An Outline History Of Classical Chinese Literature

by Feng Yuanjun
translated by Yang Xianyi and Gladys Yang

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Publisher's Note

This book outlines the history of Chinese literature from its genesis to the May Fourth Movement of 1919, which marks the birth of modern Chinese literature.

Originally entitled *A Short History of Classical Chinese Literature*, it was first published in 1958 by Foreign Languages Press, Beijing. In this new edition we have converted the transcription of Chinese characters into Hanyu pinyin and made some minor changes where appropriate.

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I. The Origin of Chinese Literature

> The primitive men who were our ancestors could not even speak at first; but to work together they had to convey their ideas, and so gradually they learned to utter complex sounds. Suppose they were carrying logs and found it hard work, but did not know how to express this; if one of them called out "Yo, heave, ho!" that was a literary creation. And if others, admiring him, took it up, this was a form of publication. If it were recorded by some method it would become literature, and of course such a man would be an author or writer of the Yo-heave-ho school. . . . Today we still have folk songs, ballads, fishermen's chants and the like everywhere, which are also the work of illiterate poets. Then there are folk tales, which are stories by illiterate writers. So all these men are illiterate men of letters.*

Lu Xun points out in the above passage that the earliest authors were the labouring people, who composed the first – unwritten – literature during the course of their work.

* Lu Xun, "A Layman's Remarks on Writing", collected in *Essays of Qiejieting*, 1934. The present English translations are quoted from *Lu Xun: Selected Works*, Vol. IV (Beijing: Foreign Languages Press, 1980), translated by Yang Xianyi and Gladys Yang.

To lighten the burden of their toil and express the joy of achievement, the ancient Chinese, like the first men in every country, created rhythmic sounds and language which became the earliest poetry; while, as the centuries went by, labour heightened their perceptive powers and their aesthetic sense developed.

In the early vernacular literature, myths and legends had a special significance.

As the life of primitive men was hard and their knowledge was limited, they had no scientific explanation for natural or social phenomena: heaven and earth, the sun and the moon, mountains and rivers, wind and rain, thunder and lightning, birds, beasts and plants, the origin of human life, the invention of tools, or men's struggle for a happier existence. Instead they tried to understand and explain these things on the basis of their own experience, thus creating many beautiful myths and legends.

The story of the flood is a case in point. This myth is widely known, different versions existing in different parts of China. But the best known of all the heroes alleged to have pacified the flood is Yu the Great.

Yu's father, Gun, undertook the arduous task of curbing the flood. He consulted two wise creatures that lived in the water and constructed dykes to prevent inundations, but the flood only became worse until Heaven grew angry and killed him, and his corpse was left three years without burial. In these three years, however, his body remained unrotted and Yu was born from it to go on with his work. Yu struggled against many monsters and evil spirits who obstructed him; he raised great earthworks to stop the flood's advance and cut channels to let it pass. After toiling for eight years, he finally pacified the flood and enabled the people to live in peace and happiness.

This myth tells of the courage and perseverance of our ancestors in their battle with nature, and how undaunted they were by death and difficulties – when one fell another stepped into his place. Though this myth may strike modern readers as fantastic, it reflects men's determination to build

themselves a better life. Stories with a deep significance like this can educate successive generations and become a force to impel society forward. They remain, too, an inspiration for later writers, leaving their mark on the nation's poetry, fiction and drama.

Early Chinese literature was also rich in songs and riddles, but after the lapse of so many centuries the majority of these are lost, while some were so modified when recorded by later scribes that we no longer know their original form.

As mankind advanced, a written language was invented. In China a distinctive ideographic script was developed, starting with pictographs or simplified drawings, such as  for man,  for bird,  for moon, or  for mountain. Gradually these pictograms became stylized, and indirect symbols, associate compounds, phonetic loan words and other types of characters were added. The special nature of the Chinese language, which is remarkably laconic and evocative if sometimes ambiguous, has helped to give classical Chinese literature certain of its distinctive features: succinctness and vigour. And relatively few changes have taken place in the written language over the last three thousand years.

Of the earliest writings extant, some are genuine and some are spurious. In other words, there are records attributed to the Xia and Shang dynasties, or even to the time of the three sage emperors, which were actually written during or after the Zhou dynasty, perhaps based on earlier materials. The earliest genuine writings are the oracles of the Shang dynasty inscribed on the shoulder-blades of mammals or the shells of turtles. The answers of the gods to various questions were indicated by the shape of the cracks produced when the bones were heated, and inscriptions on the bones recorded the results. Records of important events were also inscribed on bronze vessels.

By the Shang dynasty China had a slave society. Agriculture, husbandary and handicrafts were already comparatively developed, and on this basis a strong state of slaves and slave-owners was established with a fairly high level

Oracle bone recording scantiness of rain, Shang Dynasty

of civilization.

The inscriptions on oracle bones and bronze vessels are usually short, though certain bronze inscriptions number more than thirty words and some of those on oracle bones more than a hundred. In the main these recorded the activities of the rulers, but they also reflect conditions of work at that time. Since these records are mostly in prose, we can consider them as our earliest prose literature. Some, however, resemble songs, as in the following case:

We ask the oracle on gui si *day:*
Is there going to be any rain?
Rain from the east?

Rain from the west?
Rain from the north?
Rain from the south?

This seems to be an incantation for rain, reflecting those early husbandmen's desire for a bountiful harvest.

Most of these ancient incantations in prose and verse date from before the eleventh century B.C. This can be considered as the beginning of Chinese literature, the first chapter in our classical literature.

II. Zhou Dynasty Literature

1. Western Zhou, Spring and Autumn Period

By the eleventh century B.C., King Wu of Zhou had destroyed the Shang dynasty and the slave-owning form of society was beginning to distintegrate. A feudal society was gradually evolved which persisted for several thousand years. The second period in the history of classical Chinese literature is the eight hundred years from the founding of the Western Zhou dynasty to the end of the third century B.C. when the First Emperor of Qin, also known as Qin Shi Huang Di, united all China.

Let us first look at early Zhou literature, for after the Spring and Autumn Period some important changes took place. The masterpieces of this age are *The Book of Songs*, and certain sections of *The Book of History* as well as of *The Book of Change*.

The *Book of Songs* is the earliest anthology of poetry in China and one of her greatest treasures. It contains more than three hundred songs composed before the sixth century B.C., most of them with four characters to a line. Some are ancient songs for dances and sacrifices, others narrative poetry and satire belonging to a later period, yet others folk-songs from different districts, reflecting the life and thoughts of the common people.

Like the early poetry of other countries, most of these

songs were associated with dances representing different forms of work or fertility rites. The section called "Hymns of Zhou " in *The Book of Songs* includes several poems dealing with agriculture, the best of these being "They Clear Away the Grass, the Trees," and "Very Sharp, the Good Shares." These are probably folk-songs which were taken over by the rulers as sacrificial odes and may well have been changed or distorted in the process, for certain lines appear not altogether consistent. They conjure up for us a vivid picture of how the early Chinese serfs wrested a living from the soil three thousand years ago in the Yellow River Valley.

The ancients enjoyed narrative poems about the heroic deeds of their predecessors, and such poems can also be found in *The Book of Songs.* Some praise ancestors of the royal house, while others describe the exploits of earlier heroes or the resistance to invading northern tribes. Ancient Chinese literature has no great epic, yet from these narrative poems we can see how the Zhou people worked, administered the land and fought.

There are numerous satires too in this anthology. Though the husbandmen toiled hard and often went hungry and cold, they had to pay heavy taxes and levies, and also give free conscript labour or serve as soldiers. Some of the songs therefore criticize social injustice, contrasting the carefree and extravagant life of the rulers with the labourers' hard lot.

But the most important section of *The Book of Songs* is that comprising folk-songs of different localities. As the rulers collected these for their own purposes, certain alterations were inevitably made; yet even so these lyrics remain perennially lovely. "In the Seventh Month," which describes the occupations belonging to different seasons of the year, gives us an authentic glimpse of country life in autumn and winter:

In the ninth month we make ready the stackyards,
In the tenth month we bring in the harvest,
Millet for wine, millet for cooking, the early and the late,

Paddy and hemp, beans and wheat.
Come, my husbandmen,
My harvesting is over,
Go up and begin your work in the house,
In the morning gather thatch-reeds,
In the evening twist rope;
Go quickly on to the roofs.
*Soon you will be beginning to sow your many grains.**

The serfs not only worked, hard for the lord of the manor, but endured humiliating treatment too – especially the womenfolk:

The spring days are drawing out;
They gather the white aster in crowds.
A girl's heart is sick and sad,
Forced to go home with the lord.

Hatred for their masters is expressed in such songs as "Chop, Chop, They Cut the Hardwood.":

You do not sow, you do not reap,
Yet you have corn, three hundred stackyards!
You do not hunt, you do not chase,
Yet see all those badgers hanging in your courtyard!

The poem"Great Rats, Great Rats" voices similar resentment and the longing for a better future:

Great rats, great rats,
Keep away from our wheat!
Three years we have worked for you,
But you have spurned us;
Now we shall leave this land
For a happier one –

* From *The Book of Songs*, translated by Arthur Waley.

That happy land, that happy land,
*There we shall find all that we need.**

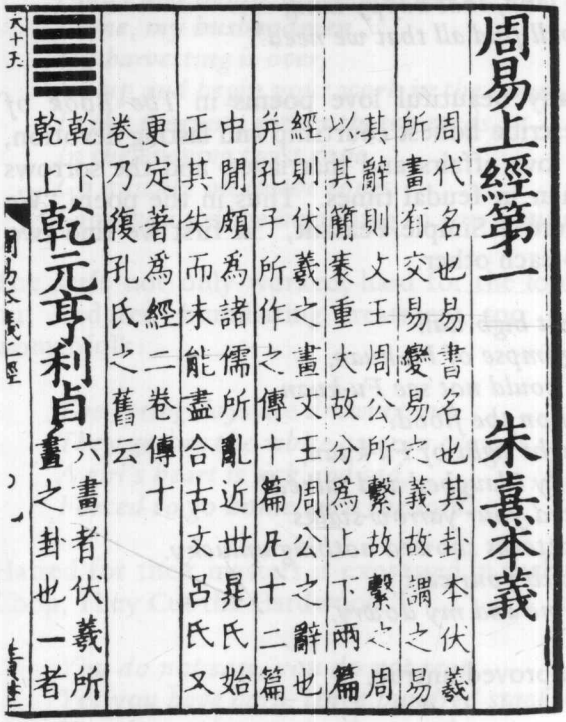
There are many beautiful love poems in *The Book of Songs*. Some describe honest courtship and lasting devotion, others unhappy love affairs and marriages, and the sorrows peculiar to women in feudal times. Thus in the poem "We Thought You Were a Simple Peasant," at first we find two lovers devoted to each other.

I climbed that high wall
To catch a glimpse of Fu-kuan,
And when I could not see Fu-kuan,
My tears fell on the flood.
At last I caught sight of Fu-kuan,
And how gaily I laughed and talked!
You consulted your yarrow-stalks
And their patterns showed nothing unlucky.
You came with your cart
And moved me and my dowry.

But later the man proved untrue.

The mulberry leaves have fallen,
All yellow and seared,
Since I came to you,
Three years I have eaten poverty.
The waters of the Chi were in flood;
They wetted the curtains of the carriage.
It was not I who was at fault;
It is you who have altered your ways,
It is you who are unfaithful,
*Whose favours are cast this way and that.***

* From *The People Speak Out*, translated by Rewi Alley.
**From *The Book of Songs*, translated by Arthur Waley.


周易上經第一　朱熹本義

周代名也易書名也其卦本伏羲所畫有交易變易之義故謂之易其辭則文王周公所繫故繫之周以其簡衆重大故分爲上下兩篇經則伏羲之畫文王周公之辭也并孔子所作之傳十篇凡十二篇中間頗爲諸儒所亂近世晁氏始正其失而未能盡合古文呂氏又更定著爲經二卷傳十卷乃復孔氏之舊云

乾下乾上乾元亨利貞六畫者伏羲所畫之卦也一者

1265 edition of The Book of Change

The *Book of Songs*, especially its section of folk-songs, holds a very high position in Chinese literature. Though feudal commentators distorted the meaning of many of the poems, for over two thousand years this collection has been dear to innumerable Chinese readers. These beautiful lyrics with their graphic images and simple, evocative language give a true picture of life in the Zhou dynasty and laid the foundations of the fine tradition of realism in Chinese poetry.

Roughly contemporaneous with *The Book of Songs* are the historical records in *The Book of History* and the explanations of hexagrams used for divination in *The Book of Change*.

As Zhou dynasty prose developed from the Shang oracle bones and bronze inscriptions, *The Book of History* shows resemblances to the bronze inscriptions while *The Book of Change* is reminiscent of the earlier oracles. Much of *The Book of History* dates from a later period, but a few of the sections on the Western Zhou and early Eastern Zhou period were actually written at this time. Although most of these record the statements and actions of rulers, they give us a picture of the serfs' conditions. And as the explanations of the sixty-four hexagrams in *The Book of Change* have a folk origin, they too supply us with much general information about life in those days. Thus there are references to fishing and hunting, husbandry and agriculture, war, sacrifice and marriage, food and drink, housing and clothing. If we disregard the many mystical commentaries and false interpretations of these books written in the past, they remain important prose works of the early Zhou dynasty.

2. Warring States Period

The works of the Warring States Period are entirely unlike the earlier Zhou literature.

After the Spring and Autumn Period, there was a change in the system of landownership and gradually a new landlord class appeared. In the course of the struggle between these new landowners and the old feudal chiefs, the literati emerged as a prominent group and began to dominate all cultural activities. More important still, after the Zhou people advanced eastwards from the Wei River to the Yellow River Valley, even the Yangtse Valley changed. And when the kingdom of Chu with its distinctive traditions came within the economic orbit of the Zhou empire, this greatly hastened the spread of culture.

The most outstanding literature of this period is *Chu Ci*, the poetry of the kingdom of Chu.

These poems were written in the dialect of Chu and set to Chu music. The earliest are the *Nine Odes* — actually

Qu Yuan, portrait by Chen Hongshou (1599-1652)

eleven in number – used in sacrifices in the kingdom of Chu at the end of the Spring and Autumn Period and the beginning of the Warring States Period. The deities and spirits to whom sacrifices were made were for the most part gods and goddesses related to agriculture: the sun god, the cloud god, or mountain and water goddesses. As the ancients believed that gods were like men and could fall in love with mortals, the *Nine Odes* also speak of love. Through the love of shamans for gods and goddesses, they expressed men's longing for richer gifts from nature: if the gods were pleased they would surely send better harvests, if angry they would destroy the crops. The "Ode to the Fallen" was used in sacrifices to the warriors who had fallen in battle, and shows