

*Old Lyric+

South of the Wall They Fought

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*The wars of Hàn produced their own poetry. This polymetric piece reflects the hardships of the soldiers. It owes much to the *Nine Songs+ memorial (p64) with its alternation between an invocator and the spirits of the dead. In this poem, we have a cry from unburied corpses, the scene after the battle, ghosts searching for their homes, and a final exorcism.*

Lines with an odd number of syllables have a caesura 3 syllables before the end, and a breathing space at the end. In Chũ and other early poetry (p51, p60), this internal caesura is marked by “ah” In the 7-syllable lines in this poem, the caesura is unmarked and implicit. Both are prosodically 3 + 1 + 3 + 1, and occupy the same performance time, but now the heptameter line is independent of the former “ah.” We have seen independent pentameter lines above, on p72-73. The meters of Hàn poetry, including a dramatic use of trimeter, now exist.

South of the wall they fought,
 North of the town they died:
 They died in the wilds, they have no graves;
 crows flock from every side.

“Give the crows this word for us:
 Stalwart men were we, and true,
 We died in the wilds, and needs must have no graves,
 How should our rotting flesh contrive
 to get away from you?”

The river’s sound goes roaring past,
 The rushes stand in dense array;
 In the thick of battle, valiant riders died;
 Aimlessly pacing, haggard horses neigh.

“My house beside the stream –
 North a couple rods??
 South a hundred feet??
 The millet crop we have not cut:
 what shall our ruler eat?
 Our duties we would all fulfil
 but leave them incomplete.”

*We grieve for you, O loyal men,
 For loyal men ‘tis meet and right to grieve:
 You left for mighty deeds at morn,
 But came ne’er back to rest at eve.*

“At Fifteen Years, I Left With the Campaign”

The wars of Hàn were constant. Some were clashes between rebellious regions and the central government, others pushed into the northern steppe, in part to establish and maintain commercial contact with the West. Campaigns could go on for years, and in this piece the sacrifice of the soldiers who fought them – even when they survived to return home – is dramatically emphasized. Our soldier returns, like a living version of the wandering ghosts at left, encountering on the way a fellow who, with awkward sympathy, evades his question about the folks he had left behind. On arrival, he finds that his own family are now ghosts: everything is either dead, or abandoned, or reverted to wilderness.

He makes food from the weeds, and finds that he has no one to whom he could offer it; his duty to his parents can no longer be fulfilled. Everything that might make the homecoming meaningful is gone.

From the polymeter of the first of our Hàn poems, we have slipped into straight pentameter, which at this point begins to replace the tetrameter which had been standard since the time of the Shī. This piece is also organized in quatrains. Thus do later Chinese prosodic preferences crystallize out of earlier practice.

At fifteen years, I left with the campaign,
 At eighty years, my leave at last is due:
 Going home, I meet a villager:
 “Who’s still living, of the ones I knew?”
 “Way off yonder is milord’s abode” –
 The grave mound pines reach high into the blue.
 In the dog-hole runs a startled hare,
 On the rafter nests a grouse or two;
 Creeping tares have covered all the yard,
 Creeping mallow hides the well from view;
 A meal of tare I set about to make,
 A broth of mallow I begin to brew:
 Meal and broth are finished soon enough,
 But there’s no one that I could give them to –
 I go outside, and gaze into the east:
 With falling tears, my clothes are moistened through



*Nineteen Old Poems+

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Here is one of the more assertive of the “Nineteen.” The banquet entertainers at left, one performing a sword dance, are from a Hàn tomb engraving. There is vigor in the poem too, and it ends with a moral: one should enjoy one’s pleasures, but, like Chyn Shv` (p62), also try to accomplish something while there is still time.

The poem is in seven couplets; other “old” poems have five or eight couplets. There is no principle of form here, other than organization in couplets. The poem simply goes on, thought by thought, until it has reached its end, and then it stops. This is more or less what is meant by “old style.”

Today a splendid banquet there is held,
 Its pleasures far too many to portray:
 The fingered cithern stirs a resonance,
 Its fresh new sounds divinely interplay
 The artists sing of aspiration high,
 The hearers grasp the point of what they say;
 Alike their hearts, that hold a single wish,
 But what it is, they none of them betray:
 Human life is set within its term,
 Like dust upon the wind, it blows away;
 How can one but whip his horses up,
 And strive to lead, upon life’s onward way? –
 Not stay behind, in poverty and gloom,
 Bewailing one’s misfortunes day by day!

Anonymous

Long-Song Ballad

The Chín suppression of Confucian texts was repealed in early Hàn, and experts in the various Confucian texts were sought out and installed at court, beginning in the reign of Emperor Wǎn (0179-0155). Confucianism was officially recognized as the qualification for state office in the early years of Emperor Wǔ. The state structure, the career structure, was in place. The career opportunities thus created led to an age of optimism and energy, which this poem expresses. There is a push to make something of oneself, whether militarily or otherwise.

What is “long” about this ballad is that it is in a single rhyme-sound (for change of rhyme within a poem, see p70 and p74). In just a moment we will meet a “Short Song Ballad” by Tsáu Tsāu (p93). A later poet might have omitted the final moral; its presence adds a certain antique quality. “Blazing yellow” is the sun of autumn, which began with warm weather at the end of the dormant spell, six weeks after summer solstice. The eastward flow of Chinese rivers is proverbial. And no less than the river, time never returns, and life is only now.

Garden sunflowers all in green arrayed,
 Morning dewdrops in the dwindling shade;
 The warmth of springtime spreads its virtue forth:
 On every hand its luster is displayed.
 But always one must fear the autumn time:
 In blazing yellow, flower and leaf will fade.
 The hundred streams run eastward to the sea:
 When will they flow back in retrograde?
 If Youth does not exert its energy,
 In vain will Age be bitterly dismayed.