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GOLDEN TREASURY
OF TANG AND SONG POETRY
唐宋诗一百五十首

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PREFACE

The Tang dynasty (618-906) and the Song dynasty (960-1279) were the Golden Age and the Silver Age of Chinese literature, not only of Chinese but also of world literature, for during the Dark Ages in the West, the Tang and the Song Empire attained the highest political, economic and cultural development not only in the East but also in the whole world. If the reader is interested in the greatest empires that had ruled over the greatest country in the world for more than six centuries, it would not be uninteresting to read Tang and Song poetry, which might reveal the secret of the highest and the longest-established civilization in world history. This secret may be summed up in two words, that is, rite and music. Music imitates the harmony of nature and rite imitates the order of the universe. Rite is instituted to secure the mean in man's desire and music (including poetry) the mean in man's sentiment. Rite and music in Confucius' system are even more important than gymnastics and music in Plato's system, for rite is to regulate man's mind, music to harmonize man's affection, government to promote their performance and law to guard against their violation. In comparison with rite and music, government and law are but secondary, for their main function is but to provide the conditions that make rite and music possible. That may be said to be the gist of Confucian philosophy of government, of which the reader can catch some glimpses in this Golden Treasury of Tang and Song poetry.

Emperor Xuan Zong (685-762) who reigned at the zenith of

the Golden Age enjoyed the highest economic and cultural prosperity when his government promoted the performance of rite and music. This can be seen from the first two verses written by himself while he offered sacrifice to Confucius in his temple;

*How much have you done, sage of sages,
All for the good for all the ages!*

Here we see he worshipped Confucius as the king of the Zhou dynasty (1122-255 B. C.) worshipped their ancestors. Just compare these two verses with the hymn written by King Cheng (reigned 1114-1076 B. C.) to his father King Wu (reigned 1122-1115 B. C.) in the Book of Poetry;

*Favored by Heaven, I
Succeed the Martial King.
I'll follow him as night
As summer follows spring.*

We can see the difference between King Cheng who followed his father in imitation of the harmony of nature, and Emperor Xuan Zong who followed Confucius in imitation of the order of the universe. Thus he had provided the conditions to make rite and music possible so that even his favorite Lady Yang followed the Confucian principles, which can be seen from the following quatrain she wrote on dancing;

*Silk sleeves are swaying ceaselessly with fragrance spread;
In autumn mist are floating lotus lilies red.
Light clouds over mountains high ripple with breezes cool;
Young willow shoots caress water of garden pool.*

We see here the dancer is compared to a red flower spreading its

fragrance ceaselessly, to a cloud rippling in the breeze and to a willow branch caressing the water surface. In other words, Lady Yang's poetry imitates the harmony of nature and harmonizes her sentiments so as to secure the mean in her affection. Her love for the emperor was described by Li Bo (701-762) as follows:

*The lady fair admires and is admired by the flower;
The sovereign would gaze on them from hour to hour.
Gratifying Spring Wind's insatiable desires,
She leans on balustrade north of the Fragrant Bower.*

Here we see the lady becomes one with the flower and the emperor with Spring Wind so that both the lovers are part of Nature. No wonder the love of nature became one of the prominent features of Tang poetry, and the best-known nature poets of the High Tang period were Meng Hao-ran (689-740) and Wang Wei (701-761). Read the following couplet by Meng:

*On boundless plain clouds hang atop the tree;
In water clear the moon seems near to me.*

It shows the communion of heaven with earth. Read the ottava rima written by Wang:

*Three Southern Rivers rolling by,
Nine tributaries meeting here,
Their water flows from earth to sky;
Hills now appear, now disappear.
Towns seem to float on rivershore,
With waves horizons rise and fall.
Such scenery as we adore
Would make us drink and drunken all.*

This poem shows the aspiration of earth for sky and the intoxication of man in nature. What is more, we may find the communion of man with nature in the following quatrain by Li Bo:

*All birds have flown away, so high;
A lonely cloud drifts on, so free.
Gazing on Mount Jingting, nor I
Am tired of him, nor he of me.*

This quatrain may be compared with the following verse in Byron's *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage* (Canto III, lxxv):

*Are not the mountains, waves, and skies, a part
Of me and of my soul, as I of them?
Is not the love of these deep in my heart
with a pure passion, . . . ?*

If the people all over the world love the beauty of nature as the poets do, won't they live peacefully together and do their best to outlaw war as a means of settling disputes? Here we see the important role music and poetry might play on the establishment of peace in the human world.

If the principles of rite and music were not followed, if the emperor did not imitate the harmony of nature and the order of the universe, if he did not adopt the mean in his desire and sentiment but let them go to excess, if his lust for territory as for beautiful women became insatiable as described by Li Bo, then the country would be thrown into disorder and good ministers would be dismissed from the court. For instance, Premier Zhang Jiu-ling (673-740) wrote the following quatrain after his dismissal:

Since my lord from me parted,

*I've left unused my loom.
The moon wanes, broken-hearted
To see my growing gloom.*

Here the prime minister compared himself to a housewife and the emperor to her lord who had deserted her. The rejected wife who did not use her loom still longed to regain her lord's favor as the waning moon longed to wax toward the full. But both the moon and the wife were disappointed and brokenhearted. Here again we see the harmony between man and nature, or unity of celestial harmony and conjugal harmony.

Out of disorder came war, which was condemned by many Tang poets. For example, their abhorrence of war can be read in the following verse:

*Don't laugh if we lay drunken on the battleground!
How many warriors ever came back safe and sound?*

The soldiers killed in battle won more sympathy than the general won admiration from the people, for instance,

*I pray you not to talk about the glories vain;
A victor's fame is built on bones of soldiers slain.*

Of all the Tang poets Du Fu (712-770) was the most sympathetic with the soldiers and the suffering people. We may read in his *Song of the Conscript*:

*Have you not seen
On borders green
Bleached bones since olden days unburied on the plain?
The old ghosts weep and cry, while the new ghosts complain;
The air is loud with screech and scream in gloomy rain.*