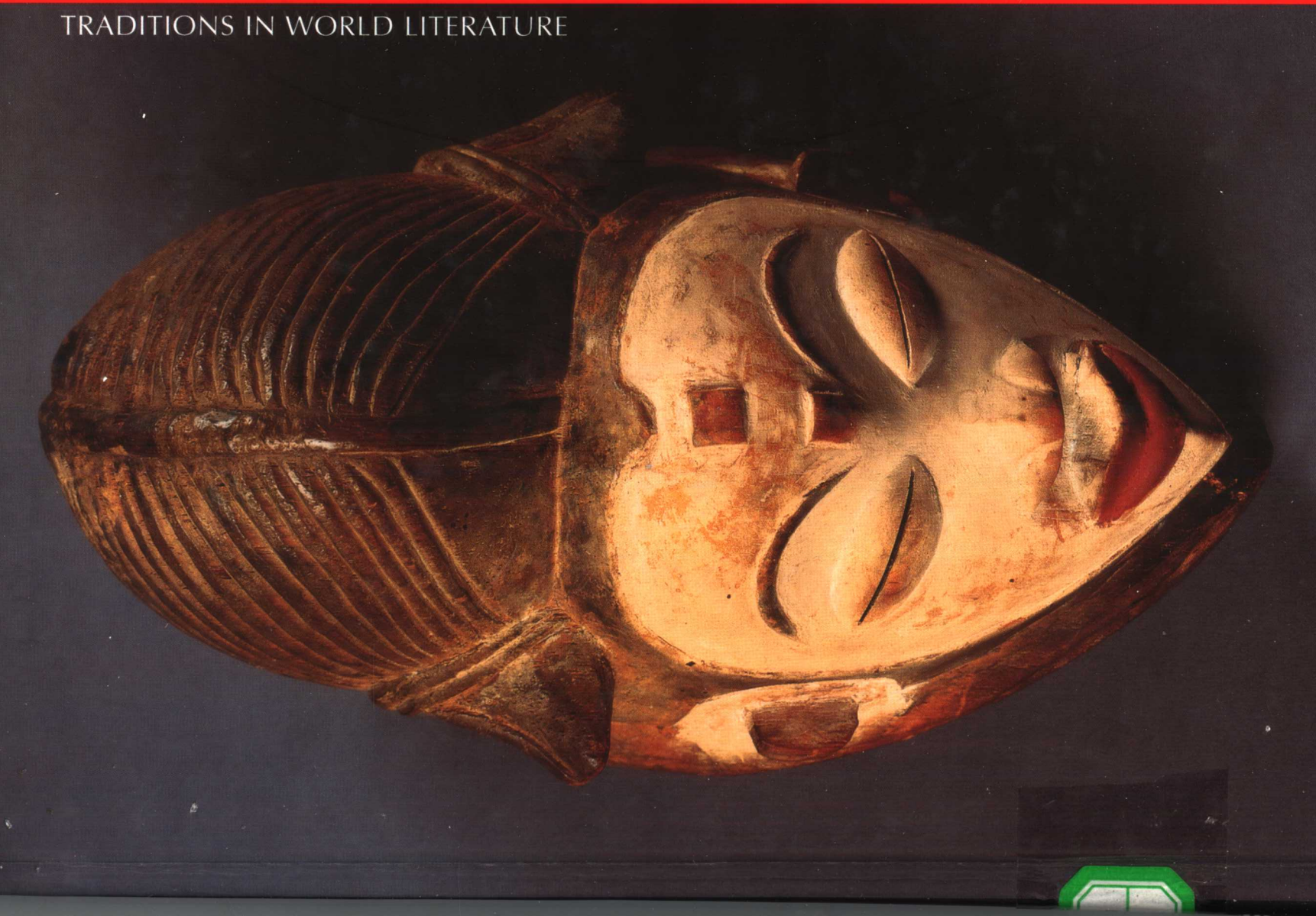
LITERATURE OF Asia

TRADITIONS IN WORLD LITERATURE



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INTRODUCTION

A HUMANIZED WORLD: AN APPRECIATION OF CHINESE LYRICS

Ling Chung

> "Fair, fair," cry the ospreys
> On the island in the river.
> Lovely is this noble lady,
> Fit bride for our lord.
> —from "Kwan Chu," translated by Arthur Waley

The most famous collection of Chinese poetry, *Shih Ching* ("Book of Songs"), which is supposed to have been compiled by Confucius around 500 B.C., starts with a wedding song, "Kwan Chu." This poem begins with the echoing of the birds on an island to celebrate a happy marital union in the human world. This poem anticipates a dominant thematic aspect of the Chinese lyric tradition for more than two thousand years thereafter: the harmonious relationship between man and nature, and among men.

The relation between man and nature in Chinese poetry has often been misinterpreted by the Western world. There are no figures equivalent to Odysseus, Coleridge's Ancient Mariner, or Byron's Childe Harold. When these Western heroes find themselves in lofty mountains or on the vast sea, they are exiled into a hostile and challenging world. When a Chinese hermit-poet finds himself alone in nature, however, he is utterly at peace with his environment because he believes that man and nature are one. This difference in the relationship between man and nature in the cultures of China and of the Western world is often the cause of misinterpretation in translation. Gary Snyder, for example, is an excellent translator, with his knowledge of Chinese language and literature, his enthusiasm for the Asian style of life, and his poetic rendering of Chinese poetry into English; yet he like other Western translators has distorted the Chinese concept of nature in his translation of a poem by Han-shan. In his version of one of the Cold Mountain Poems (page 131), Snyder translates the Chinese word for *deep* as "rough" to describe the mountain trail, *round stone* as "sharp cobble," *cold* as "icy," *lone* as "bleak," an onomatopoeia of the light, cool wind as "whip, whip," *blows* as "slaps" to describe the wind, and *descending thickly* as "whirled and tumbled" to describe the snow. These deliberate, crucial changes of natural images result in a different picture of nature. In Snyder's version nature is aggressive: it whips the hermit, slaps his face, and tends to bury him with snow. The original poem, however, presents the traditional poetic image of a hermit sitting in the snow, appreciating in tranquility the natural beauty that surrounds him.

W. B. Yeats in his poem "Lapis Lazuli" describes a Chinese mountain scene, carved on lapis lazuli, which depicts two hermits, a servant carrying a musical instrument, and a bird. Yeats imagines the hermits looking down on a tragic scene below them. One asks the other to play a mournful melody, and their spirits are refreshed by the music: "Their ancient, glittering eyes are gay."

Actually, in Chinese poetry and art rarely is a mountain hermit such a heroic figure that he can completely transcend the tragedy of mankind and achieve an immovable gaiety. Even a Chinese Buddhist monk, supposed to have achieved the state of Nirvana, or eternal bliss, will not stare at the wretched world with gaiety, but more likely, with compassion. These heroic hermits of Yeats are distorted pictures, because Yeats has imposed his own notions about life and nature on his interpretation of the Chinese mind. A genuine picture of Chinese hermits and their relation with nature can be found in Li Po's "On Hearing Chün the Buddhist Monk from Shu Play His Lute" (p. 136). In this poem the music, man's mind, and nature are blended into one. In the second couplet, a figure of speech has brought together the artificial music and the natural music, the song of the pines. In the third couplet man's music and that of nature become fused in even more poetic images. This couplet, amplified by the classical allusions, can be paraphrased as follows:

> The melody like the tone Flowing Stream played by the great ancient musician Po-ya, cleanses the heart of a traveler; its final notes fade into the sound of temple bells which is vibrated by the fallen frost.

The music played by man is likened to that of a mountain stream; and the bell's song, caused by the fallen frost, merges with the music of man. When the music ceases in the last couplet, the perspective is shifted to a panorama of a serene, autumnal landscape:

> And I feel no change though the mountain darkens
> And cloudy autumn heaps the sky.

This device of shifting the perspective fuses man's consciousness and the man-made music into a timeless universe.

A great portion of Chinese lyrics are songs written on simple, personal themes. They are songs expressing love for natural beauty and peaceful rural life, and expressing warm thoughts for the members in the family, for the homeland and the country. The tone may be intensified when the poet is agitated because of suffering brought on by wars, famines, and corrupted bureaucracy, or because of the inevitable tragic transiency of human life. There is also a certain degree of artifice and sophistication in some of the narrative poetry and love lyrics.

In ancient China, the Confucian gentry would require a poet to go through a pattern of life: that is, to take the imperial examinations,

become an officer to serve the emperor and the people, succeed in a career and acquire fame. At the same time, the Taoist-Buddhist's belief always urges the poet to enjoy a tranquil and leisurely life in the mountains and countryside. The majority of Chinese poets incline to the latter, because they regard it either as a Utopian form of life worth pursuing or an escape from the tumult of political intrigue. Po Chü-i's "Chu-ch'ēn Village" (p. 146), manifests this inclination. Tu Fu in his "A Hearty Welcome" (p. 139) depicts how a scholar-farmer-poet would enjoy an impractical, yet aesthetic, life: watching the flying gulls, drinking wine with friends, and writing poetry. Furthermore, in a society generally dominated by Confucianism, certain human relations are emphasized, especially those between emperor and subject, father and son, husband and wife, between friends, and between brothers. Chinese poetry of all ages has devoted considerable attention to short lyrics expressing the sorrow caused by separation from the beloved one. Li Po's "Parting at a Wine-Shop in Nan-king" (p. 137) and Tu Fu's "Remembering My Brothers on a Moonlight Night" (p. 138) express this theme.

In Chinese poetry great generals and warriors are praised because of their valor and military strategy, but war itself is not glorified. On the contrary, it is frequently condemned. In *Shih Ching* there are many anti-war folk songs written by anonymous poets. Tu Fu, the greatest humanist among Chinese poets, and also one of the greatest humanists who ever lived, witnessed the climactic blooming of the T'ang Dynasty as well as its decline after A.D. 755. The ceaseless disasters—the wars, deaths, famines, and plagues—that befell him, his family, and the Chinese people, inspired him out of his compassion to sing in a tone of suppressed anger against evil and corruption. In "A Song of War-Chariots" (p. 141), he first gives a very vivid picture of new recruits marching out of a city, and of families running with the army, crying and tugging at the sleeves of the drafted young men. Then his vision shifts to the vast land of China, barren because of the war and taxation. The poem ends with a striking and pathetic scene—ghosts of the old dead and the new dead mingling in the remote border land. Witter Bynner's translation is certainly touching, but the sound effect of an onomatopoeia is missed in the translation: "Ch'iu Ch'iu" in the last line, a mixture of the sound of rain and the ghosts, intensifies the protest of the dead and of a furious universe.

The degree of sophistication is slight in the love songs among the traditional folk lyrics. Love songs from *Shih Ching* are still naïve, straightforward, and autobiographical. Gradually after about A.D. 100 the image of a lovelorn woman is isolated and becomes a popular topic. The poet will assume a situation for such a lovelorn woman—either her husband has gone away to war, to trade, or to another woman. The psychology of this woman will be carefully described either in a direct dramatic monologue or in detailed elaboration of the background scenery as a foil for the interior movement in the woman's psychology. Li Po, the greatest romantic genius in Chinese poetry, not only writes on weighty subjects such as the grandeur of nature and the tragic passing of human life in the stream

of time but also excels in assuming the pose and psychology of a woman. In "A Song of Ch'ang-kan" (p. 136), he has successfully recreated the tone of a girl naïve and deeply in love. His "A Sigh from a Staircase of Jade" (p. 135) is a highly sophisticated poem. The original merely presents an artistic, objective picture, while Witter Bynner in his translation has put down all the implicit meanings which are only suggested in the original such as "cold," "she lingered," "behind her closed casement, why is she still waiting." This type of sophisticated artistry, which flourishes from about A.D. 900 on, is an important formalistic aspect of Chinese poetry.

READING TRANSLATIONS

Since every language is a unique and complex structure of sounds and meanings, translation cannot be a simple matter of subtituting a word from one language for a word in another. When a work of literature is being translated, the challenge is even greater. In that case the translator must attempt to create something that is both faithful to the work in the original language but also reads well in the language into which the work is being translated.

Below is a rubái, a quatrain (four-line stanza), by Omar Khayyám in the original Persian. Five English translations of his poetry follow on pages xi and xii. The first and most famous English version of the rubáiyát (plural of rubái) of Omar Khayyám was done by Edward FitzGerald in the 1850s. FitzGerald observes that he frequently "mashed together" Omar Khayyám's quatrains in his translation. An examination of FitzGerald's most famous lines, the quatrain beginning "A Book of Verses underneath the Bough," shows this process at work. In this case FitzGerald has taken two very similar quatrains from the Persian original and collapsed them into one. The other translators have rendered both quatrains. (The Persian passage is the original of the second quatrain of each of the translated pairs.)

گر دست دهد ز مغز گندم نانی
وز می دو منی ز گوسپندی رانی
با دلبرکی نشسته در ویرانی
عیشی است کی نیست حدّ هر سلطانی

EDWARD FITZGERALD (1879)

A Book of Verses underneath the Bough,
A Jug of Wine, a Loaf of Bread—and Thou
    Beside me singing in the Wilderness—
Oh, Wilderness were Paradise enow!

E. H. WHINFIELD (1883)

Give me a skin of wine, a crust of bread,
A pittance bare, a book of verse to read;
    With thee, O love, to share my solitude,
I would not take the sultan's realm instead!

So long as I possess two maunds of wine,
Bread of the flower of wheat, and mutton chine,
    And you, O Tulip-cheeks, to share my cell,
Not every Sultan's lot can vie with mine.

JUSTIN HUNTLY MCCARTHY (1932)

Give me a flagon of red wine, a book of verses, a loaf of bread, and a little idleness. If with such store I might sit by thy dear side in some lonely place, I should deem myself happier than a king in his kingdom.

When the hand possesses a loaf of wheaten bread, two measures of wine, and a piece of flesh, when seated with tulip-cheeks in some lonely spot, behold such joy as is not given to all sultans.

ROBERT GRAVES AND OMAR ALI SHAH (1968)

A gourd of red wine and a sheaf of poems—
A bare subsistence, half a loaf, not more—
Supplied us two alone in the free desert:
What sultan could we envy on his throne?

Should our day's portion be one mancel loaf,
A haunch of mutton and a gourd of wine
Set for us two alone on the wide plain,
No Sultan's bounty could evoke such joy.

PETER AVERY AND JOHN HEATH-STUBBS (1979)

I need a jug of wine and a book of poetry,
Half a loaf for a bite to eat,
Then you and I, seated in a deserted spot,
Will have more wealth than in a Sultan's realm.

If chance supplied a loaf of white bread,
Two casks of wine and a leg of mutton,
In the corner of a garden with a tulip-cheeked girl
There'd be enjoyment no Sultan could outdo.

Contents

INTRODUCTION

BABYLONIAN LITERATURE

HEBREW LITERATURE

ARABIC AND PERSIAN LITERATURE

INDIAN LITERATURE

CHINESE LITERATURE

JAPANESE LITERATURE

Babylonian Literature

THE EPIC OF GILGAMESH

One of the oldest surviving literary works in the world, the *Epic of Gilgamesh* was written on clay tablets around 2000 B.C. Its hero is the Babylonian king who ruled the city of Erech (or Uruk), around 2600 B.C. The legendary adventures of Gilgamesh were the inspiration for a series of tales that circulated for several hundred years before they were finally written down. The twelve clay tablets containing the adventures of Gilgamesh would probably have been lost had it not been for the efforts of King Ashurbanipal of Assyria, who established a library at his palace in Nineveh around 650 B.C. It was in the ruins of this library that the *Gilgamesh* tablets were eventually discovered in the mid-1800s, almost 40 centuries after they were written.

The *Epic of Gilgamesh,* like many literary works from the ancient Near East, is filled with a strong sense of the fragility of life and the haunting presence of death. Although the epic includes several episodes that demonstrate the proud triumphs of Gilgamesh, the central episode is the hero's painful quest for everlasting life, a quest that is ultimately hopeless. ■

Translated from the Babylonian and retold by Theodor H. Gaster

Once upon a time there lived in the city of Erech a great and terrible being whose name was Gilgamesh. Two-thirds of him were god, and only one-third was human. He was the mightiest warrior in the whole of the East; none could match him in combat, nor could anyone's spear prevail against him. Because of his power and strength all the people of Erech were brought beneath his sway, and he ruled them with an iron hand, seizing youths for his service and taking to himself any maiden he wished.

At length they could endure it no longer, and prayed to heaven for relief. The lord of heaven heard their prayer and summoned the goddess Aruru—that same goddess who, in olden times, had fashioned man out of clay.

"Go," said he, "and mold out of clay a being who will prove the equal of this tyrant, and let him fight with him and beat him, that the people may have relief."

Thereupon the goddess wetted her hands and, taking clay from the ground, kneaded it into a monstrous creature, whom she named Enkidu. Fierce he was, like the god of battle, and his whole body was covered with hair. His tresses hung long like a woman's, and he was clothed in skins. All day long he roamed with the beasts of the field, and like them he fed on grass and herbs and drank from the brooks.

But no one in Erech yet knew that he existed.

One day a huntsman who had gone out trapping noticed the strange creature refreshing himself beside the herds at the fountain. The mere sight was sufficient to turn the huntsman pale. His face drawn and haggard, his heart pounding and thumping, he rushed home in terror, screaming with dismay.

The next day he went out again into the fields to continue his trapping, only to find that all the pits he had dug had been filled in and all the snares he had laid torn up, and there was Enkidu himself releasing the captured beasts from the toils!

On the third day, when the same thing happened once more, the huntsman went and consulted his father. The latter advised him to go to Erech and report the matter to Gilgamesh.

When Gilgamesh heard what had happened, and learned of the wild creature who was interfering with the labors of his subjects, he instructed the huntsman to choose a girl from the streets and take her with him to the place where the cattle drank. When Enkidu came thither for water she was to strip off her clothing and entice him with her charms. Once he embraced her the animals would recognize that he was not of their kind, and they would immediately forsake him. Thus he would be drawn into the world of men and be forced to give up his savage ways.

The huntsman did as he was ordered and, after three days' journey, arrived with the girl at the place where the cattle drank. For two days they sat and waited. On the third day, sure enough, the strange and savage creature came down with the herd for water. As soon as she caught sight of him the girl stripped off her clothing and revealed her charms. The monster was enraptured and clasped her wildly to his breast and embraced her.

For a whole week he dallied with her, until at last, sated with her charms, he rose to rejoin the herd. But the hinds and gazelles knew him no more for one of their own, and when he approached them they shied away and scampered off. Enkidu tried to run after them, but even as he ran he felt his legs begin to drag and his limbs grow taut, and all of a sudden he became aware that he was no longer a beast but had become a man.

Faint and out of breath, he turned back to the girl. But now it was a changed being who sat at her feet, gazing up into her eyes and hanging intently upon her lips.

Presently she turned toward him "Enkidu," she said softly, "you have grown handsome as a god. Why should you go on roving with the beasts? Come, let me take you to Erech, the broad city of men. Let me take you to the gleaming temple where the god and goddess sit enthroned. It is there, by the way, that Gilgamesh is rampaging like a bull, holding the people at his mercy."

At these words Enkidu was overjoyed; for, now that he was no longer a beast, he longed for the converse and companionship of men.

"Lead on," said he, "to the city of Erech, to the gleaming temple of the god and goddess. As for Gilgamesh and his rampaging, I will soon alter that. I will fling a challenge in his face and dare him, and show him, once for all, that country lads are no weaklings!"