Chinese Dynastic Poetry

Introduction

Almost all the poems here were translated by Witter Bynner in *The Jade Mountain: A Chinese Anthology* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1929). Minor updates have been made to make them more understandable to a modern audience.

The *Three Hundred Tang Poems* were compiled by the Qing scholar Sun Zhu, also called *Hengtang Tuishi*, "Retired Master of Hengtang," and published in 1764. Sun was not happy with the poems in the anthology *Qianjiashi,* "A thousand master's poems" because he felt it lacked an educational spirit. His collection became so popular that it is contained in books that are found in almost every household even today. Sun's goal was to choose poems that would build the reader's character. Sun Zhu divided his anthology into six different styles: old style poems (*gushi*), regular poems (*lüshi*) and short poems (*jueju*), both with five and seven syllable verses. Poems in the style of the old Han Music Bureau (*yuefu*) were inserted between the sections.

Poems from the Tang Dynasty

* * *

Gao Shi (ca. 704–765) was a poet of the Tang Dynasty. His birthplace was either in modern Hunan Province or Shandong Province. Gao was born into a poor family, but eventually became a secretary in the military, where he had a successful career. Two of his poems were included in the anthology *Three Hundred Tang Poems*, including the following one.

A Song of the Yan Country

Gao Shi (高 適)

The northeastern border of China was dark with smoke and dust.
To repel the savage invaders, our generals, leaving their families,
Strode forth together, looking as heroes should look;
And having received from the Emperor his most gracious favor,
They marched to the beat of gong and drum through the Elm Pass.
They circled the Stone Tablet with a line of waving flags,
Till their captains over the Sea of Sand were twanging feathered orders.
The Tartar chieftain's hunting-fires glimmered along Wolf Mountain,

And heights and rivers were cold and bleak there at the outer border;
But soon the barbarians' horses were plunging through wind and rain.
Half of our men at the front were killed, but the other half are living,
And still at the camp beautiful girls dance for them and sing.
...As autumn ends in the grey sand, with the grasses all withered,
The few surviving watchers by the lonely wall at sunset,
Serving in a good cause, hold life and the foeman* lightly.
And yet, for all that they have done, Elm Pass is still unsafe.
Still at the front, iron armor is worn and battered thin,
And here at home chopsticks are made of jade tears.
Still in this southern city young wives' hearts are breaking,
While soldiers at the northern border vainly look toward home.
The fury of the wind cuts our men's advance
In a place of death and blue void, with nothingness ahead.
Three times a day a cloud of slaughter rises over the camp;
And all night long the hour-drums shake their chilly booming,
Until white swords can be seen again, spattered with red blood.
...When death becomes a duty, who stops to think of fame?
Yet in speaking of the rigors of warfare on the desert
We name to this day Li, the great General, who lived long ago.

**foeman: enemy, foe*

* * *

Du Fu (712 – 770) was an important Tang Dynasty poet. Along with Li Bai, he is often considered the greatest of the Chinese poets. His goal was to serve his country as a civil servant, but was unable to achieve this ideal. Chinese life was devastated by the An Lushan Rebellion of 755, and the last fifteen years of his life were a time of near-constant turmoil.

Although initially he was not well known, his writing became influential in both Chinese and Japanese literary culture. Nearly fifteen hundred of his poems have been preserved. He has been called the "Poet-Historian" and the "Poet-Sage" by Chinese critics, while his work has allowed him to be introduced to non-Chinese readers as "the

Chinese Virgil, Ovid, Shakespeare," etc.

Alone in Her Beauty

Du Fu [杜 甫]

Who is lovelier than she?
Yet she lives alone in an empty valley.
She tells me she came from a good family
Which is humbled now into the dust.
...When trouble arose in the Kuan district,
Her brothers and close kin were killed.
What use were their high offices,
Not even shielding their own lives? –
The world has but scorn for adversity;
Hope goes out, like the light of a candle.
Her husband, with a vagrant heart,
Seeks a new face like a new piece of jade;
And when morning-glories furl at night
And mandarin-ducks lie side by side,
All he can see is the smile of the new love,
While the old love weeps unheard.
The brook was pure in its mountain source,
But away from the mountain its waters darken.
...Waiting for her maid to come from selling pearls
For straw to cover the roof again,
She picks a few flowers, no longer for her hair,
And lets pine-needles fall through her fingers,
And, forgetting her thin silk sleeve and the cold,
She leans in the sunset by a tall bamboo.

* * *

Li Bai (701–762) was a Chinese poet who took traditional poetic forms to new heights. He and his friend Du Fu were the two most important figures in the growth of Chinese poetry during

the Tang dynasty, which is often called the Golden Age of Chinese Poetry.

Around a thousand poems attributed to Li can be read today. Thirty-four of his poems are included in the anthology *Three Hundred Tang Poems*. In the 18th century, translations of his poems began to appear in Europe. His poems are models for celebrating the pleasures of friendship, the beauty and complexity of nature, solitude, and the joys of drinking wine.

The Hard Road

Li Bai [李 白]

Pure wine costs, for the golden cup, ten thousand coppers a flagon,
And a jade plate of dainty food calls for a million coins.
I fling aside my chopsticks and cup, I cannot eat nor drink....
I pull out my dagger, I peer four ways in vain.
I would cross the Yellow River, but ice chokes the ferry;
I would climb the Taihang Mountains, but the sky is blind with snow....
I would sit and poise a fishing-pole, lazy by a brook –
But I suddenly dream of riding a boat, sailing for the sun....
Journeying is hard,
Journeying is hard.
There are many turns –
Which am I to follow?....
I will mount a long wind some day and break the heavy waves
And set my cloudy sail straight and bridge the deep, deep sea.

* * *

Han Yu (768 – 824) was a Chinese writer, poet, and government official of the Tang Dynasty. He is often described as being as important as Dante, Shakespeare or Goethe for his influence on the Chinese literary tradition.

He is considered by many to be among China's finest prose writers, but he also wrote poetry. According to *A History of Chinese Literature* by Herbert Giles, Han Yu "wrote a large quantity of verse, frequently playful, on an immense variety of subjects, and under his touch the commonplace was often transmuted into wit. Among other pieces there is one on his teeth, which seemed to drop out at regular intervals, so that he could calculate roughly what span of life

remained to him. Altogether, his poetry cannot be classed with that of the highest order, unlike his prose writings."

Mountain-stones

Han Yu [韓 愈]

Rough were the mountain-stones, and the path very narrow;
And when I reached the temple, bats were in the dusk.
I climbed to the hall, sat on the steps, and drank the rain- washed air
Among the round gardenia pods and huge banana leaves.
On the old wall, said the priest, were Buddhas finely painted,
And he brought a light and showed me, and I called them wonderful
He spread the bed, dusted the mats, and made my supper ready,
And, though the food was coarse, it satisfied my hunger.
At midnight, while I lay there not hearing even an insect,
The mountain moon with her pure light entered my door....
At dawn I left the mountain and, alone, lost my way:
In and out, up and down, while a heavy mist
Made brook and mountain green and purple, brightening everything.
I am passing sometimes pines and oaks, which ten men could not surround,
I am treading pebbles barefoot in swift-running water –
Its ripples purify my ear, while a soft wind blows my garments....
These are the things which, in themselves, make life happy.
Why should we be hemmed about and hampered with people?
O chosen pupils, far behind me in my own country,
What if I spent my old age here and never went back home?

* * *

Poems from the Six Dynasties

Ch'u Yuan was a minister to the feudal Prince of Ch'u towards the close of the Chou dynasty. His master was captured by the Ch'in State, and Ch'u Yuan fell into disfavor with his sons. He retired to the hills, where he wrote his famous "Li Sao", of which the following is one

of the songs. He drowned himself in the Mi-Lo river; his body was never found. The Dragon-boat Festival, held on the fifth day of the fifth moon, was created in his honor.

The Soldier

Ch'u Yuan

I climbed the barren mountain,
And my gaze swept far and wide
For the red-lit eaves of my father's home,
And I fancied that he sighed:

My son has gone for a soldier,
For a soldier night and day;
But my son is wise, and may yet return,
When the drums have died away.

I climbed the grass-clad mountain,
And my gaze swept far and wide
For the rosy lights of a little room,
Where I thought my mother sighed:

My boy has gone for a soldier,
He sleeps not day and night;
But my boy is wise, and may yet return,
Though the dead lie far from sight.

I climbed the topmost summit,
And my gaze swept far and wide
For the garden roof where my brother stood,
And I fancied that he sighed:

My brother serves as a soldier
With his comrades night and day;
But my brother is wise, and may yet return,

Though the dead lie far away.

* * *

Tao Qian is considered one of the greatest Chinese poets. He wrote simple, direct, and elegant "farmstead" poetry. Farmstead poetry normally focuses on the idyllic aspects of farm life: leisure time, peace, and freedom.

Tao was from a minor elite family, which had lost most of its wealth and position by the time Tao was born. He took his first position in his late twenties and retired more than twelve years later. It is believed that he was disillusioned by the political turmoil of his times and the constraints of official life. After retiring from his final post in the year 405, Tao spent the rest of his life as a reclusive farmer. This life, however, was not one of deprivation or loneliness. He was known to love wine, and while would drink alone, he also liked socializing with local officials and others.

Returning to Live on the Farm, No. 1

Tao Qian [陶潜]

Since youth out of tune with the vulgar world,
My nature instinctively loves hills and mountains.
By mishap I fell into the dusty net,
Once gone, thirteen years went by.
The caged bird longs for its grove of old,
The pond's fish thinks of its former depths.
Clearing land at the edge of the southern wilds,
Guarding simplicity, I returned to my farm.
The homestead amounts to ten-odd *mou**,
With a thatched hut of eight or nine bays.
Elms and willows shade the rear eaves,
Peach and plum line up in front of the hall.
In a haze lie the distant villages,
Indistinct is the smoke above the houses.
A dog barks somewhere in the deep alley,

A cock crows from atop the mulberry tree.
My home is unsoiled by worldly dust,
Within empty rooms I have peace to spare.
For long I have lived within a cage,
And now I may return to nature.

**mou = a unit of measure*

* * *

Xie Lingyun was an important member of an aristocratic clan of the Six Dynasties. He led a life of great privilege and leisure. His biography describes him as an extreme and temperamental in his behavior. He was not able to fulfill his political ambitions, and was exiled in the prime of his life. Xie then turned to art and nature, following a spiritual journey towards enlightenment. Xie is known as an originator of Chinese landscape poetry.

What I Observed as I Crossed the Lake on My Way from Southern Mountain to Northern Mountain

Xie Lingyun [謝靈運]

At daybreak I set out from the southern cliffs,
At sunset I rest at the northern peak.
Leaving my boat, I gaze at the distant isles,
Stopping my staff, I lean against a flourishing pine.
The side paths are dark and secluded,
While the circular island is gleaming bright.
I look down, spying the tips of towering trees,
And look up, hearing the roars of the grand ravines.
Over the crosswise rocks, the water parts its flow;
The woods are so dense paths end their traces.
"Releasing" and making bring about what ends?
"Climbing" and growing manifest richly everywhere.
First bamboo shoots, enwrapped by green shells,
New rushes, held in purple buds.

Seagulls sport on the vernal shores,
Golden pheasants play with the gentle wind.
Embracing change, my heart never tires,
Observing these things, I cherish them even more.
I do not regret that I am far from the ancients,
I only lament that there is no one to join me.
Wandering alone, I sigh not out of personal sentiments,
Rather if appreciation is abandoned, who else will understand
Nature's principles?

* * *

Xie Tiao (464–499) was born in Yangjia, now in Henan province. He was one of the foremost Chinese poets of the Southern and Northern Dynasties. He was known as "Xiao Xie" (that is, "Little Xie") compared with Xie Lingyun.

Xie was born into a noble family. His father, Xie Wei, was a *shilang* (assistant minister) and his mother was princess of the Songwen Empire.

Xie wrote nearly two hundred poems. Most of them are about the beauty of nature, and they are famous for their details and vivid descriptions. Xie Tiao wrote a lot of poems that focus mountains and streams.

An Outing to the Eastern Field

Xie Tiao [谢朓]

Despondent, suffering from lack of cheer,
We go out for pleasure, hand in hand.
Seeking clouds, we ascend a tiered kiosk;
Following the hills, we gaze at the mushroom-like pavilions.
Distant trees are hazy in their luxuriance;
A mist rises, spreading in billows.
Where fish sport, new lotuses stir;
As birds scatter, remaining flowers fall.
If not facing the fragrant spring ale,
We shall gaze at villages in the blue hills instead.

* * *

Xiao Gang was known also as Emperor Jianwen. Because of political problems, he was put under house arrest. During the house arrest period, he wrote several hundred poems—and because he was not given paper to write on, he wrote the poems on the walls and screens of his home.

His poetry focuses on the idea of transience. This is a Buddhist theme, but it is also a universal one. Transience does not mean that Xiao Gang was always writing about the shortness of human life; it means that he was concerned with "moments." He was fascinated by shadows and wrote about shadows often in his poetry.

Autumn Evening

Xiao Gang [蕭綱]

Drifting clouds emerge from the eastern peaks;
In the west the sun descends to the river.
Hastening shadows stretch across and darken the walls;
Lengthened rays obliquely penetrate the window.
Tangled clouds, glowing red, are made circular by the clear water;
Tiny leaves outlined by a lamp in the air.