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I could pull mountains down, oh! with main and might,  
But my good fortune wanes, oh! My steed won't fight.  
Whether my steed will fight, oh! I do not care.  
What can I do with you, oh! My lady fair!

力拔山兮气盖世，  
时不利兮骓不逝。  
骓不逝兮可奈何，  
虞兮虞兮奈若何！



Chinese-English

# 汉魏六朝诗

Golden Treasury of Chinese Poetry in Han, Wei and Six Dynasties

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汉英对照

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# INTRODUCTION



I

"Chinese literature," said John Turner, "is the artistic peak of the most literary, the most artistic, the longest-established civilization that exists." One source of Chinese literature is the *Book of Poetry* compiled in the 6th century BC, marked by the use of four-character verse form as follows:

When I left here,  
Willows shed tear.  
I come back now,  
Snow bends the bough.

Long, long the way;  
Hard, hard the day.  
My grief o'erflows.  
Who knows? Who knows?

(*Home coming After War*)

Another source is the *Poetry of the South* composed in the 3rd century

BC, marked by the use of six-character verse broken in the middle by the insertion of an exclamation such as “oh” or “eh”, for example,

The autumn breeze, oh! ceaselessly grieves

The Dongting waves, oh! with fallen leaves.

In 206 BC Liu Bang founded the Han dynasty. In 196 BC he revisited his native village when he composed the *Song of the Great Wind* in the same style as the *Poetry of the South*:

A great wind rises, oh! the clouds are driven away.

His grandson, Liu Che or Emperor Wu of the Han, who founded in 120 BC the Music Bureau to collect folk songs from various parts of the empire, also wrote in this style:

The autumn wind rises, oh! and white clouds sail the sky;

Grass and leaves yellow, oh! and wild geese southward fly.

Orchids and asters, oh! sweeten the chilly air;

But how can I forget, oh! my lady sweet and fair!

In this *Song of the Autumn Wind* we see Emperor Wu revealed his love for his deceased Lady Li, of whom we find a good description in her brother's *Song of the Northern Beauty*:

At her first glance, soldiers would lose their town;

At her second, a monarch would his crown.

This description may be compared with that of Duchess Zhuang Jiang in the *Book of Poetry*:

Her forehead like a dragonfly's,

Her arched brows curved like a bow.

Ah! dark on white her speaking eyes,

Her cheeks with smiles and dimples glow.

We may say the Book of Poetry describes the physical beauty of the Duchess and Lady Li's brother her spiritual beauty. It would be interesting to remark that Li wrote not in the same style as Liu Che but in the folk song style. The folk songs in the Book of Poetry are lyrical while those of the Music Bureau are narrative. For instance, we may compare *Home Coming After War* cited above with a song of the same title selected in this book.

The folk songs of the Han dynasty are characterized by the use of lines of irregular length. They reflect the lives and hardships of the common people. Some deal with their miseries (*Song of the East Gate*, *On Her Deathbed*), evils of war (*Fighting South of the Town*), oppression of feudal society (*Song of the Orphan*), desertion of woman by man (*Song of the White Hair, the Old Wife and the New*) etc. Others deal with love between man and woman (*I Long for One, the Pledge*) and still others with birds and fish (*Song of a Butterfly*, *Song of a Crow*, *Song of a Dried Fish*) etc. The most important folk song is *A Pair of Peacocks Southeast Fly*, the longest narrative poem written in five-character lines, telling how the feudal system destroyed the happiness of a young couple who were unable to overcome it unless in death.

*Nineteen Old Poems* are said to be the earliest folk songs written in the five-character line, for example:



You travel on and on ,  
And leave me all alone.  
Long miles between us lie  
As earth apart from sky.

Some poems deal with love (x-yin. I' 11 make a quilt for loverst bed) and marriage (XIII. My far -off husband longs for his dear wife), others with friendship (VII. No friendship is as firm as rock), feasting (IV. We keep a feast in spirits high), or the quest for fame (XI. Let's value glory more than gold) and fortune (in. How splendid is Riverside Town). For the most part they are somber in tone, no doubt reflecting the troubled social conditions of the time, and dwell much on the themes of distance (VI. The one I love is living far away), separation (IX. But I'm grieved so long we've parted), and the dreadful brevity (XV. Few live as long as a hundred years) and uncertainty of human life (XIII. Life is a journey which can never last/As long as stone or metal).

In short, just as the *Book of Poetry* is marked by the use of fourcharacter verse and the *Poetry of the South* by that of six-character line broken in the middle by the insertion of an exclamation, the Han poetry is marked by the rise of the five-character verse which would exercise a great influence on later Chinese poetry.

## II

Chinese history was marked by unification, division and reunification. Liu Bang unified the country and built up his empire in 206 BC, but the Han dynasty fell in AD 220 and the empire split into

the three kingdoms of Wei in the north, Shu in the west and Wu in the south with its capital at Jiankang (modern Nanjing). The dynasty of Wei was set up by Cao Cao (155–220), who was not only a military leader but also a poet who followed the tradition of the *Book of Poetry* and continued to write in the old four-character verse form.

Cao Pi (186–226), his eldest son who succeeded him on the throne and forced the last emperor of Han dynasty to abdication, followed the tradition of the Poetry of the South but turned the inserted exclamation in the middle of the six-character line into a word or character so that he became the first poet to write in the seven-character line. For instance, we may read the first four lines of his *Lonely Wife in the North*:

The weather turns cold when bleak blows the autumn breeze;  
The leaves shiver and fall; into frost dewdrops freeze.  
Swallows in group fly south together with wild geese;  
Missing you so far off, my heart is not at ease.

It would be interesting to compare this song with the Sea of his father. Both of them talked about the bleak autumn wind, but the father thought of “the monstrous billows” surging up high, and of his own lofty aspiration, while the son became sympathetic with a lonely wife, and thought of a peaceful home life. What is true of father and son is equally true of the first Emperor of Han dynasty and his grandson Emperor Wu.

Emperors and kings, ministers and generals, all were poets bred in the same tradition, in the folk songs of the common people. That is the reason why Chinese literature is said to be “the longest-established civilization that exists.”



Cao Zhi (192-232), the third son of Cao Cao, was well-known for his literary talent, especially for his five-character verse. He won the favor of his father at the age of ten and lost that of his eldest brother, who became later the first emperor of Wei and ordered him, under pain of death, to write a poem within the time of taking seven paces. And he did write the following quatrain:

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

This symbolic poem saved his life as well as his literary renown. In his *Song of a Beauty* we find the following:

Her melting glance reveals her shining eye;  
In her sweet breath you hear the orchid sigh.  
She lives alone at her prime, fair and bright.  
How can she not sigh at the dead of night!

If we compare his *Beauty* with his brother's “lonely wife”, we may find Coo Pi objective and sympathetic and Coo Zhi subjective and symbolic. The lonely wife sighed because her husband was far off, and the poet was merely sympathetic with her. The beauty sighed because she was not married at her prime just as the poet was not employed at his because his brother, suspicious of his disloyalty, would persecute him to death. So the beauty was symbolic of the poet himself.

Besides the three Coos, the most important poet of the Wei was Ruan Ji (210–263), well-known for his satirical *Reflections*:

- (Ⅲ) Bright flowers languish soon and fade;  
With thorns the hall will be overgrown.  
(Ⅵ) The plain-dressed may live to the end;  
On royal favor none can depend.

His poems may rival with Cao Zhi's but they are ambiguous,

In short, the Wei poetry is marked by the rise of the seven-character verse form which has exercised as great an influence on later poetry as the five-character verse of the Han.

### III

In 280 the three kingdoms were reunified by the Jin dynasty (265–420). The Confucian doctrines that had formed the official foundation of the Han dynasty were in some degree discredited with the decay and collapse of the Han and interest in the transcendental thought of Taoist philosophy revived. The poet well-known for his Taoist ideas was Guo Pu (276–324), in whose *Songs of Immortals* we find the following verse:

The gallants live in capital;  
The hermits' huts in forest stand.  
Why should you envy lordly hall  
Not lasting as the fairy land?...

Better soar over the world in breeze

And overdo the hermits with ease!

During the Jin dynasty most scholars tried to escape reality and the bestknown poet was Tao Qian (or Tao Yuanming 365–427), who retired from official life to a pastoral one of farming and writing and became the archetype of the “hermit poet” at the foot of the famous Mount Lu, the “Southern Hill” as he mentioned in the following verse:

I pick fenceside asters at will;

Carefree, I see the Southern Hill.

The mountain airts fresh day and night;

Together birds go home in flight.

Lines 1 and 2 are representative of the poet’s love of nature and freedom. The aster or chrysanthemum, the last cold-proof flower to bloom in autumn, is the symbol of purity in difficult circumstances and the Southern Hill, that of tranquillity, longevity and eternity. Therefore, the poet’s love of aster and hill reveals his own character, pure and cold-proof as the one and tranquil and lasting as the other.

In line 4 the birds’ flight symbolizes the poet’s life journey and its home-coming alludes to his return to his native land. These four lines sum up the pursuit, frustration, retreat and self-cuhivation of an intellectual in troubled times.

Many of Taos poems described the quiet joys of country life (*Return to Nature, Moving House*), though others spoke of famine, drought and similar hardships (*Begging for Food, A Poor Scholar*).

The Taoist side of his nature told him he should be content with

such a life of seclusion (Secluded heart creates secluded plan), 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, as shown in his four-character verse *Spring Excursion* written in the style of the *Book of Poetry*:

I gaze midstream  
And miss the sages  
Singing their dream  
Of Golden Ages.  
How I adore  
Their quiet day!  
Their timers no more  
And gone for aye.

The sages in the above poem referred to Confucius and his disciples. Unable to attain his ideal, he sought solace in wine and verse (*Drinking Wine*).

In a word, the Jin poetry is marked by Tao Qian's pastoral or hermit poems. On the other hand, *Spirit of the Four Seasons* written by the famous painter Gu Kai-zhi (345-406) on four of his pictures may be said to be the forerunner of landscape or "mountain and river" poetry of the Southern Dynasties:

Spring water overbrims the streams;  
Summer cloud fancy peaks outshines;

The autumn moon sheds brilliant beams;  
On winter cliffs stand cold -proof pines.

## IV

In 265 the Jin dynasty reunited the empire, but soon it fell victim to internal dissention and invasion from the north. In time, both the western and eastern capitals (Chang'an and Luoyang) had fallen to Northern tribes, and in 317 the Jin emperor and his court fled to the southern capital Jiankang (modern Nanjing), the dynasty thereafter being known as the Eastern Jin. For nearly three centuries, roughly the period known as the Six Dynasties, the north remained in the hands of the Northern rulers, while a succession of weak dynasties ruled the south, known as the Southern Dynasties: Song (420-479), Qi (479-501), Liang (501-557) and Chen (557-589).

Liu Yu (reigned 420-422), founder of the Song dynasty, was glorified as "the Cowherd King" by a later poet Xin Qiji (1140-1207) in his lyric written to the tune of "Joy of Eternal Union":

Where lived the Cowherd King retaking the lost land.

In bygone years,

Leading armed cavaliers,

With golden spear in hand,

Tiger-like, he had slain

The foe in Central Plain.

The most important poet of the Song dynasty was Xie Ling-yun (385-433). Noted for his rapt appreciation of the sights of nature, he was often looked on as the father of landscape or "mountain and river" poetry. He was well-known for the following verse:

High mountains spread for miles and miles;  
The stream is dotted with isles and isles.  
White clouds embrace the boulders steep;  
Green ripples lull bamboos to sleep.

He was considered as a better poet than Tao Qian in his time. His verse is balanced and elaborate while Tao's style is plain and simple. His is an objective description of mountain and stream while Tao's is an subjective one in which the outer world and his inner world mingle and become one. That is the reason why later poets considered Tao better than Xie. However, both their poetry exercised great influence on Tang poet Wang Wei (701-761).

Another important Song poet was Bao Zhao (414-466). His verse exercised influence on great Tang poets Li Bai (701-762) and Gao Shi (706-765). Li wrote *Hard Is the Way* in imitation of his *Weary Way* and Gao wrote his *Song of the Northern Frontier* in imitation of his song of the same title. For instance, we may read the following verse:

A man's life's also ruled by fate.  
Why must we sigh outdoors or in, early or late?  
Drink wine to drown grief if you may,

And raise your cup and stop to sing the Weary Way.

(*The Weary Way*)

In hard times we see men steadfast;

In chaos we know heroes great.

For good rulers lives may be east

And sacrificed to their dear State.

(*Song of Northern Frontier*)

The most important poet of the Qi dynasty was Xie Tiao or Junior Xie (464-499). His verse is more natural and less elaborate than Xie Ling-yun or Senior Xie's. He is well-known for the following couplet:

The colored clouds spread like brocade;

The river's clear as silver braid.

Li Bai himself wrote in his verse:

Mine is in Junior Xie's direct and easy style.

Xiao Yan (464-549), founder of the Liang dynasty, was himself a poet who began to write palace poems such as

The morning sun shines on window green;

The breeze ripples embroidered screen.

Her pearlike teeth smile sweet and tender;

Her eyes bewitch with eyebrows slender.

His *Song of the Southern Shore* was said to be the earliest lyric or tuned



poem.

The most important Liang poet was Shen Yue (441–513), credited with having laid down the principles for tonal regulations of poetry. The tonally regulated verse form did not reach full maturity till the Tang dynasty (618–907). Besides, Shen was well-known for his *Six Recollections*:

I think of when she came  
Up marble steps like bright, bright flame.  
Talking long, long of when we parted,  
Of sad, sad yearning, broken-hearted.

Another important Liang poet was He Xun (?–518), who exercised influence on great Tang poet Du Fu (712–770). For instance, we may read his *Reply to Fan Yun*:

My cot is shaded with leafy trees;  
Lush grass would darken doorsteps quiet.  
Bright blooms caressed by gentle breeze,  
Sunbeams amid flowers run riot.

If we compare the first two lines with the following verse of Du Fu:

Around the steps in vain spring has tinged grass green;  
Amid thick leaves to no avail the orioles sing.

(*The Temple of the Famous Premier of Shu*)

We can see how the great Tang poet learned from his master and

excelled him.

Yu Xin (513–581) was also a Liang poet who became a captive of the Northern emperor and served in the Northern court. That is the reason why he was considered as a poet of Northern Dynasties. In his verse we often find nostalgic thoughts, for example, in *Parting Again with Secretary Zhou*:

On long, long way of Sunny Pass  
Alone I can't go back, alas!  
Only the riverside wild geese  
Fly southward when blows autumn breeze.

His verse also exercised great influence on Li Bai and was considered as an important forerunner of Tang poetry.

As the founder of the Liang dynasty, the last emperor of the Chen (553–604) was also a poet, notorious for his *Blooming Jade Trees in the Backyard* because he was hearing this song when the Sui army entered his capital and he was made a captive. Hence this song became the symbol of a conquered kingdom. Du Mu (803–852) wrote about it in his well-known verse:

The songstress, knowing not the grief of conquered land,  
Still sings the song composed by a captive ruler's hand.

Another important Chen poet was Yin Keng (?–565). Du Fu said in his verse that he learned to write poetry from Yin Keng and He Xun. Read Yin's *Leaving New Tower at Dusk*: