LI SAO

AND OTHER POEMS OF CHU YUAN

Translated by Yang Hsien-yi and Gladys Yang

FOREIGN LANGUAGES PRESS
PEKING 1953

A SKETCH OF CHU YUAN

Kuo Mo-jo

I

Chu Yuan is a great Chinese poet who lived more than two thousand years ago. He was not simply a poet, but also a thinker and statesman.

Chu Yuan was born in 340 B.C. during the Warring States period (403 B.C.—221 B.C.). The twelve great states of the Spring-and-Autumn period (770 B.C.—403 B.C.) had now been reduced to seven, which were struggling among themselves, trying to achieve the unity of China.

Of the seven states, Chin in the northwest was the most powerful, while Chu in the Yangtse River valley was the largest. The state of Chi in the Shantung peninsula, thanks to its proximity to the sea, had abundance of fish and salt, and was the richest. Han, Chao and Wei, having come into being as a result of the partition of Tsin, were sometimes called "the three Tsin states" and occupied the central part of

the Yellow River valley; they were smaller states, thickly populated, in the heart of ancient China. The state of Yen in the northeast had its boundary along the Liaotung peninsula and Northern Korea, and was therefore relatively remote from the struggle.

Chu Yuan was a noble of Chu. He was born when the once powerful kingdom of Chu was declining. His failure to win the support of the corrupt king of Chu and the other nobles for his honest and progressive proposals made his life a tragic one.

At first he won the confidence of the king of Chu, and held the high post of "left minister," having constant access to the king, and helping to draft laws and determine foreign policy. In view of the danger threatening Chu from Chin, Chu Yuan proposed reforms in the government and an alliance with Chi to ensure the safety of the state. But the king of Chu was surrounded by self-seekers such as the councillor Tze Chiao (who held the highest position in the Chu government), the knight Chin Shang (Chu Yuan's political opponent), and the king's favourite, Queen Cheng Hsiu. Having accepted bribes from Chin's envoy, Chang Yi, they not only stopped King Huai from taking Chu Yuan's advice, but brought about the latter's estrange-

ment from the king. As a result King Huai was tricked into going to Chin, where he died after three years' captivity.

King Huai's successor, King Chin Hsiang, was even more incompetent than his father. In the twenty-first year of his reign (278 B.C.), General Pai Chi of Chin led troops southward to storm the capital of Chu. The kingdom of Chu never recovered. Fifty-five years later it was finally overthrown.

Most of Chu Yuan's poems were written after his policy was rejected. When the capital of Chu was sacked by Pai Chi, he wrote a poem of lament. He was then sixty-two. He had lived for more than twenty years in retirement and now, seeing no future for his country, on the fifth day of the fifth month of the lunar calendar he drowned himself in the Milo River in Hunan.

II

Chu Yuan's life was a tragedy. As a political figure he was a failure, but as a poet he achieved great success. The people sympathized with him. Not only the people of Chu, but the people of all China for two thousand years and more have sympathized with him. Every

year on the fifth of the fifth month of the lunar calendar, the day on which he is believed to have died, people throughout China have dragon-boat races to commemorate him. This ceremony may be considered a representation of how the people of Chu at that time recovered his body. On this day Chinese everywhere eat a special variety of dumpling, made of sticky rice wrapped in leaves and steamed. And, according to tradition, some of these dumplings are thrown into the river to feed the dragons and serpents, so that they may not devour Chu Yuan's body. This tradition has spread to Korea, Japan, Viet-Nam and Malaya.

Chu Yuan won such great sympathy largely because of his own deep love for his motherland and the people. Although a noble of Chu, he sympathized deeply with the common people. Over two thousand years ago he wrote:

Long did I sigh and wipe away my Tears,
To see my People bowed by Griefs and Fears. (*The lament*) And again:

The People's Sufferings move my Heart,
Our Land I cannot leave. (*Stray Thoughts*)

The people will grieve for one who has grieved for them. Chu Yuan's poetry shows great sincerity. And his life proves that he practised what he preached. He was banished from court

for more than twenty years, during which he lived in retirement; yet he never left his motherland. So great was his love for his motherland and his people that he put up with disgrace and finally drowned himself rather than leave the kingdom of Chu. It is easy to understand how such a man must have won the deep sympathy of the people.

His passionate love for his people is also clearly seen in the form of his poetry. There are twenty-five poems attributed to Chu Yuan, most of which we may consider authentic. Some of these poems are odes dedicated to the gods. These were written in the prime of his life, when all was well with him. They are fresh, vigorous, musical and charming, like the soft breeze of spring. But the majority of his poems were written after his hopes had been dashed. These are filled with indignation, pathos, passion and grief, like the darkness that precedes a storm, or like the storm itself.

His poetic forms were derived mainly from folk poetry, and the vocabulary used was that of the common people. He initiated a revolution in ancient Chinese poetry, and his influence has made itself felt on Chinese literature for the last two thousand years. The people loved his poetry. Though he lived two thousand years

ago, and his language differs considerably from that of today, when translated into modern Chinese or a foreign language it can still move us.

III

Chu Yuan's poetic imagination is unrivalled in Chinese literature. From his *Li Sao* (*The Lament*), the greatest of his poems, we can see that he felt all things in nature possess life and can be shaped to man's purpose. Wind, rain, thunder and lightning, clouds and moon, become his attendants and charioteers. Phoenix and dragon draw his chariot. He gallops to the sky and reaches heaven's gate, then climbs up the roof of the world and wanders to the uttermost parts of the earth. But he found no rest anywhere, and finally took his own life.

Although he liked to give free rein to his imagination to conjure up heaven and hell or various spirits, he did not reverence them. Heaven and hell alike appeared to him as places where the spirit could not dwell. In his poem *Requiem* he exhorts the soul not to go to heaven or hell, nor to the north, south, east or west, for nothing good was to be found there. His native place was best. In *Li Sao (The Lament)* he

describes how he reached the gate of paradise and called the gatekeeper to open up, but the gatekeeper simply leaned against the door looking at him—probably unwilling to admit him. So finally he sighed and said: "Even in Heaven there are no good people."

His most extraordinary poem is a long one entitled *Tien Wen (The Riddles)*. In this he asks questions regarding what existed before the universe, the creation of the heavenly bodies and the structure of the earth. He also asks about myths and legends, and historical events. Over one hundred and seventy questions are raised, and none of them answered. These riddles give us some idea of the myths of ancient China, but many of them are unintelligible today because so many ancient legends have been lost.

Most noteworthy, in my opinion, are the questions regarding the structure of the heavenly bodies. Who built the sky? Where does it end? What supports the sky? Why the division into Twelve Zodiac Signs? How are the sun, moon and stars held in place so that they do not fall? How many miles does the sun travel in one day? What makes the moon wax and wane? Where does the sun hide before dawn? These are the questions asked, and very rational questions they are too. From

them we can see his concern with nature, and the richness of his imagination.

Chinese science in Chu Yuan's time had, in fact, reached great heights. In astronomy, calendar science and mathematics great advances had been made, while logic was well developed. A southern philosopher named Huang Liao, who lived shortly before Chu Yuan, once asked a northern scholar, Huei Shih, who was a well-known logician, why the heavenly bodies did not fall, and what caused the wind and rain, thunder and lightning. And Huei Shih gave him answers. This shows that the intellectuals of the time were generally interested in problems concerning the structure of the universe.

Chu Yuan lived in the Golden Age of Chinese civilization. His genius and his position made it easy for him to assimilate current thought, and to develop in many directions. But his genius was pre-eminently poetic. Few poets indeed in the world can rival him in his sincerity, imaginative power and brilliance, nor in the wealth of imagery, lyrical qualities and diversity of forms of his poems.

This poet who so loved his motherland and his people, who loved freedom and justice, will never die.

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LI SAO

LI SAO (The Lament) is not only one of the most remarkable works of Chu Yuan, it ranks as one of the greatest poems in Chinese or world poetry. It was probably written during the period when the poet had been exiled by his king, and was living south of the Yangtze River.

The name LI SAO has been interpreted by some as meaning "encountering sorrow," by others as "sorrow after departure." Some recent scholars have construed it as "sorrow in estrangement," while yet others think it was the name of a certain type of music.

This long lyrical poem describes the search and disillusionment of a soul in agony, riding on dragons and serpents from heaven to earth. By means of rich imagery and skillful similes, it expresses love of one's country and the sadness of separation. It touches upon various historical themes intermingled with legends and myths, and depicts, directly or indirectly, the social conditions of that time and the complex destinies of the city states of ancient China. The

conflict between the individual and the ruling group is repeatedly described, while at the same time the poet affirms his determination to fight for justice. This passionate desire to save his country, and this love for the people, account for the poem's splendour and immortality.

A Prince am I of Ancestry renowned,
Illustrious Name my royal Sire hath found.
When Sirius did in Spring its Light display,
A Child was born, and Tiger marked the Day.
When first upon my Face my Lord's Eye glanced,
For me auspicious Names he straight advanced,
Denoting that in me Heaven's Marks divine
Should with the Virtues of the Earth combine.
With lavished innate Qualities indued,
By Art and Skill my Talents I renewed;
Angelic Herbs and sweet Selineas too,
And Orchids late that by the Water grew,
I wove for Ornament; till creeping Time,
Like Water flowing, stole away my Prime.
Magnolias of the Glade I plucked at Dawn,
At Eve beside the Stream took Winter-thorn.
Without Delay the Sun and Moon sped fast,
In swift Succession Spring and Autumn passed;
The fallen Flowers lay scattered on the Ground,
The Dusk might fall before my Dream was found.

Had I not loved my Prime and spurned the Vile,
Why should I not have changed my former Style?
My Chariot drawn by Steeds of Race divine
I urged; to guide the King my sole Design.

Three ancient Kings there were so pure and true
That round them every fragrant Flower grew;
Cassia and Pepper of the Mountain-side
With Melilotus white in Clusters vied.
Two Monarchs then, who high Renown received,
Followed the kingly Way, their Goal achieved.
Two Princes proud by Lust their Reign abused,
Sought easier Path, and their own Steps confused.
The Faction for illicit Pleasure longed;
Dreadful their Way where hidden Perils thronged.
Danger against myself could not appal,
But feared I lest my Sovereign's Sceptre fall.

Forward and back I hastened in my Quest,
Followed the former Kings, and took no Rest.
The Prince my true Integrity defamed,
Gave Ear to Slander, high his Anger flamed;
Integrity I knew could not avail,
Yet still endured; my Lord I would not fail.
Celestial Spheres my Witness be on high,
I strove but for His Sacred Majesty.
Twas first to me he gave his plighted Word,
But soon repenting other Counsel heard.

For me Departure could arouse no Pain;
I grieved to see his royal Purpose vain.

Nine Fields of Orchids at one Time I grew,
For Melilot a hundred Acres too,
And fifty Acres for the Azalea bright,
The Rumex fragrant and the Lichen white.
I longed to see them yielding Blossoms rare,
And thought in Season due the Spoil to share.
I did not grieve to see them die away,
But grieved because midst Weeds they did decay.

Insatiable in Lust and Greediness
The Faction strove, and tired not of Excess;
Themselves condoning, others they'd decry,
And steep their Hearts in envious Jealousy.

Insatiably they seized what they desired,
It was not that to which my Heart aspired.
As old Age unrelenting hurried near,
Lest my fair Name should fail was all my Fear.
Dew from Magnolia Leaves I drank at Dawn,
At Eve for Food were Aster Petals borne;
And loving thus the Simple and the Fair,
How should I for my sallow Features care?
With gathered Vines I strung Valeria white,
And mixed with blue Wistaria Petals bright,
And Melilotus matched with Cassia sweet,

With Ivy green and Tendrils long to meet.
Life I adapted to the ancient Way,
Leaving the Manners of the present Day;
Thus unconforming to the modern Age,
The Path I followed of a bygone Sage.

Long did I sigh and wipe away my Tears,
To see my People bowed by Griefs and Fears.
Though I my Gifts enhanced and curbed my Pride,
At Morn they'd mock me, would at Eve deride;
First cursed that I Angelica should wear,
Then cursed me for my Melilotus fair.
But since my Heart did love such Purity,
I'd not regret a thousand Deaths to die.

I marvel at the Folly of the King,
So heedless of his People's Suffering.
They envied me my mothlike Eyebrows fine,
And so my Name his Damsels did malign.
Truly to Craft alone their Praise they paid,
The Square in Measuring they disobeyed;
The Use of common Rules they held debased;
With Confidence their crooked Lines they traced.

In Sadness plunged and sunk in deepest Gloom,
Alone I drove on to my dreary Doom.
In Exile rather would I meet my End,
Than to the Baseness of their Ways descend.

Remote the Eagle spurns the common Range,
Nor deigns since Time began its Way to change;
A Circle fits not with a square Design;
Their different Ways could not be merged with mine.
Yet still my Heart I checked and curbed my Pride,
Their Blame endured and their Reproach beside.
To die for Righteousness alone I sought,
For this was what the ancient Sages taught.

I failed my former Errors to discern;
I tarried long, but now I would return.
My Steeds I wheeled back to their former Way,
Lest all too long down the wrong Path I stray.
On Orchid-covered Bank I loosed my Steed,
And let him gallop by the flow'ry Mead
At Will. Rejected now and in Disgrace,
I would retire to cultivate my Grace.
With Cress Leaves green my simple Gown I made,
With Lilies white my rustic Garb did braid.
Why should I grieve to go unrecognised,
Since in my Heart Fragrance was truly prized?
My Headdress then high-pinnacled I raised,
Lengthened my Pendents, where bright Jewels blazed.
Others may smirch their Fragrance and bright Hues,
My Innocence is proof against Abuse.
Oft I looked back, gazed to the Distance still,
Longed in the Wilderness to roam at Will.
Splendid my Ornaments together vied,

With all the Fragrance of the Flowers beside;
All men had Pleasures in their various Ways,
My Pleasure was to cultivate my Grace.
I would not change, though they my Body rend;
How could my Heart be wrested from its End?

My Handmaid fair, with Countenance demure,
Entreated me Allegiance to abjure:
"A Hero perished in the Plain ill-starred,
Where Pigmies stayed their Plumage to discard.
Why lovest thou thy Grace and Purity,
Alone dost hold thy splendid Virtue high?
Lentils and Weeds the Prince's Chamber fill:
Why holdest thou aloof with stubborn Will?
Thou canst not one by one the Crowd persuade,
And who the Purpose of our Heart hath weighed?
Faction and Strife the World hath ever loved;
Heeding me not, why standest thou removed?"

I sought th'ancestral Voice to ease my Woe.
Alas, how one so proud could sink so low!
To barbarous South I went across the Stream;
Before the Ancient I began my Theme:
"With Odes divine there came a Monarch's Son,
Whose Revels unrestrained were never done;
In Antics wild, to coming Perils blind,
He fought his Brother, and his Sway declined.
The royal Archer, in his wanton Chase