

**CHINA KNOWLEDGE SERIES**

**A SHORT HISTORY OF  
CLASSICAL  
CHINESE LITERATURE**

**FENG YUAN-CHUN**

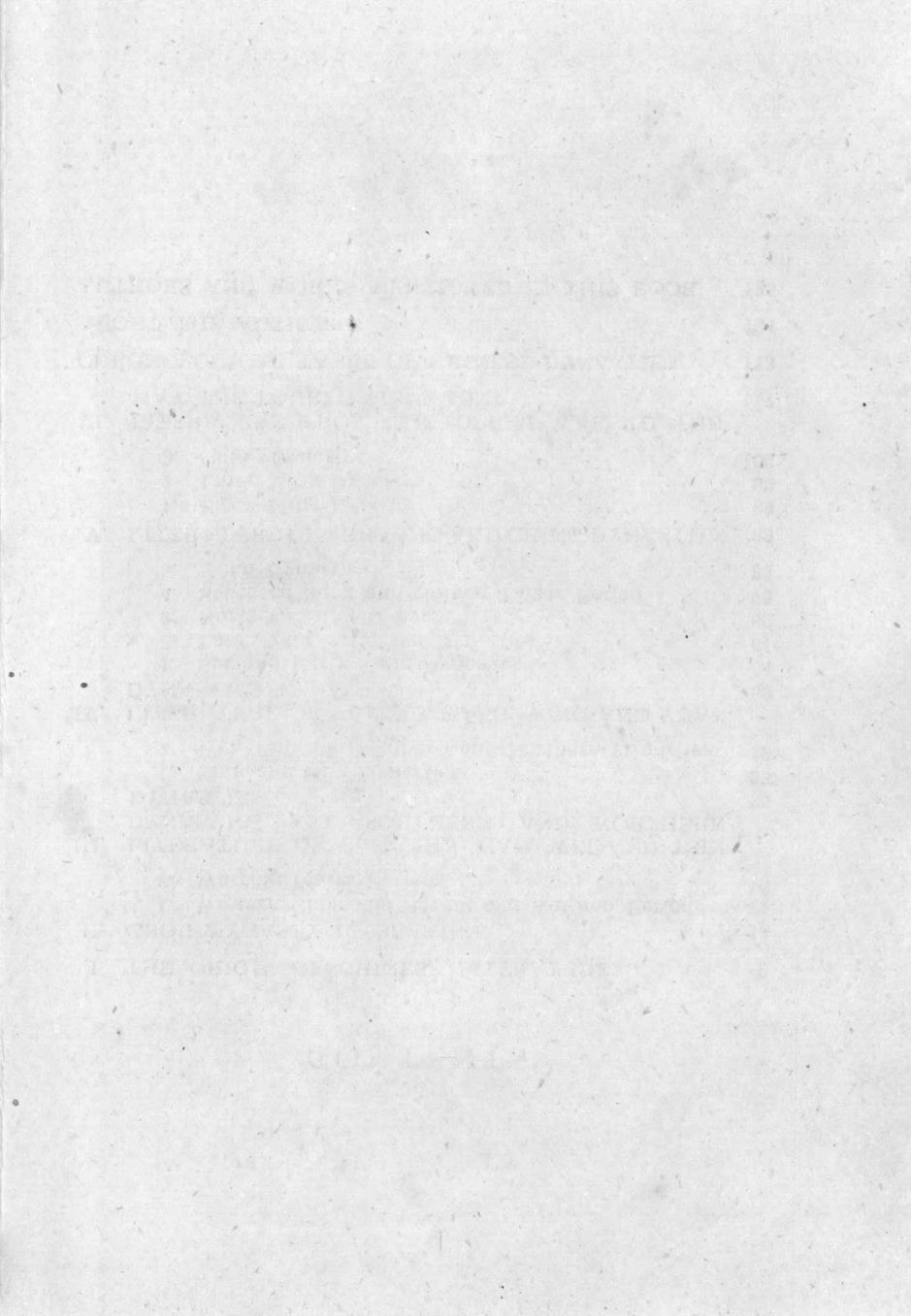
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## PUBLISHER'S NOTE

This short history deals with Chinese literature from the earliest days to the May the Fourth Movement of 1919, giving a brief introduction to classical Chinese literature and a general survey of the chief writers and their most important works. The development of Chinese literature since the May the Fourth Movement will be covered in a forthcoming publication, "A Short History of Modern Chinese Literature."

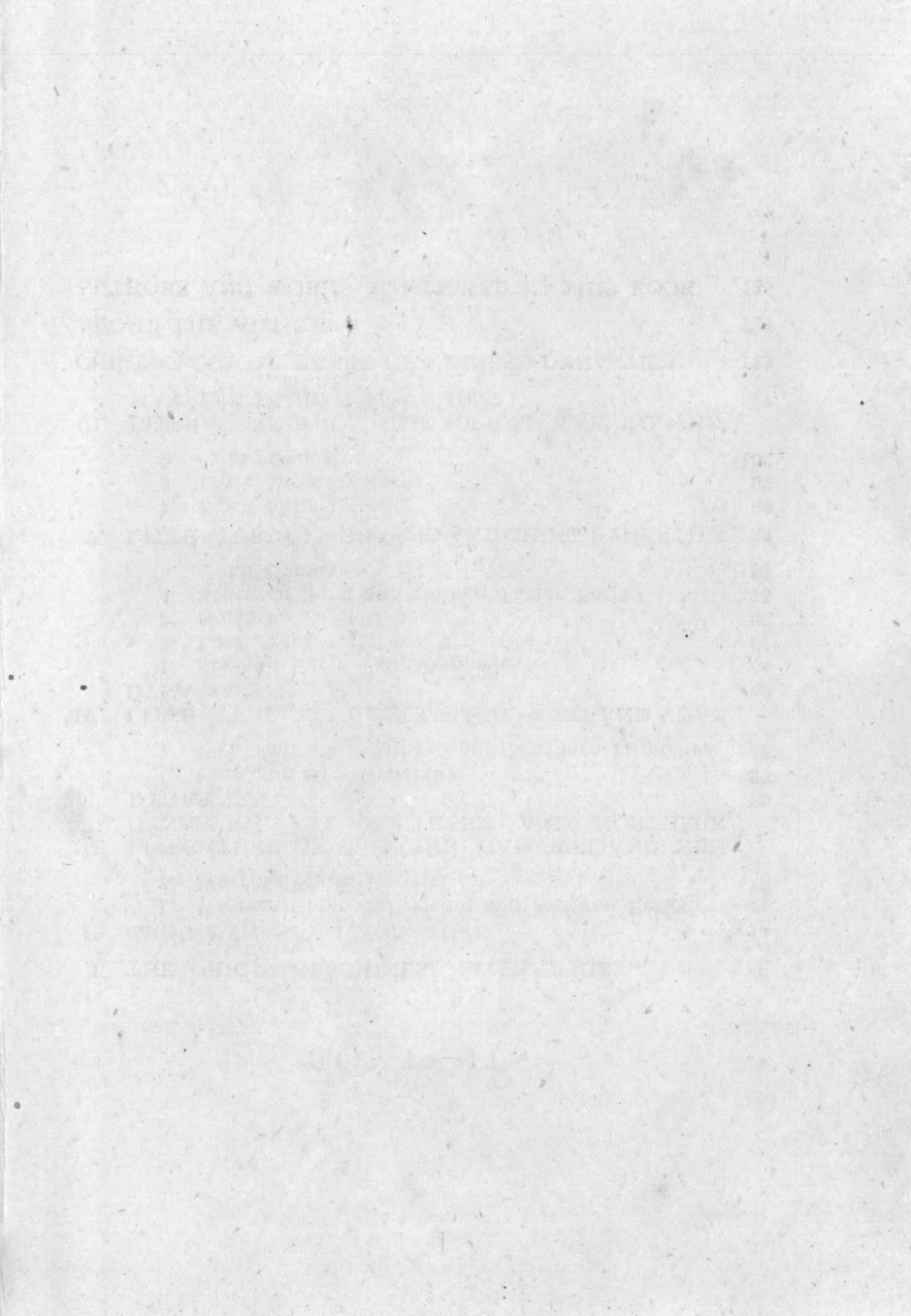
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## I. THE ORIGIN OF CHINESE LITERATURE

Literature is the form of art which reflects life through verbal images. An author in his writing inevitably reflects his view of life and the world around him; thus good writing encourages us to advance, while bad writing drags us back. Hence the social significance of literature.

China's long and glorious history boasts many writers who were pioneers in the realm of ideas, and many works which move readers deeply and have a profound educational significance. Some of these have won universal recognition. Indeed, the socialist realist literature of New China is growing out of this outstanding heritage.

It is both rewarding and necessary to look back on the history of this centuries-old literature, for this enables us to understand more clearly the achievements of past writers, the gradual development of China's literary tradition, and the extent to which it was influenced by the life and struggles of the times. This will also help us to see how for thousands of years the Chinese people have fought for a better life, and from the goodly heritage they have left their descendants are drawing sustenance to strengthen them in their work today.

All primitive literature grew out of labour. As Lu Hsun says:

The primitive men who were our ancestors had no language at the start, but to work together, they had

to exchange ideas, and so they gradually learned to make different sounds. If they did not know how to express their weariness when carrying logs, for instance, one of them might cry: "*Ho-yo! Ho-yo!*" and this was a kind of literary creation. If the others approved of it and took it up, the thing was "published." Once such sounds were recorded by means of symbols, you had literature; so the originator was a writer, a man of letters of the "*Ho-yo school*". . . . Even today we can find many folk-songs by illiterate poets and folk stories by illiterate novelists. These are all illiterate authors.

This points out that the earliest authors were the labouring people, who composed the first — unwritten — literature during the course of their work.

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, Kun, 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.

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As mankind advanced, a written language was invented. In China a distinctive ideographic script was developed, starting with pictographs or simplified drawings, such as 人 for man, 鸟 for bird, 月 for moon, or 山 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 left to us, some are genuine and some are spurious. In other words, we have records attributed to the time of the three sage emperors, or Hsia and Shang dynasties, which were actually written during or after the Chou dynasty, sometimes based on earlier materials. Our 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, husbandry 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 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 kuei-sze 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. CHOU DYNASTY LITERATURE

### 1. Western Chou and Spring and Autumn Period

By the eleventh century B.C., King Wu of Chou had destroyed the Shang dynasty and the slave-owning form of society was beginning to disintegrate. 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 Chou dynasty to the end of the third century B.C. when the First Emperor of Chin, also known as Chin Shih Huang Ti, united all China.

Let us first look at early Chou 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 Chou" 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 Chou 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.<sup>1</sup>*

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,*

---

<sup>1</sup> From *The Book of Songs*, translated by Arthur Waley.