

# SONGS OF THE IMMORTALS

Translated by  
XU YUAN ZHONG

AN ANTHOLOGY OF  
CLASSICAL CHINESE  
POETRY



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CLASSICAL CHINESE POETRY

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To Peking University,  
where I was a student of foreign languages  
fifty years ago  
and where I am a professor of world literature now.

X. Y. Z.

# INTRODUCTION

## I

“Chinese literature,” according to John Turner in his *Golden Treasury of Chinese Poetry*, “is the high artistic peak of the most literary, the most artistic, the longest-established civilization that exists.” The earliest anthology of Chinese literature is *The Book of Poetry*, consisting of 305 poems and compiled in the sixth century B.C. It is divided into three main sections: 160 songs, 105 odes, and 40 hymns. The songs are folk songs collected by royal musicians from fifteen feudal states that clustered along the Yellow River; the odes are ceremonial or festive songs composed by official diviners and historians and used before going to war and hunting; the hymns are songs of praise and advice to the ruler, written by officials and used as part of ancestral sacrifices and feasts during the Western Zhou period from the eleventh to the seventh centuries B.C.

The poems centre on daily activities. We see people farming and hunting (*Hunting*), gathering food and courting (*A Fair Maiden*), performing sacrifices and going off to war (*Comradeship*). Poems about love and marriage form the bulk of the folk songs, presenting the sadness and joy of lovers’ partings and reunions, as well as the relative freedom of love in those days for ordinary people (*The Quiet Maiden*). Many of these poems are light-hearted in tone, but others complain of unhappy love affairs or marriages (*A Faithless Man*), misrule or the hardships of soldiering (*Homecoming After War*). The happier songs tend to express feelings directly while the unhappy

singer often turns to metaphors. For example, the poet vents his indignation against injustice on earth by enumerating the stars in heaven which do not live up to their fine names:

In southern sky appears a Winnowing Fan,  
Alas! it can't be used to sift the grain;  
In northern sky a Dipper, which man,  
Alas! would use to ladle wine in vain.

The poem's depth of feeling and unusual artistic technique are remarkable for the Western Zhou period.

Structurally, each line of these poems is made up of four characters (*Homecoming After War*), though lines of other lengths occur at times. The lines are arranged in stanzas, usually of four lines each (*The Cock Is Crowing*). Rhyme is used at the end of the even-numbered lines. Alliteration, assonance, and inner rhyme are also used. Many songs employ repetitions (*My Man's Away*) and refrains, others start a stanza by evoking an image quite apart from the central theme (*The Fruits from Mume Tree Fall*), a device called "evocation" or "association." Conciseness is also a characteristic of the earliest Chinese poetry.

As *The Book of Poetry* was numbered among the Five Confucian Classics, it has had considerable influence because of its use as a basic text in traditional Chinese education.

## II

If *The Book of Poetry* is the earliest anthology of realistic songs composed by the northern people, *The Verse of Chu* may be said to be the earliest collection of romantic poems written by a southern intellectual, Qu Yuan (340-278 B.C.). During Qu Yuan's life, northern realism met southern romanticism. Qu Yuan's blending of the two made him the greatest

lyrical poet in the period of the Warring States (475-221 B.C.). His best-known work is his autobiographic long poem *Sorrow After Departure*, which depicts his grief at being estranged from the undiscerning King of Chu. He refers to the king as "Fair One" and "Godly One," and compares his own longing for a discerning king to the quest for an ideal mate. Thus he established in classical Chinese poetry the tradition of using beauty to symbolize the sovereign and fragrant plants to represent loyal ministers and subjects. He writes:

I did not grieve to see sweet blossoms die away,  
Grieved rather that amid weeds they did decay.

His love for the ideal is so deep that he says:

Long, long the way, I know not which to go.  
I'd seek my heart's desire both high and low.

He could not bear the grim reality and drowned himself in the Milo River on the fifth day of the fifth lunar month, which has become the Dragon Boat Festival in his memory.

Other poems attributed to Qu Yuan include *Nine Hymns* and *Nine Elegies*. The former are songs dedicated to gods or goddesses and written in a form suggestive of drama, in which a male or female shaman donned elaborate costume and make-up, and singing and dancing, invited the god or goddess to an amorous encounter. As sacrifices to the gods were occasions for courtship, the mention of love in these hymns is natural, whether love between man and woman, god and goddess or god and mortal. In *To the God of Cloud* the songstress professes love for the god; in *To the Lord of River Xiang* the god courts the goddess; in *To the Lady of River Xiang*, a lovesick goddess is portrayed in dramatic form. In Chinese poetry love between gods comes after that between man and woman, as opposed

to the Greek epic in which the romantic comes before the realistic. There is only one hymn which makes no mention of love, that is the poem praising fallen warriors. In that hymn there is no celebration of heroic deeds and feats of arms usually associated with the epic poetry of the West. In *Ode to the Orange*, one of the *Nine Elegies*, we find the image of an ideal man.

Qu Yuan uses in *Nine Hymns* and *Nine Elegies* a line of four, five or six characters, broken in midline by the insertion of a breathing particle "xi" and concluded (usually) with end rhyme. This form is known as Southern Song style.

### III·

By the end of the period of the Warring States the king of the Qin State in the northwest had conquered all the other states and founded in 221 B.C. the Qin Dynasty with the king as its first emperor. During his reign scholars were buried alive and classics burned so that no literature was left. About a thousand years later the Tang poet Zhang Jie (837-?) wrote a satirical quatrain called *The Pit Where Emperor Qin Burned the Classics*:

Smoke of burnt classics gone up with the empire's  
fall,  
Fortress and rivers could not guard the capital.  
Before the pit turned cold, eastern rebellion  
spread;  
The leaders of revolt were not scholars well-read.

The leaders of the revolt were General Xiang Yu (see Poem 15) of the State of Chu and Liu Bang (see Poem 16) who defeated Xiang in 202 B.C. and founded the Han Dynasty (206 B.C.-A.D. 220). But it was not the victor but the defeated hero and his beautiful Lady Yu who were glorified in poetry later. For example, Li



Qing-zhao (1084-1151) wrote the following quatrain:

Be man of men while you're alive;  
Be soul of souls e'en though you're dead.  
Think of Xiang Yu who'd not survive  
His men, whose blood for him was shed.

Lady Yu's name became the title of a song sung from generation to generation. Is it not an irony of history?

During the Han's four hundred years of relative peace and stability, literature and learning flourished after Confucian doctrines had formed the official foundation of the state and the civil service examination system was established under the reign of Emperor Wu or Liu Che (156-87 B.C.). Lyrical works were composed in the Southern Song style that derived from the *Nine Hymns of The Verse of Chu*, and used a six- or seven-character line broken in the middle by the breathing particle "xi." Emperor Liu Che (see Poem 19) wrote in this form too. But, at variance with the emperor, later poets sang the praise more of his disfavoured general than of His Majesty. For instance, Lu Lun (748-800) described the feats of General Li Guang in his *Border Songs*:

In gloomy woods grass shivers at wind's howl;  
The general takes it for a tiger's growl.  
He shoots an arrow at a shape in view,  
Only to find at dawn a rock pierced through.

Besides the works assigned to known authors, we have anonymous folk songs which take their name from a government office called the Music Bureau, set up around 120 B.C. by Emperor Wu to collect songs from various parts of the empire. These songs reflect the life and hardships of the common people. Some use lines of irregular length and others use predominately five-character lines, a form which reached its climax during the High Tang period.

## IV

Chinese history has been marked by a recurring cycle of unification, division and reunification. The Han Dynasty founded by Liu Bang in 206 B.C. was overthrown in A.D. 220 and the unified empire split into the Three Kingdoms of Wei in the north, Shu in the west and Wu in the south. The Wei Dynasty was set up by Cao Cao (155-220), who was not only a warlord but also a poet who continued the tradition of *The Book of Poetry* and wrote in the old four-character verse form (see Poem 1). His eldest son Cao Pi succeeded him on the throne, continued the tradition of *The Verse of Chu* and became one of the earliest poets to write in seven-character verse form. Cao Zhi (192-232), younger brother of Cao Pi, was well-known for his literary talent, particularly his five-character verse, which won his father's favour when Cao Zhi was only ten years old and provoked the jealousy of his elder brother, who ordered him, under penalty of death, to write a five-character verse while taking seven paces; it reads:

Pods burned to cook peas,  
Peas weep in the pot:  
"Grown from the same trees,  
Why boil us so hot?"

A nice example of the poet's wit under pressure, this poem along with the many others composed by Cao Pi, Cao Zhi and their father have established the place of the Three Caos, as they are known in the history of Chinese literature.

In 208 Cao Cao was defeated at Red Cliff by Sun Quan, king of the State of Wu, and Zhou Yu, commander-in-chief of the Wu navy, whom Su Shi (1037-1101) described as follows:

I fancy General Zhou Yu at the height  
Of his success, with a plume fan in hand,  
In a silk hood, so brave and bright,  
Laughing and jesting with his bride fair,  
While enemy ships were destroyed as planned  
Like castles in the air.

The exploits of Liu Bei, king of Shu, and his prime minister Zhuge Liang were also glorified in later poetry, for example, by Du Fu (712-770) in *The Temple of the Famous Premier of Shu*:

The emperor thrice called on him for nation's  
sake;  
The famous premier served heart and soul for  
long years.  
Before victory was won he died, which would e'er  
make  
All heroes after him wet their sleeves with hot  
tears.

For Chinese intellectuals, Zhou Yu has become the image of an ideal general who can win victory against heavy odds, and Zhuge Liang an ideal minister whose life is entirely devoted to the interest of the nation.

Besides works about king and prince, minister and general, there were also popular ballads such as *A Pair of Peacocks Southeast Fly*, composed around 220. This is a long narrative poem telling how the feudal ethics of the patriarchal clan system destroyed the happiness of a young couple, who were unable to overcome it except in death.

## V

The Three Kingdoms were reunified in 265 by the Jin (265-420), but the decay and collapse of the Han had in some degree discredited the Confucian doctrines and

cleared the way for a revival of interest in the transcendental thought of Taoist philosophers. During the Wei and Jin dynasties most scholars tried to escape reality and the best-known poet was Tao Qian (365-427), who retired from official life to a pastoral life of farming and writing and became the archtype of the "hermit poet." Many of his poems described the quiet joys of country life, for instance:

Among the haunts of men I build my cot,  
There's noise of wheels and hoofs, but I hear not.  
How can it leave upon my mind no trace?  
Secluded heart creates secluded place.  
I pick fence-side chrysanthemums at will .  
And leisurely I see the southern hill.

But other poems spoke of famine, drought and similar hardships. The Taoist side of his nature told him he should be content with such a life of seclusion, but his dedication to Confucian ideals kept him longing for the less troubled times of the past when virtue prevailed and a scholar could in good conscience take an active part in state affairs. Unable to attain his ideal, he sought solace in wine and verse, writing in a plain and simple style in a five-character verse form.

In 420 the Jin Dynasty was replaced by the Song, and the empire was split into the Northern and Southern Dynasties (420-589). The Southern emperors worshipped Buddha and built hundreds of Buddhist temples so that Buddhism exercised a predominant influence during the Six Dynasties. This can be seen in the following quatrain:

Orioles sing amid red blooms and green trees;  
By hills and rills wineshop streamers wave in the breeze.  
Four hundred eighty splendid temples still  
remain  
Of Southern Dynasties in the mist and the rain.

The poets of that period excelled at describing natural sceneries. For example, Xie Tiao (464-499), whom Li Bai (701-762) admired, wrote the following five-character lines:

I see from distance high and low  
Winglike tiled roofs in sunset's glow.  
The coloured clouds spread like brocade,  
The river calm as silver braid.

In 589 the Northern and Southern Dynasties were both overthrown by the Sui (589-618), and the well-known *Song of Mulan* appeared, a poem about the first Chinese war heroine, which symbolizes the reunification of the North and the South. But the Sui was a short-lived dynasty, whose second and last emperor was notorious for his life of luxury. The poetry of this period tended to be shallow and mannered, ornate in diction and much given to the use of rhetorical devices such as parallelism, allusion and elegant variation.

## VI

The Tang Dynasty (618-907) was the golden age of Chinese poetry. It may be divided into four periods: Early Tang (618-712), High Tang (713-770), Middle Tang (771-835) and Late Tang (836-907). Early Tang poetry followed the ornate style of the Six Dynasties, but some poets began to break the tradition. For instance, Yu Shi-nan (558-638), whom the emperor highly appreciated, wrote the following five-character quatrain called *The Firefly*:

You shed a flickering light;  
Your wings are weak in flight.

Afraid to be unknown,  
At night you gleam alone.

Later, Wang Bo (649-676) and three other poets tried to develop a style of their own and were criticized by their contemporaries. But Du Fu wrote the following seven-character quatrain in support of them:

Our four great poets have their own creative  
style;  
You shallow critics may make your remarks  
unfair,  
But you will perish with your criticism, while  
Their fame will last as the river flows fore'er.

It was Chen Zi-ang (661-702) who succeeded in infusing new vitality into the tradition of the Six Dynasties by returning to the spirit of Han and Wei poetry. He was regarded as a precursor of the High Tang poets.

The High Tang period represented the peak of poetic excellence in the Tang Dynasty. It corresponds roughly to the reign of Emperor Xuan Zong (712-755), a ruler whose early years on the throne were marked by power and splendour and who, as a worshipper of Confucius, wrote the following five-character verse while sacrificing to him:

For what did you so busily strive, my Sage,  
Expounding hard your doctrine in your age?

Even his favourite Lady Yang could write poems and the following is her seven-character quatrain *Dancing*:

Silk sleeves are swaying ceaselessly with fragrance  
spread;  
In autumn mist are floating lotus lilies red.  
Light clouds o'er mountains high ripple with  
breezes cool;  
Young willow shoots caress water of garden pool.

During the reign of Xuan Zong, all civil service examination candidates were required to compose a regulated verse, so poetry became an indispensable accomplishment and a daily accompaniment to the lives of officials and scholars.

Among the High Tang poets, Wang Chang-ling (698-756) was well-known for his seven-character quatrains, in which we can see the influence of the Six Dynasties palace poetry. The following quatrain on a disfavoured court lady is typical:

She brings her broom at dawn to dust the golden  
halls  
And strolls about with round fan within the  
palace walls.  
Her rosy colour envies wintry crow's black one,  
Oft bathed in favourable light of royal sun.

Instead of describing the luxurious palace life in flowery poetic style, this quatrain reveals the poet's sympathy with a disfavoured lady whose beauty could not even outshine the ugly crow, so it reads more like *Lament of the Autumn Fan* of the Han Dynasty than a palace poem of the Six Dynasties.

Wang Wei (701-761) was the most important pastoral poet of the High Tang period, best known for his five-character poems. He was a devout Buddhist, a fact that deeply influenced the way in which he viewed the world and his place in it. As a celebrator of the quiet joys of rural life, he followed a line of development earlier explored by Tao Qian, though he wrote with greater calm and detachment than had Tao. For example, his *The Dale of Singing Birds* reads as follows:

I hear osmanthus blooms fall unenjoyed;  
When night comes, hills dissolve into the void.

The rising moon arouses birds to sing,  
 Their fitful twitters fill the dale with spring.

He did not assiduously seek out the picturesque elements in the natural landscape, but rather registered the scenes about him just as they appeared. No wonder it is said "in his poetry there is painting and in his painting there is poetry."

## VII

Li Bai was the best-known poet in Chinese history, a representative of High Tang culture, the combination of Northern culture represented by Confucian philosophy and *The Book of Poetry* and Southern culture represented by Taoist philosophy and *The Verse of Chu*. His life may be summed up by the following quatrain *To Li Bai* written by Du Fu:

When autumn comes, you're drifting still like  
 thistledown;  
 You try to find the way to heaven, but you fail.  
 In singing mad and drinking dead your days you  
 drown.  
 For whom will fly the roc? For whom will  
 leap the whale?

Li Bai could not fulfil his Confucian ideal to serve the country, spending his later years wandering lonely like a drifting cloud. Nor could he find spiritual freedom in Taoism which taught him to seek the way to heaven. He could but chant poetry and drink wine to drown his sorrows as described by Du Fu in *Eight Immortal Drinkers*:

Li Bai could turn sweet nectar into verses fine.  
 Drunk in the capital, he'd lie in shops of wine.  
 Even imperial summons proudly he'd decline,



Saying immortals could not leave the drink  
divine.

In Li Bai we have the tragedy of a lonely genius wandering the earth like an angel fallen from heaven. When would he realize his aspiration to fly to the sky like the fabulous roc mentioned by the Taoist philosopher Zhuang Zi?

Li Bai's poetry is marked by masculine grandeur (*Watching from Afar the Waterfall on Mount Lu*) and natural grace (*The Moon over Mount Brow*). His imagery may be sublime (the giant bird symbolizing his love of freedom) or graceful (the moon conveying his sympathy to his banished friend Wang Chang-ling). His description of natural scenery is characterized by a swift and fierce imaginative sweep. For instance:

Oh, lightning flashes  
And thunder rumbles;  
With stunning crashes,  
The mountain crumbles.

But he disappoints when describing human feelings and always compares them to natural phenomena. For example:

However deep the Lake of Peach Blossom may be,  
It's not so deep, O Wang Lun! as your love for me.

He is little given to expressions of despair or bitterness. His poetry on the whole is calm, at times sunny in outlook. It appears to grow out of certain convictions that he held regarding life and art, out of a tireless search for spiritual freedom and communion with nature as in Poem 77 (*Sitting Alone Facing Peak Jingting*), a lively imagination and a deep sensitivity to beauty (*A Reply to Someone in the Hills*).