

Chinese Poems in Context

EXCURSIONS IN POETRY

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Chinese Poems in Context
Glimpses of a Virtuoso Tradition

E Bruce Brooks

A Taeko Brooks



Warring States Project
University of Massachusetts at Amherst

2023

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ISBN 978-1-936166-37-4 *cloth*, 77-0 *paper*, 97-8 *E-book*

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The cover illustration is a detail from a 1716 painting by Shǔn Nán-pín 沈南蘋 (1682-1760), a Chīng Dynasty painter who was popular in Japan following a 1731-1733 visit to Nagasaki; courtesy Hashimoto Collection. Illustrations in the book include Hàn tomb rubbings, anonymous sketches, and the calligraphy of the poets themselves.

PRINTED IN THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA

For

Hellmut Wilhelm

10 December 1905 (Tsingtao) – 5 June 1990 (Seattle)

Preface

It was a typical morning in the Chinese class. Teacher was explaining how the background, the personal sensibility, of these poets was different from ours, how we needed to feel ourselves into their world in order to understand what they wrote; how names like Caesar and Cleopatra were replaced by others, and how, when those poets looked up at the sky, they saw different constellations. One student, in a corner of the room, was taking this in with an air of intensity. He said later that it “blew his mind.”

Well it might. It was supposed to.

Chinese poetry lives in its own world; a world made up of persons and events of its own past. A Chinese past. The poems and prose pieces in this book are designed to populate the mental world of the reader with specimens of this background: with tragic heroes (Syàng Yǔ) or heroines (Green Pearl), with dynastic founders (Tsáu Tsāu, Lǐ Shī-mín), and with master spirits both elusive (Táu Chyēn) and exuberant (Lǐ Bwó), which the poets and their readers knew. If someone tires of hearing about Wáng Jāu-jyǔn, we can only reply that the tradition does not; that she represents the tragedy of all neglected talent and the shame of any foreign domination, just as concubine Green Pearl is an emblem of duty and ultimate devotion, whether female or male.

The world of the Chinese poem is also made up of earlier Chinese poems. This is a virtuoso tradition, both aware of itself and varying its previous selves. To appreciate poem C, it thus helps to have read the earlier poems A and B. This book seeks to provide a sense of what it is like to read a poem that way.

It also seeks to show how the poems themselves work: what they sound like, how they are arranged to make a certain literary effect. Chinese word tone cannot be brought into English without undue ingenuity, but features with available counterparts, such as rhyme, meter, and parallelism, *are* preserved. This much, it seems to us, readers have a right to expect.

The resulting translations might not get by a modern editor, in this age of the postformal poem. But our question is this: If we start by lying about *poems*, where shall we stop? Carl Sandburg, in the preface to his book *Wind Song*, justifies his nonuse of rhyme and meter by the example of the Chinese poets who would here be spelled Lǐ Bwó and Dù Fǔ. Sandburg may have been misled by some translations he had read, but whose prefaces he had skipped, about the kind of poems Lǐ Bwó and Dù Fǔ actually wrote.

The reason a modern Western reader picks up a book of Chinese poems, one imagines, is to get something a bit different. In this book, the differentness of the Chinese poems which it includes has been, as far as possible, respected.

Otherwise, why bother?

This book is not a History of Chinese Poetry; that would be much larger. It must be short enough not to weary its readers, and yet include enough examples to fulfil its purpose. The result is a collection of mostly short poems (the long rhapsody fù 賦, the typical court poem of Hàn, is absent), in which, by intention, certain standard themes and situations will continually reappear: the soldier on campaign, the hermit, the lonely wife, the amorous courtesan. The treatment of Shǔn Ywē and his circle, Bwó Jyw-yì and his friends, or the unsuccessful career of Dù Sywǎn-hv̄, may suggest what this book would be like, if it did better justice to the poets it does include.

The earliest Chinese poems are those in the classic Shī 詩 court repertoire. Fù rhapsodies and popular lyrics (ywèfǔ 閨府) typify the unified Hàn. Poetry gained in technique (with input from popular traditions) in the Six Dynasties. Táng was the acme of the shī 詩, the poem with the same number of syllables in each line. The polymetric verse (tsǔ 詞) became popular in Sùng. The aria (chyǔ 曲) was the mainstay of Ywǎn (Mongol period) opera, with its origins in the performance tradition the non-Chinese steppe peoples. There were no major formal innovations after that, which is why this book concludes there. That and a certain sense of, well, attenuation in the last Ywǎn poems.

To make Chinese names less opaque for readers with English alphabetic reflexes, we spell them by the old rule “consonants as in English, vowels as in Italian,” plus *æ* as in at, *v* as in up, *r* as in fir, and *dz* as in adz; *w* is “umlaut u.” Diacritics represent tone contours: hīgh, rising, lōw, fālling. Texts are given in italics (*Analects*); tune names and fictive persons in quotes (“Hán-shān”).

Headnotes provide basic personal background and literary connections. In dates, *c* is for “circa,” the *most likely* year; “*xm*” is the date someone passed the highest civil-service examination. Dates “AD” are given as the number; “BC” ones with a prefixed zero; thus 0221 = 221 BC; 317 = 317 AD.

Metrical formulas are provided when needed. The heptameter quatrain, with seven syllables in a line, would be 7777. In the 77737 variant, the short line creates a pause, a tiny hesitation, before the end. Extrametrical syllables preceding the counted ones are indicated by superscripts, for example ³3³7755 (Lǐ Bwó, p173). For an effective use of these incipits, see Lǐ Chīng-jàu (p338). This device keeps the meter in sight, but overflows it for expressive purposes.

We owe much to fellow students; to our guiding spirit Hellmut Wilhelm (to whom this book is affectionately dedicated); to our own students in later years, who may be amused to see sections of their old textbook in these pages; and to criticisms from many friends in still later years. Now that these efforts have become a book, we hope that readers will find something to interest them, and that the poets it includes may find new friends in the new century.

E Bruce Brooks
A Taeko Brooks

5 June 2023

Contents

Preface, 7

The Classical Period

The Analects, 13

The Shī, 13

Dàoist Texts, 35

Chǔ and Hàn

Chǔ, 43

Hàn, 51

Six Dynasties

Ngwèi (220-264), 63

Jīn (265-419), 89

Sūng 420-478), 85

Chí (479-501), 92

Lyáng (502-556), 107

Ch'v́n (557-588), 126

Swéi (589-618), 130

Táng (618-906)

Early (Lǐ Shì-mín – Wáng Hàn), 135

High (Wáng Wéi – Dài Shú-lún), 157

Mid (Shī-d'v́ – Lǐ H'v́), 185

Late (Bwó Jy'w-yì – Y'w Syw'æn-jī), 212

Five Dynasties (Dù Sy'w'n-h'v́ – Lǐ Y'w), 262

S'v́ng (960-1279)

Northern (Lín Bū - Lǐ Chīng-j'v́u), 287

Southern (Jū D'v́n-rú - Jyāng Kwéi), 332

Yw'æn (1280-1332)

Early (Lǐ Tsw'èi-ngó - Gwān Hàn-chīng), 343

Late (Mǎ Jī-yw'ǎæn - Y'w Jí), 358

End Matter

For Further Reading, 377

Chinese Romanization Table, 378

Index to Poets, 382