have derived from the same occasion. The poet kept in the poem some of his sister's wording (those italicized in Dorothy's text), but he also made a few important changes during his own writing process, his "recollection in tranquility." Besides excluding his walking companion entirely from the scene, he also substituted a breeze for what Dorothy had described as a furious wind that "seized [their] breath," a change which corresponds well to the overall milieu of beauty and harmony in his poem. From the generic features of the diary as a form of composition, we may consider Dorothy's record as a more truthful account of the actual event, the trip that they made together that day. What is presented at the opening of William's poem, on the other hand, is obviously quite a different account of the event, even a distortion. A poet, nevertheless, has the poetic license to manipulate his fabula. It does not need the genius of a William Wordsworth to sense that it is much more poetic to say "I wandered lonely as a cloud" than, for instance, "We strolled together as clouds." To appreciate the wonderful opening of this poem in terms of the relation between that literary event (fabula), probably more truthfully recorded in Dorothy's diary, which her brother had read before his composition of the poem, and the way the poet presented it (sjuzet), is to read the poem in terms of its structure.

Under the category of *poetic structure*, one may place such structural units as poetic titles, beginnings, endings, and last but by no means the least, the structural patterns in their relations with each of these separate units and with the entire text.

Now one may argue that just as a thousand people have a thousand faces, each poetic text has its own individual features which, according to an argument prevalent since the New Critics, have to be dealt with individually; hence it is perhaps meaningless to have a general study of any of its structural units. Such an argument, however, is to be taken with a grain of salt. While it is desirable to study every poem in its own right, real appreciation of literature comes from comparison and contrast. Just as the thousand faces can be distinguished according to, say, complexion or shape, poems can be studied in groups of, for instance, genre, period, school, or structure. The same is true of their structural units. Categorization is inherent in human nature, even though one

certainly has to keep in mind that it is not, and should not be, an end in itself. Also, what has made the issue relevant to our discussion is the realization that the categoric features are most often inherent in the text itself, and are not mere functions of the motives of the categorizer.

A poetic text may be regarded as a system not all the components of which interact equally. Most often it is one in which, in the creative process of the sjuzet's manipulation of the fabula, some components are projected into the foreground and become dominant, to use another Formalist term, while some others recede into the background or even become absent in the text. The dominant, in the words of Roman Jacobson, is the foregrounding of one or a group of elements. It is the focusing component of a work of art that rules, determines, and transforms the other components. It is largely through the dominant that a poetic text takes on its specific features. Although the dominant parts do not stand entirely on their own, they do not function merely as constituents of the whole either, but actually in their turn have their own important structural functions, and often their dominance, in the whole text. Largely in the sense of literary history, Jacobson used the term dominant to refer to parts of poetic structure (such as rhyme, syllabic scheme, and intonational unity), or to different genres of art (such as visual arts, music, and verbal art). To Jacobson, the dominant does not remain the same all the time, but rather shifts from age to age. The shifting of the dominant underscores the tension between canon and artistic novelty, the latter being understood as a deviation from the former which often gives shape to a new canon.<sup>3</sup>

### ATTENTION TO POETIC STRUCTURE IN CHINESE CRITICAL TRADITION

Since early times Chinese writers and critics have paid much attention to poetic structure as well as to the importance of structural units. An emphasis on the importance of parts in their relation to the whole may have had its origin in the critique of the practical use of literature, such as during the "Period of Spring and Autumn" (the 8th to the 5th century B.C.), when texts from the ancient anthology of songs, the Shih-ching (Book of Songs), were widely used and quoted for political, diplomatic, and various social functions. Lines were frequently garbled out of context—what the T'ang classical scholar K'ung Ying-ta called tuan

chang ch'ü yi, "interpreting a passage out of its context." In this way, many poems in the Shih-ching became widely known through frequent citations, and were transmitted, so to speak, "on everyone's lips."

The earliest Chinese writer known to have attributed great importance to separate parts in a literary text was the Chin poet Lu Chi. His Wen-fu (The Rhyme-prose Exposition on Literature) is primarily a detailed description of the writing process. In talking about the essentials of literary expression he suggested the concept of ching-ch'e ("cracking horsewhip"):

Set a piece of expression at a key position To make a cracking horse-whip for the entire text.

What is meant here, according to traditional exegesis, is that in a literary composition, it is desirable to put down a word or phrase at an appropriate place which, though incomplete in itself, may become a point of convergence, and which may function like a "cracking horse-whip" to invigorate the whole piece. The term *ching-ch'e* has since been used to refer to words, phrases, sentences and other structural units which play an important role in the text: units that spur and alert the reader's attention, as the original meaning of that equestrian term suggests. This approximates to the Formalist idea of the *dominant* when applied to parts of poetic structure, though Lu Chi's original use of the term seems to have put the emphasis more specifically on the smaller units of words and phrases.<sup>5</sup>

Liu Hsieh's Wen-hsin tiao-lung (Carving Dragon at the Heart of Literature), written circa. 502, is the earliest systematically organized book of Chinese literary criticism. Several of its fifty chapters touch upon the topic of poetic structure, but most notably in the chapters "Stanza and Line" (Chang-chü) and "Fluency and Coherence" (Fu-hui). These two chapters examine the structure of a literary text, especially how the parts work towards the unity of the text. They investigate the relation between the subject and the art, between the material that provides the basis for literary composition and its arrangement under the author's pen. The latter chapter also contains some comments on beginning and closure, and on their significance in relation to the entire text, which is to be further discussed in detail later in this study.

Such a close attention to parts as the organizing and animating center of the whole had also been found in the comments on art made by the

great Chin dynasty painter Ku K'ai-chih, who asserted the paramount importance of painting the eyes in portraits. When asked why he usually would not add the eyes to his figures until years after he finished all the rest of a portrait, Ku remarked that in a portrait, the four limbs and the body were less important than what he called "those things" (e-tu), i.e., the eveballs which conveyed the spirit and reflected the real image of the person.<sup>7</sup> Later, the term yen or mu ("eye") was sometimes used by critics to refer to poetic units. A book of prosody attributed to the T'ang poet Chia Tao, The Secret Purports of the Two "Southern" Sections (Erhnan mi-chih), defines the Chinese term for "title" (t'i-mu) literally as the "theme and eyes" of the poet.8 The Sung literary critics further developed a concept of the shih yen ("the poetic eye(s)"), which in their terminology stand for key words in the lines, not unlike Liu Hsieh's "cracking horsewhip." Yen Yü, a thirteenth century critic, identified the three points that demand skillful handling (yung-kung) in the composition of poetry, namely, ch'i chieh, beginning and closure; chü-fa, the structure of the lines; and tzu-yen, the "eye" of words (the choice of le mot juste, usually a word denoting a movement or a descriptive word, at a specified position within a line). As Stephen Owen has pointed out, all three points were common topics of Chinese technical criticism.9

Towards the end of the Six Dynasties Period (6th century), there was already a growing technical concern for prosody. The poet Shen Yüeh first advocated the theory of the "Four Tones" (ssu-sheng) and the "Eight Defects" (pa-ping) which, as the modern scholar Hu Shih suggested, was perhaps inspired by the introduction of the Sanskrit practice of chanting Buddhist sutra texts. 10 The technical concern was instrumental to the formation of the *lü-shih* (regulated verse) in Early T'ang. Exactly because of the rise of the new form, and partially also due to the inclusion of poetry-writing in the T'ang civil service examinations, there appeared a number of prosody handbooks which often included collections of paradigmatic poetic lines. Some of such handbooks still exist today in The Secret Book of Literary Mirror (Wenching mi-fu-lun or Bunkyo hifuron in its Japanese title), compiled by the Kōbō Daishi, the Japanese Buddhist monk who went to live in China for three years at the beginning of the ninth century. The wide use of such handbooks contributed to the individual significance of beginning and closure, as well as to other structural units of the lü-shih form. Incidentally, body terms were used for each of the four couplets of a lüshih text: they are respectively called the head, the chin, the neck, and

the tail couplet.

Starting in the Sung dynasty, probably originating from the pedagogical practice of private tutoring schools, which prospered in the period, a particular way of reading literary texts added to the attention to parts in criticism. The *ch'üan-tien* (circles and dots) method consisted of using the writing brush, or later a seal specially made for that purpose, to mark out favorite lines in classic texts with dots and small circles. The implementation of this reading method identified the "cracking horsewhip" and the "poetic eye" within a line, or more often the most commendable lines within a poem, and attached greater significance to individual parts of a literary text. From the numerous books of *shih-hua* ("Remarks on Poetry") in the Sung to, just to give one example, the *Shih-sou* (A Poetic Assembly), a book of poetry criticism by the Ming critic Hu Ying-ling, there were extensive discussions of individual lines and couplets.

All such attention to parts played a crucial role in giving rise to the critical concern (sometimes the *meta-poetic* concern as in the works of poets themselves) with the craft of poetic beginning and closure in the Chinese tradition through the ages, a phenomenon unrivalled in Western poetry and poetics.

### POETIC BEGINNING AND POETIC ENDING

As early as in the age of the ancient Greeks, Aristotle had already raised the issue of "beginning, middle, and end" in his *Poetics*, but he did not go into any detail on it. In fact the issue had never been thoroughly explored in the West until in Barbara Herrnstein Smith's pioneering study, *Poetic Closure: A Study of How Poems End* (1968). Exemplary as Smith's book is, its range of discussion is largely restricted to English and American poetry.

Although beginnings and closure have only occasionally and casually been the object of critical attention, some Western poets, through their own creative practice, have understood their significance. Byron remarked, in his *Don Juan*, that

Nothing [is] so difficult as a beginning In poesy, unless perhaps the end. 11

The American poet Henry Wadsworth Longfellow also noticed:

Great is the art of beginning, but greater is the art of ending; Many a poem is marred by a superfluous verse. 12

Like other structural units, the beginning and the ending often work in a way not unlike what Lu Chi had called "cracking horsewhip," that which plays a *dominant* role in the text. Among English poets, for example, John Donne often made use of forceful surprise beginnings:

```
Goe, and catche a falling starre,
Get with child a mandrake roote, ... (Song)
```

Busie old foole, unruly Sunne, ... (The Sun Rising)

For Godsake hold your tongue, and let me love, ... (The Canonization)

These openings, in the form of imperative sentences and apostrophes, create a dramatic tension that catches the reader's attention, and often curiosity as well, from the very start, in its unusual mode of address that seems to shove the reader immediately into a theater set for him, alluring, intriguing, puzzling. The reader is urged to listen with full attention, as in a theater, to the speaker in the poem as to a performer on the stage. And in many of Donne's poems with such openings, the reader will thenceforth be further bombarded by a series of unusual expressions and imagery. Donne, perhaps more than any English poet before him, integrated the art of drama into lyric poetry. 13

In the Chinese tradition Ts'ao Chih, a major poet of the period of the "Three Kingdoms" (220–265), often employed forceful and unexpected beginnings in his poems, and has long been celebrated for his superb skills in the practice. One often cited example of such skills is the opening of his valediction presented to a close friend and fellow poet Hsü Kan, who had lost favor in the court:

```
A wind startled, whirling the white sun off, Suddenly, 'twas back to the western hills!<sup>15</sup>
```

The opening is almost absurd in its hyperbolic description at first sight: it seems to have little connection with the rest of the text, basically words of encouragement for his disheartened friend. On a more careful look, however, the suddenness of the change from light to dark is

allegorical: it sets the background for the poems's melancholy theme of departure, as the two friends are blown part by destiny as by a "startling wind," and their happy, carefree days of union are gone, just like the daylight receding its place to darkness.

There is also a kind of *dominant* opening that serves to define the context, using deictic terms of person, time, or space to set up a framework for the complete text. In the first of his sonnet series *Chimères*, entitled *El Desdichado*, the French poet Gérard de Nerval began with lines richly charged with allusions:

```
Je suis le Ténébreux,—le Veuf,—l'Inconsolé,
Le prince d'Aquitaine à la tour abolie:...
```

[I am the shade, the widower, the unconsoled, The Aquitanian Prince in his wreck of a tower...]<sup>16</sup>

Walt Whitman opened his Song of Myself in much the same way, though compared to Nerval his style is more succinct and straightforward:

```
I celebrate myself, and sing myself,
And what I assume you shall assume,
For every atom belonging to me as good belongs to you.
```

Looking back upon Chinese poetry one may find a similarly self-defining beginning in a poem by the great Chinese poet Li Po:

```
I was formerly that crazy man of Ch'u;
Singing the song of phoenix, I jeered at K'ung Ch'iu.<sup>17</sup>
```

Here Li Po made an allusion to the story in the *Analects* about how Confucius was derided by a "maniac" of the Ch'u state during his travel. By identifying himself with "that crazy man," and by calling Confucius or "Master K'ung" (who by Li Po's age had long been sanctioned as the sage) by his name K'ung Ch'iu, directly and irreverently, the poet was deliberately displaying his own unorthodox disposition.

Each of the three texts above begins in what Chinese critics traditionally called the rhetoric of k'ai meng chien shan—"open the door and the mountain emerges right in sight." Such an opening frequently carries the sense of personal manifesto, and provides a framework, or in Chinese critical terminology, a ku ("bone"), for the entire text.

Endings could just as well become dominant in a similar way. Anyone who has read Villon's poetry, for example, would hardly ever forget the famous refrain of his *Ballade des dames du Temps jadis* (*Ballad of the Ladies of Bygone Days*):

Mais où sont les neiges d'antan?

[But where now is yesterday's snow?]

The use of the conjunction (Mais) at the beginning of the line suggests a pause and a switch: a pause for painful summarizing and recollection, a switch to highly metaphorical and lyrical imagery. The phrase les neiges d'antan crystallizes all the beauty, youthfulness and virginity of the celebrated ladies that he enumerated in the poem, ending it with a lingering echo that resounds in the reader's mind.

Mallarmé made a similarly marvelous use of the same conjunction at the end of his *Brise marine* (Sea Breeze), one of his earlier poems:

La chair est triste, hélas! et j'ai lu tous les livres. Fuir! là-bas fuir! Je sens que des oiseaux sont ivres D'être parmi l'écume inconnue et les cieux! Rien, ni les vieux jardins reflétés par les yeux

- 5 Ni retiendra ce coeur qui dans la mer se trempe Ô nuits! ni la clarté déserte de ma lampe Sur le vide papier que la blancheur défend, Et ni la jeune femme allaiotant son enfant. Je partirai! Steamer balançant ta mâture,
- 10 Lève l'ancre pour une exotique nature!
  Un Ennui, désolé par les cruels espoirs,
  Croit encore à l'adieu suprême des mouchoirs!
  Et, peut-être, les mâts, invitant les orages
  Sont-ils de ceux qu'un vent penche sur les naufrages
- Perdus, sans mâts, sans mâts, ni fertiles îlots...

  Mais, ô mon coeur, entends le chant des matelots!

[The flesh is sad, alas! and I've read all the books. Flee! flee afar! I feel that the birds are drunk
To be between the unknown waves and the sky!
Nothing—not old gardens reflected in our eyes—

Will hold back this heart, which soaks itself in the sea Oh nights! nor the desolate light of my lamp Over the blank paper defended by its own whiteness, Nor the young wife feeding her child.
I shall depart! A steamer, swinging its masts,