The Flowering Plum and the Palace Lady

Interpretations of Chinese Poetry

Hans H. Frankel

中國詩選譯隨談

傅漢思著

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For Ch'ung-ho

Preface

This book offers new translations and interpretations of 106 Chinese poems, grouped under thematic and stylistic headings, and analyses of some common phenomena of Chinese poetic structure. It is not, however, a general introduction to Chinese poetry. Readers looking for such a work may turn to several good books available today, such as James J. Y. Liu, *The Art of Chinese Poetry*; A. C. Graham, *Poems of the Late T'ang*; and Burton Watson, *Chinese Lyricism*. The present work is intended for readers with an interest in Chinese poetry. It invites those who have not learned the Chinese language, as well as those who are in the process of studying it, or who are wondering whether such study is worth the effort. But those who have mastered the language, including specialists in Chinese poetry, will also (I hope) read beyond this point.

The viewpoint adopted for the interpretation of the poems is that of modern Western literary criticism, with due regard for the peculiarities of the Chinese literary tradition and the traditional Chinese approach to poetry.

The 106 poems selected for interpretation range in time from about the tenth century B.C. to the fourteenth century of our era. But the selection is not intended as a representative cross section of Chinese poetry during that time span. Rather, the poems chosen are personal favorites that seem to have yielded to my efforts to make them intelligible and enjoyable in translation. Some of them need hardly any comment, while others require a great deal of it. The explications offered vary from poem to poem in length and in kind, providing in each case what I feel to be necessary and helpful. The type of interpretation that I practice works only on poems which I like and admire, hence poems that strike me as inferior are excluded from this study.

My interpretations and judgments are obviously subjective. Reading poetry is after all a very personal affair, and no two individuals will understand a given poem in quite the same way. To counterbal-

ance this subjectivity, I give close attention both to the formal and the nonformal structures of the poems, studying them as skillfully integrated organisms, as exquisitely coordinated creations of verbal art. Structure operates simultaneously and harmoniously on three levels: sound, syntax, and meaning. About phonetic features I say little, because the changing sound systems of the various historical periods are difficult to ascertain and hard to convey to nonspecialists. Hence our analyses will deal primarily with syntactic and semantic features.

This book is not oriented toward literary history and the lines of so-called development but toward an appreciation—rational, aesthetic, and emotional—of the material it deals with. To compare our intercourse with poetry to that with people, there are two ways of learning to know a person. You may make an effort to find out as much as possible about his childhood, background, parents, ancestors, relatives, teachers, friends, and associates, and about those who in turn have been influenced by him. Or you may accept him as he is, become familiar with him, study his appearance, listen sympathetically to whatever he has to say, and enjoy his company. I have chosen the latter way.

On the more technical side, however, since our ultimate concern is with understanding and appreciating each poem just as it was meant to be taken, we must learn as much as possible about its language, in the broadest sense of the word: the literary Chinese of the period and genre, the author's private language where it differs from other poets', the language of allusions and conventions such as were familiar to the author and his audience, and the language of the social and cultural milieu in which the poem was created.

The matter of the English versions deserves a few words. Much has been written on the problem of translating poetry from one language into another, and on the special difficulties of translating Chinese poetry into English.[1] Thus there is no need for going deeply into the matter here. Let me just clarify my stand on a few points.

I strike a compromise between a literal and a literary translation. I always keep intact the divisions of a poem into lines and stanzas. I change the word order as little as possible, and try to convey something of a pervasive poetic phenomenon that will occupy much of our attention throughout, namely, the word-for-word matching of lines, of half-lines, and sometimes of larger sections, which is known

as parallelism and antithesis.* But I make no attempt to render other prosodic elements that are difficult or impossible to reproduce in English, namely, line length, rhyme, rhythm, and tonal balance.[2] In addition, I try (with uneven success) to keep intact that important but elusive phenomenon: imagery.

For the names of animals, plants, minerals, and the like, I make do with approximate translations. Precise equivalents could only be arrived at by experts in those scientific fields.[3] Besides, poets are usually not scientists, and even in cases where they are, they do not speak as such, and the medium of poetry is diametrically opposed to the scientist's precise and unequivocal statement, as has often been pointed out.[4]

On the few occasions where the translations are not my own, that fact will be acknowledged. I have profited from the use of earlier translations, commentaries, and studies, but I have not tried to find and peruse all existing secondary literature.

The poems selected are numbered from 1 to 106. (Fifty of them have not previously been translated into English, as far as I know.) They are cast in nine different poetic forms, which are explained in appendix 1. Legends, historical incidents, and other lore to which the poems allude appear in appendix 2, partly translated from the sources, and partly summarized.

I will say no more about the purpose and organization of the present volume. From my own experience as a reader I know that the way in which a book is used often has little in common with what the author had in mind. May the book speak for itself. Or better yet: may the poems speak for themselves.

*See especially chapter 11 below.

Acknowledgments

This book began to be written in 1965. In that year I had the good fortune to receive a Guggenheim Fellowship and a Yale Senior Faculty Fellowship. I spent six months at Academia Sinica in Nankang, Taiwan, in 1965–66, followed by three months in Kyoto. During my stay in Taiwan, I enjoyed the hospitable and congenial atmosphere of Academia Sinica, and benefited from the counsel and erudition of many Chinese scholars at Academia Sinica and National Taiwan University, especially Professors Chang Ping-ch'üan, Tai Chün-jen, T'ai Ching-nung, and Wang Shu-min. In Kyoto, I got helfpul advice on my work from several Japanese scholars, particularly Professors Ogawa Tamaki, Shimizu Shigeru, and Yoshikawa Kōjirō.

In my continuing work on the book, I was privileged to receive several grants from the Concilium on International and Area Studies of Yale University, which made possible some research trips to libraries outside of Yale, and the copying of needed materials. A final revision of the translations of the poems was supported by a grant from the A. Whitney Griswold Endowment Fund of Yale University, through the Council on the Humanities. On this revision I worked with Judith Wile. Thanks to her competence in Chinese and English, combined with a rare sensitivity for poetic diction in both languages, the translations were greatly improved. Two editors of the Yale University Press, Ellen Graham and Charles Grench, prepared the manuscript for publication with uncommon skill and loving care.

Permission to include previously published material is gratefully acknowledged as follows: Professor Bernhard Karlgren has given permission to quote from his translations of the *Shih ching* in *The Book of Odes* (Stockholm: Museum of Far Eastern Antiquities, 1950); Professor Angus C. Graham allows me to use, in appendix 2 under "Po Ya and Chung Tzu-ch'i," his translation in *The Book of Lieh-tzŭ* (London: John Murray, 1960); Professor Hugh M. Stimson, Secre-

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The book owes much to many others, especially to my students and colleagues at Yale. Above all, I have received constant help and inspiration from my wife Chang Ch'ung-ho, who is herself a poet, a lifelong student of Chinese poetry, and a living embodiment of the finest in Chinese civilization.

Contents

1

Man and Nature

(Poems 1–11)

The relationship between man and nature is an aspect of Chinese poetry that has received much attention from Chinese literary critics over the centuries. They often point out the explicit and implicit relations between the human emotions (*ch'ing*) and the scenery (*ching*) described or created in a poem. Thus Hsieh Chen (1495–1575) said: "Scenery is the go-between of poetry, emotion is the embryo of poetry. By combining them a poem is made."[1] Those connections seem to me to be even more extensive and complex than has generally been realized.

We begin by looking at a poem in which a human figure and a semipersonified tree are made to interact, and in which the interaction renders an abstract notion. The poem is set in the imperial palace, and the author was himself an imperial prince who briefly reigned at the end of his life as a puppet emperor (Emperor Chien-wen of the Liang dynasty).

Poem 1, "The Flowering Plum"[2]
Hsiao Kang (503–51)
Form: *fu*

In the many-walled palace's
Sacred garden:
Wondrous trees, myriad kinds,
And countless plants in thousandfold profusion,
With light diffused and shadows mingled,
Twigs abound and trunks are everywhere.
When the cold sundial marks the change of season

蕭綱「梅花賦」層城之宮　靈苑之中　奇木萬品　(4)庶草千叢　光分影雜　條繁幹通　寒圭變節

And wintry ashes move in the calendar pipes,*
They all wither and fade,
Their beauty falls, destroyed by the wind.
The year turns, the ether is new,
Rousing the plants and strirring the earth.
The plum breaks into blossom before other trees,
She alone has the gift of recognizing spring.
Now, receiving *yang*,† she brings forth gold,
Now, mingling with snow, she wears a cloak of silver.
She exhales glamor and lights up the grove on all four sides,
She spreads splendor at the meeting of five roads.
As jades are joined and pearls strewn,
So ice is hung and hail spread.
Tender leaves sprout, not yet formed;
Branches pull out fresh shoots and stick them onto old twigs,
Petals from the treetop fall halfway and fly in the air,
Sweet scent goes with the wind to faraway places.
She suspends slow-drifting gossamer
And mingles with the heavy morning mist.
She vies with the cosmetic powder falling from upstairs
And surpasses the silk on the loom in sheer whiteness.
Now, opening into flower, she leans on a hillside;
Now, reflecting her own image, she overhangs a pool.
Stretching toward jade steps, she forms brilliant patterns;
Gently brushing a carved door, she lowers her branches.
Thereupon in the many-cloistered ladies' quarters an exquisite beauty,
Her appearance delicate and her mind refined,
Loves the early blossoms that spur in the season
And welcomes glorious spring's putting the cold to flight.

*A calendrical instrument of the imperial court: the ashes of reed membranes, placed in pipes, were supposed to indicate by their movements changes of season. See *Hou-Han shu*, "Chih," 1.23b–24a.

†The principle of light (contrasting with *yin* "darkness") as manifested in sunlight and spring.

(8)冬灰徙管　並皆枯悴　色落摧風　年歸氣新　(12)搖芸動壑　梅花特早　偏能識春　或承陽而發金　(16)乍雜雪而被銀　吐豔四照之林　舒榮五衢之路　既玉綴而珠離　(20)且冰懸而雹布　葉嫩出而未成　枝抽心而插故　標半落而飛空　(24)香隨風而遠度　挂靡靡之遊絲　雜霏霏之晨霧　爭樓上之落粉　(28)奪機中之纖素　乍開花而傍巇　或含影而臨池　向玉階而結彩　(32)拂網戶而低枝　於是重閨佳麗　貌婉心嫻　憐早花之驚節　(36)訝春光之遣寒

Her lined gown is thinner now, unwadded,
Her silk sleeves are of single thickness.
She plucks the fragrant blossoms,
Raising her dainty sleeve. 40
She'll either stick some in her hair and ask how it looks,
Or break off some branches and give them away.
She hates too much bareness in front of her hair-knot
And is tired of the golden hairpin she has worn so long. 44
She looks back at her own shadow on the red lacquered steps
And posing, fondly eyes her graceful carriage.
She opens wide the spring windows,
She rolls up the silk curtains on all four sides. 48
"The spring wind blows plum petals—I'm afraid they will all fall,
So I knit my moth-eyebrows.*
Blossoms and beauties are all alike,
We always worry that time will pass us by." 52

We cannot be sure that this is the complete poem, since the text has been reconstituted by modern editors from quotations in two early encyclopedias.[3] But, complete or not, it is a well integrated work whose dualistic approach to a single theme is reflected in its prosodic structure.

Like other *fu* poems, it is divided into sections by three kinds of devices: changes in meter, changes in rhyme, and a supernumerary phrase (which has been set in italics here and throughout the book). The meter is complex. There are six types of line, differing in length, caesura, and the use of certain particles in fixed positions. Two types of meter predominate, accounting for twenty-two lines each. The changes in metric type divide the poem into twelve metric sections (lines 1–2, 3–14, 15–16, 17–18, 19–32, 33–34, 35–36, 37–40, 41–44, 45–48, 49–50, and 51–52). The last four lines are set off from the rest of the poem both metrically and stylistically to make the final section (the technical term is *luan*) sound like a lyric poem or song. Insertion of such lyric sections is not uncommon in the *fu* form.

*A beautiful woman's eyebrows were often likened to the antennae of a moth.

挾衣始薄　羅袖初單　折此芳花　(40)擧茲輕袖　或插鬢而問人　或殘枝而相授　恨鬢前之太空　(44)嫌金鈿之轉舊　顧影丹墀　弄此嬌姿　洞開春牖　(48)四卷羅帷　春風吹梅畏落盡　賤妾爲此斂娥眉　花色持相比　(52)恒愁恐失時

Changes of rhyme divide the poem into seven rhyme sections (lines 1–10, 11–16, 17–28, 29–32, 33–38, 39–44, and 45–52). Only half of these rhyme changes coincide with metric changes.

The third organizing device is the supernumerary phrase *yü shih* "thereupon." It occurs only once in this *fu*, at the beginning of line 33, which is one of the few places where meter and rhyme change simultaneously. With the three organizing devices coinciding, this point thus stands out as the one major dividing mark in this poem. Here the poet makes a fresh start, introducing the second of the two figures. He places the palace lady, like the plum tree, inside a multiple enclosure (lines 1, 33), and he enhances the similarities between them in other passages as well: both show off fine garments (lines 16, 37–38), both display their charms in all directions (lines 17, 48), both are dissatisfied with their old adornments and put on something new (lines 22, 41, and 44), and both assume coquettish poses (lines 29–32, 45–46).

The parallels are further brought out by the use of identical words (I have not always managed to reproduce this feature in my translation): *chin* "gold" (lines 15, 44); *ssu* "four" (lines 17, 18); *ch'a* "to stick" (lines 22, 41); *k'ai* "to open" (lines 29, 47); *hsin* "heart," "shoots," "mind" (lines 22, 34); *ying* "reflected image," "shadow" (lines 30, 45). Each figure becomes more significant through its association with the other. It is partly a poetic method of indirection. The poet chooses to say certain things about the flowering plum, not directly but by speaking about the palace lady, and he says certain things about the lady by speaking about the tree. What he says about one is also relevant to the other, and each can only be fully understood through its counterpart.

The poet's use of two separate figures does no harm to the unity of the poem because the two converge on a single theme: the transience of beauty. This is an abstract concept, and the reason why the Chinese poet does not deal with it directly, I suppose, is that he prefers concrete figures to abstract notions. And he creates a *pair* of figures rather than a single one because this makes possible a dramatic encounter. Throughout the poem, the method of presentation is dynamic rather than static. The two figures move toward each other; and in the opening passage, the exposition takes the form of a swift-moving narrative, which serves at the same time to give the flowering plum a central, superior, and unique position in the imperial garden:

a multitude of other plants are first displayed and then removed, leaving the plum to hold the stage alone.

These manipulations would be impossible if the plum did not play a dual role: as a tree and as a woman. It is in keeping with the conventions of the *fu* genre to devote an entire poem to a plant species or some other natural object or phenomenon. As far as personification is concerned, this is not quite as common in Chinese literature as in the West. But in Chinese folklore and popular religion (as in other countries) certain trees were early conceived as spirits or deities, some male, some female. The plum tree became established as a female figure. Hsiao Kang's *fu* is an early example of an important literary development which eventually made the flowering plum into a refined lady or a bewitching fairy, as in the following twelfth-century story.

> During the K'ai-huang era (581–601) of the Sui dynasty, Chao Shih-hsiung was sent to a post at Lo-fu.* Once, on a cold day, at the time of sunset, when he happened to be in a grove of plum trees, he saw a beautiful woman, made up sparingly and dressed simply but elegantly, coming toward him from a building next to a wine shop. It was already getting dark; the last remnants of snow had not yet melted, and the moon shone forth with a pale light. As Shih-hsiung spoke with her, her speech was most refined and beautiful, and her fragrance was enticing. So he took her to the wine shop and knocked at the door, and they drank together. After a while, a lad dressed in green merrily sang and danced for them. Shih-hsiung fell asleep, intoxicated. He only felt that the wind was cold, and the power of attraction was great. After a long time, when the east was already lighting up, he arose and, looking around, found himself under a large blossoming plum tree. Above there was a kingfisher, crying and gazing at him. The moon was setting, and Orion was on the horizon. Nothing was left but a feeling of disappointment.[4]

Here the equations are plain: the beautiful woman *is* the blossoming plum, the lad dressed in green *is* the kingfisher. Such stories of double identity and metamorphosis are as common in Chinese folklore as in the myths and tales of other civilizations. But in Chinese

*A mountainous region in modern Kwangtung, with an age-old reputation of being haunted by all sorts of spirits.

literature, they are found more often in prose fiction and drama than in poetry. There was no Ovid in China to make metamorphosis a focal point in poetry. That is why in Hsiao Kang's poem the relation between plum tree and woman is elusive and vague, in contrast to the twelfth-century story.

In the next poem we find again an association of two disparate figures, this time a girl and a deer.

Poem 2, *Shih ching*, no. 23
Anonymous (ca. tenth-sixth century B.C.)
Form: *Shih ching*

In the wilderness there is a dead roe,
Wrapped with white rushes.
There is a girl longing for spring,
A handsome man seduces her.

In the forest there are elms,
In the wilderness there is a dead deer,
Bound with white rushes.
There is a girl like jade.

Slow, easy, easy!
Don't touch my sash,
Don't make the dog bark.

In the first two stanzas, two themes are interwoven: the killing of a deer and the seduction of a girl. The last stanza is a dramatic flashback to the scene of seduction. Any interpretation of the poem must account for the remarkable combination of two themes in a single song. In the traditional Chinese explication, going back to the authoritative commentary by Cheng Hsüan (127–200), the poem is an appeal by a virtuous girl to her lover, asking him to give her a dead deer as a gift of betrothal. Modern readers will find this explanation hard to accept.[5] More convincing interpretations are offered by Arthur Waley and Bernhard Karlgren. Waley explains: "If people find a dead deer in the woods, they cover it piously with rushes. But there are men who 'kill' a girl, in the sense that they seduce her and then fail to 'cover up' the damage by marrying her."[6] According to

詩經23「野有死麕」 野有死麕 白茅包之 有女懷春 吉士誘之 林有樸樕 野有死鹿 白茅純束 有女如玉 舒而脫脫兮 無感我帨兮 無使尨也吠

Karlgren, "A girl enticed into a love affair is likened to precious game carefully wrapped up and hidden by the lucky poacher."[7]

For a more satisfactory explanation, I suggest that we are dealing here with an archetypal pattern in which a hunter chasing (and sometimes killing) a deer is equated with a man pursuing (and sometimes raping) a woman. This pattern recurs frequently in the folklore and literature of various countries. In Goethe's *Faust*, for example, Euphorion likens the girls with whom he sports to "light-footed deer," and himself to "the hunter" (part 2, act 3). Two other instances are the British ballad "The Three Ravens" and the German ballad "Der Nachtjäger," or "The Night Hunter." It may be helpful to quote here all of the first poem and part of the second (in my translation, with the last fourteen lines omitted, as not pertinent to the present discussion).

The Three Ravens

There were three rauens sat on a tree,
  Downe a downe, hay down, hay downe
There were three rauens sat on a tree,
  With a downe
There were three rauens sat on a tree,
They were as blacke as they might be.
  With a downe derrie, derrie, derrie, downe, downe

The one of them said to his mate,
"Where shall we our breakefast take?"

"Downe in yonder greene field,
There lies a knight slain vnder his shield.

"His hounds they lie downe at his feete,
So well they can their master keepe.

"His haukes they flie so eagerly,
There's no fowle dare him come nie."

Downe there comes a fallow doe,
As great with yong as she might goe.

She lift vp his bloudy hed,
And kist his wounds that were so red.

She got him vp vpon her backe,
And carried him to earthen lake.