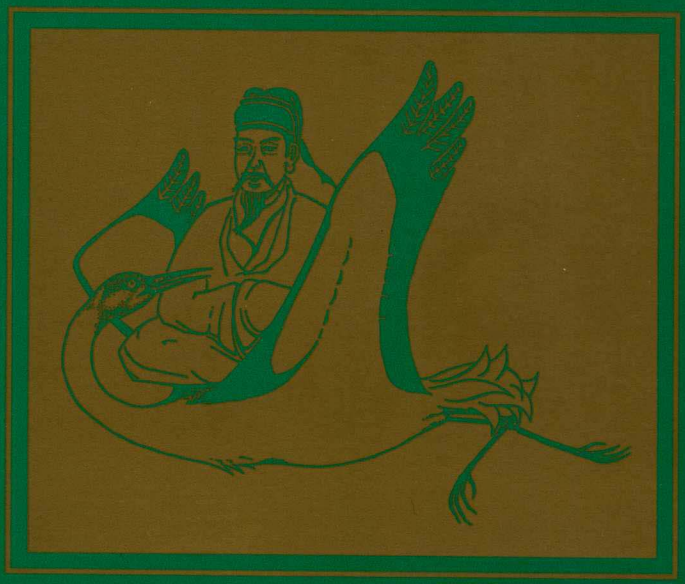
Song-Poems *from* Xanadu



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To My Colleagues in the Department

whose companionship, scholarship, and knowledge furnished brains for me to pick while creating this book, and whose patience and generosity provided a home where it could be written, and to Professors Perng Ching-Hsi and S. H. West, erstwhile students and longtime friends: the former read a draft with great skill and care and beautified the final product with his elegant calligraphy; the latter's invitation to speak at Berkeley formed the book's genesis. He later wrote kind words about it while deeply engaged in still other labors on behalf of its author.

Preface

In Xanadu did Kublai Khan
A stately pleasure dome decree;
Where Alph, the sacred river, ran
Through caverns measureless to man
Down to a sunless sea.

S.T. Coleridge

If the title *Song-Poems from Xanadu* seems hauntingly familiar to the reader, it is because there is another book called *Songs from Xanadu,*[1] written by the same author between 1979 and 1983, primarily as a rigorous attempt to make some sense out of the technical

[1] Ann Arbor: Center for Chinese Studies, University of Michigan, 1983. Michigan Monographs in Chinese Studies, no. 47. Hereafter, *Songs*.

and prosodic questions which these songs raise about themselves. The editor at the Center for Chinese Studies noted somewhat wistfully that *Songs from Xanadu* would have been a perfect title for the present book. Since I had already used that title up on a somewhat stuffier work, I tried to mollify him by choosing a title that sounded as much like the one he preferred as possible. Being largely directed at specialists in Chinese literature, the first book differs greatly from this, its sequel, which is written for those who know next to nothing about the subject. The differences between the two publications can be made clear with a single example:

Legend has it that a certain Feng Tzu-chen wrote, on command, forty-two versions of a single song-poem all on one snowy day he spent near Xanadu with a troupe of singing-girls. He also wrote a preface to go with those poetic efforts. In *Songs* I devoted ten pages to the preface and generated thirty-two prosodic graphs from its information, but neither explored the enchanting conditions under which Feng was supposed to have written the songs nor translated any number of them for my readers. The present work rectifies this situation—a whole section is devoted to Feng, translations of his songs, and the circumstances under which they were created (chapter 4). In *Songs* I wrote, "I found several of his forty-two to be as fresh sounding as though they had just sprung to his mind and so particularized that they sound like personal experiences," but in *Song-Poems* I have included translations of a good number of them so readers may judge their quality for themselves. If you would like to understand the prosodic implications of Feng's preface, read *Songs;*

if you know nothing of prosodic questions and would as lief things stayed that way, good; keep the present book on your night-stand.

In short, *Song-Poems from Xanadu* is an attempt to share with the reader my love for the liveliness, breadth of subject matter, and poetic beauty of these songs from Xanadu.

But why Xanadu? The reader needs only three facts to come up with an answer: (1) Among the earliest missionaries to China were Jesuits from Portugal and Spain. (2) If you look at an old Spanish map of Spain, you will find that the town from which English "sherry" (the fortified wine) got its name is spelled *Xeris* (modern *Jeres*). From this you may fairly presume that Spanish speakers once used *x* to transcribe a sound we would write as *sh*. (3) In Chinese, the suffix *du* usually means "capital city." Kublai Khan's summer palace (Coleridge's "stately pleasure dome") was said to be located in the *Shang* (upper) *du* (capital), which Marco Polo writes as *Chandu*. But one of the best-known romanizations for this place, brought back by the Jesuits, perhaps, resulted in "Xanadu"—how that extra *a* managed to insert itself between *Shang* and *du* in Coleridge's "Kublai Khan" is a puzzle. My guess is that it simply sounded more euphonic to his poet's ear.

So, reader, this is a book of song-poems from the Khan's capital—and from many other places in China during the age of Mongol domination—to be appreciated as pieces of literature. I hope you like these English versions as much as I enjoyed translating them.

J. I. C.

Contents

Introduction

It appears that sometime toward the end of the Southern Sung dynasty (1127–1279) a new style of music, heavily modal in structure and perhaps already popular among the Jurched tribes of the northeast, was introduced into northern China—probably while that region was ruled by the Chin dynasty (1115–1234)—after which it remained very much the vogue for some six decades. As with musical fads everywhere (the waltz, the tango, jazz, for example) this new form was soon exploited by the entertainment world and became even more widespread. The rhythmic skeletons of these songs later became the frameworks for a favored kind of fixed-form verse (the *san-ch'ü*)—featuring frequent rhyme and irregular line length—to which composers could write their own words.[1] It is believed that

[1] There are in extant works some three hundred titles *(ch'ü-p'ai)* of these "song matrices," as they will be called in this book. This somewhat cumbersome designation is needed because we have left to us today only the meters and some formal requirements of what once were musical compositions—the melodies long ago vanished into the dusty air of North China.

throughout most of the life of this form, lyrics written to these song rhythms were sung, either diffidently by the literatus without much musical talent in the privacy of his own study (the fourteenth-century equivalent of our shower-bath baritone), or sung *for* the composer by professional entertainers at banquets and other social occasions. It is certain, however, that with the passage of time, men did compose poetry to these matrices that was only meant to be read, but the resulting verse still retains many musical characteristics: musical nonsense syllables, repeats which make more musical than literary sense, stutter words, reprises, and refrains.

All these compositions (referred to collectively in this book as songs from Xanadu) took one of two major forms—the short lyric *(hsiao-ling)* or the long song-set *(san-t'ao* or *lien-t'ao)*. The latter consisted of a number of *hsiao-ling* (related to one another by belonging to the same mode) strung together to form self-contained units. In the musical drama of the age, for example, an act was distinguishable as such when the song-set changed its mode—there was no curtain to descend—the change from one mode to another signaling the end of a song-set and a major dramatic division. In the world away from the stage, the song-set was used by poets for longer narrative pieces and/or fuller, often humorous, treatment of a subject. "In Dispraise of Snow" (chapter 2) is a good example of the latter type. There are several other clever examples of the narrative potential

inherent in the *san-t'ao* to be found in *Songs from Xanadu*. I once wrote about the subject matter of songs:

> The Yuan poet was characterized by a willingness to explore far more topical *terra incognita* and do it in a manner less hampered by tradition than ever before; in addition, he had an incomparable arsenal of verse forms with which to invade these territories.... The fact that despite these experiments composers largely stuck to a few themes in the majority of their *ch'ü* verse is testimony either to the popularity of the subject matter itself (slightly erotic love songs and the joys of retirement) or to the power of the genre's form and conventions over its subject matter.[2]

Whatever the reason, these two topics statistically outweigh all others for *san-ch'ü* by a wide margin. The *Ch'üan-Yuan San-ch'ü* (Complete Yuan Songs) is the best and most widely used anthology of Yuan songs, incorporating the contents of 117 earlier collections.[3] It contains a set of no less than sixty songs on retirement and seclusion *(kuei-yin)* by a single composer, and the first chapter of the present book, though entirely devoted to various types of love songs, presents the reader with a good deal less than one tenth of 1 percent of the love-song corpus in *CYSC*. This preference in subject matter holds for both the short song and the song-set.

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[2] *Songs*, p. 10. The reader should keep in mind that songs from Xanadu were earliest and most frequently sung by professionals in various houses of entertainment, where, one suspects, banquets for retiring officials were traditionally held.

[3] Sui Shu-sen, ed. Beijing, 1964; reprint edition, Taipei, 1969. Hereafter referred to as *CYSC*.

這家村醪盡。那家醅甕開。賣了肩頭一擔柴。咍。酒錢懷內揣。葫蘆在。大家提去來。

後園中姐兒十六七。見一雙蝴蝶戲。香肩靠粉牆。玉指彈珠淚。喚丫鬟趕開他別處飛。

This does not mean songs from Xanadu lack variety. On the contrary, I am frequently amazed by the range of topics in what are, after all, supposed to have been simply popular songs. The following little drinking song (done in the carefree persona of a woodcutter) is the kind of thing I would expect most songs daily on the lips of fourteenth-century *mobile vulgus* to resemble:

> We finished the vat to the lees over there,
> We cracked the jug of dregs that was here.
> But now I've peddled my firewood—
> Good!
> The money in my tunic's mine
> To buy us all a round of wine,
> And my gourd is hanging near—
> So gather 'round, friends, and share the cheer.
>
> (Wu Hung-tao. *Chin-tzu Ching.* 727.2)[4]

However, just as often you may come upon pieces which express the most delicate sentiments in subtle and elliptical images:

> *Singing of What I See*
>
> A young miss in the garden have I seen,
> Perhaps as old as seventeen,
> Watching a pair of butterflies at play—
> A fragrant shoulder
> Slumps against the whitewashed wall,

[4] Parenthetical references identify the author, the song matrix, and the page and item number in *CYSC*.

One jade finger wipes away
A tear.
Then I hear her call,
Summoning her serving maid:
"Chase them elsewhere, I can't stand them
here!"

(Anon. *Ch'ing-chiang Yin.* 1744.3)

While the woodcutter's song is a rollicking piece, completely straightforward, the real burden of "Singing of What I See" is only alluded to: the young woman is nubile and her longings are stirred by the mating flight of butterflies.

A considerable number of songs are so given over to formal and musical devices (nonsense syllables resembling English balladry's *hey-non-nonny* and the like) that their literary content is very dilute. Some, however, show considerable complexity and ambiguity. I still puzzle over the author's cranky Taoist message in the following, for example:

Fearsome enough the storms of life,
So guard your lips and tongue.
"The Heaven that made a duck's legs short
Yet made the crane's legs long."
Oh Fisher! Oh Woodsman! now
Speak ye less of saints and fools;
Many aid one who's found the Tao,
While the bungler's friends are few.
A saint is always someone else,
The fool is never you.

(Ch'en Ts'ao-an. *Shan-p'o Yang.* 145.5)

風波實怕。唇舌休掛。鶴長鳧短天生下。勸漁家。共樵家。從今莫講賢愚話。得道多助。失道寡。賢。也在他。愚。也在他。

小則小偏能走跳。咬一口一似針挑。領兒上走到褲兒腰。眼睜睜拿不住。身材兒怎生撈。翻箇觔斗不見了。

Emotional impact in the short songs ranges from nil in this blithe confection by Yang Na:

Song of the Flea

Small as he is he can nimbly dance
From a fold in the collar
To the waistband of the pants.
The prick of a lance
Is this creature's bite
And he can elude the keenest sight.
How can you capture a creature who
With a somersault can vanish from view?!

(*Hung Hsiu-hsieh.* 1610.1)

路逢餓殍須親問。道遇流民必細詢。滿城都道好官人。還自哂。只落的白髮滿頭新。

to very considerable in this brief piece, written by Chang Yang-hao as he traveled to take up the post of famine-relief director for Shensi:

I questioned the starvelings met on the way
And talked to refugees seen each day.
"Faithful agent of the king," the townsfolk say.
To myself I laugh a rueful laugh:
What have I done except turn my hair grey?

(*Hsi-ch'un Lai.* 413.3)

However, the majority of songs fall fairly high up in the spectrum—much closer to gay than grey.

This kind of variety and contrast is the result of *CYSC*'s eclectic nature. We have to keep in mind what was pointed out above; for about sixty years these song matrices were being used simultaneously by garden-variety entertainers for their trade and by

gifted and highly literate men and women for elegant social occasions and, less often, for intimate self-expression. If a twentieth-century editor collected every example spared him through half a millennium by chance or plan, he was bound to produce a very heterogeneous aggregation.

In addition to the diversity of their subject matter, songs from Xanadu contain hundreds of metrical forms and devices that lend the treatment of any subject pleasing animation and variety. It is next to impossible to display consistently in translation the songs' metrical shapes while still preserving a decent regard for poetic values; occasionally, however, it has seemed possible to me to suggest something of both:

Opening My Heart to a Friend

The weeds invade
My garden-plot and field.
I'm a bankrupt in my "inherited trade."
The routes to paradise remain
Very well concealed,
And my cloak is in the pawnshop's keep.
Ah, well,
I'll raise my snailshell cup
Get dead drunk and, groggy, fall asleep
Until first birdsong wakes me up.
Sadness?
Dear friend, I know it not.
Joy?
That's also not my lot.

(T'ang Shih. *Shan-p'o Yang.* 1602.3)[5]

田園荒廢。箕裘陵替。桃源有路難尋覓。典鶉衣。舉螺杯。酡酗醉了囫圇睡。啼鳥一聲驚覺起。悲。也未知。喜。也未知。

雞鳴爲利。鴉栖收計。幾曾得覺囫圇睡。使心機。昧神祇。區區造下彌天罪。富貴一場春夢裏。財。漚泛水。人。泉下鬼。

And again, the same form used for quite different subject matter:

Sigh for the Times

Profit they seek from cock-crow on,
And they scheme till the ravens return to nest.
How many wake from a good night's rest?
First, they ply deceitful tricks,
Then prayers to gull the gods, anon;
And what is worse,
For a tittle's worth of gain
They'll sin against the universe . . .
Spring dreams of fame and wealth are vain!
The money—
Froth not worth the taking.
Those men—
Damned souls in the making.

(Tseng Jui. *Shan-p'o Yang.* 493.2)

The distinctive 1,3;1,3 of the last four lines is the hallmark of the song matrix known by the name of *Shan-p'o Yang.* I have tried to reproduce the rhythm of the last four lines in my translations by stressed beats in English. As the reader can see, even in translations of the *ch'ü,* the form is a member of the class called by Chinese long-short-line verse *(ch'ang-tuan-ch'ü),* and the song *Shan-p'o Yang*'s characteristic line-length variation gives it its particular appeal. There are songs, however, totally devoid of

[5] The number of base characters (syllables) required in each line is 4,4,7;3,3,7;7;1,3;1,3.

line-length variation—*Yen-erh Lo,* for example, consists simply of four five-syllable lines—while other matrices are exuberant not only in their long and short line alternation but also in their total length. A single song may run to as many as sixteen to eighteen lines of varying length, and many matrices allow or demand a reprise *(yao),* which usually doubles the size of the composition.

In addition to length of line and song, there are, as was mentioned, a number of other devices to lend formal interest to the songs from Xanadu; the most widely used among them is probably parallel lines. Though every song translated in this book contains one or more pairs of these, they are not always evident in the Englishing. The first four lines of the song below, however, (even in translation) are plainly balanced two and two. The content may not be impressive, but the parallelism is plain:

Spring Thoughts

Gosling yellow,
Those sparse willow fronds'
Mallard green,
Clear ripples of the ponds.
Misty, delicate, timely,
The fecund rains fall.
I leave my door ajar,
For the wine of spring sleep
Is the sweetest drunkenness of all.

(Wang Ho-ch'ing. *Yang-ch'un Ch'ü.* 43.1)

An even more insistent parallelism involving no less than four colors and four riverine features

柳梢淡淡鵝黃染。波面澄澄鴨綠添。及時膏雨細廉纖。門半掩。春睡殢人甜。