

Tsáu Tsāu (155-220)

Short-Song Ballad

Tsáu Tsāu, with his epic defeat at the naval battle of Red Cliff, and the Ngwèi dynasty he founded, is a hero for the ages. This “Short-Song Ballad” (see p92) is built not of couplets, but of quatrains, each in a different rhyme. It includes a whole stanza from a Shī banquet poem (p33) and allusions popular (Dù Kāng the winemaker) and learned (Jōu-gūng hastening to greet a worthy guest). We here see a great spirit struggling to find a poetically adequate way to express itself.

With his wine, a man should sing:
 Human life, uncertain thing,
 Even as the morning dew,
 Its passing fraught with suffering
 The anguish with the sorrow goes,
 Hard to banish inner woes;
 What can take away the pain?
 Dù Kāng is the one who knows.
 Green so green my master’s sleeve,
 Sad so sad my heart doth grieve;
 It is only for your sake
 That ever to my chant I cleave.
 “Yōu” and “yōu” the deer do cry
 Feeding on wisps of meadow rye
 I have got auspicious guests –
 Syrinx and psaltery do ply:
 “The moon is shining bright as day,
 It cannot be made to stay;
 Sorrow cometh from within,
 It cannot be cut away”
 Down the paths the guests have strolled,
 Vain to huddle in the fold;
 Met from afar, they talk and feast,
 Remembering favors done of old.
 The moon aglow unstars the sky,
 Southward doth the raven fly,
 Thrice he circles round the tree -
 On what branch can he rely?
 Hills tire not of lofty height,
 Seas tire not of vasty deep;
 The Prince of Jōu spat out his food –
 The people’s hearts were his to keep.

Tsáu Pī (187-226)

Occasional Poem

Tsáu Pī, the second son of Tsáu Tsāu, became his heir, and the first emperor of the fully independent Ngwèi dynasty. He was concerned for literary as well as political matters, and in his influential essay “On Literature” identified as major figures the “Seven Masters of Jyèn-ān” (the reign period 196-220). He suffers with posterity because of his brother Tsáu Jí, a better poet of whom Pī was jealous, and whose dynastic aspirations he feared, But in his own right, Pī has his points.

*This piece reflects the cares of those who strive for power, for dominion, for such immortality as the political process provides. Like his father, Pī is a student of earlier poetry: the ninth line of this piece occurs almost identically in one of the *Old Poems+ (and for that matter, it also occurs in one of his brother Jí’s poems). The last line presumably expresses concern for the rivalry of his brother.*

North and west are full of drifting clouds,
 Level and high, like carriage-canopies;
 Alas, indeed; the times are all contrary,
 Violent whirlwinds are the only breeze:
 They blow me on a journey south and west,
 South to Wú and Gwèi Commanderies.
 Wú and Gwèi are not my native land,
 How could I stay in places such as these?
 Put it by, nor speak of it again –
 The wanderer goes in fear of other men.

Kǔng Yúng (153-208)

Last Poem

(208)

Ten-year-old Kǔng Yúng, widely read and quick of tongue, was being admired at a party. Chǔn Wéi disapproved: "Being clever when young doesn't mean you'll amount to anything when grown." Replied Yúng, "I imagine Milord must have been clever when young." Talent has its dangers at all ages: in 208, at the height of Tsáu Tsāu's rivalry with Sūn Chywén (ending in Tsáu's defeat at the great naval battle at Red Cliff, and the ruin of his wider dynastic ambitions), Yúng made a witty remark to Sūn's envoy, and Tsáu put Yúng and his family to death. Thus perished one branch of Confucius' descendants: one of the Jyèn-ān Masters who did not live to see the officially proclaimed Ngwèi Dynasty.

Yúng's farewell lament is not for himself - he is well rid of the mess -but for everything that is continually going wrong, in a world run by people who were not clever when young, and stayed that way. The poem, like that of Tsáu Tsāu (p93), is almost a litany of standard sayings or similes (for "lacquer and size," see p80). The tiger in the square is the kind of rumor you doubt on first hearing, hesitate about if a second person confirms it, but then believe on receiving a third report. Lies succeed, in this world; trust fails. Death at least puts an end to it.

When words abound, the matter goes awry,
 When vessels leak, concealment is there none:
 The anthole leads the river through the dike,
 From monkeys' caves are mountainslides begun
 The Jyāng and Hàn go bubbling on their way,
 And Heaven opens on Oblivion;
 Lying slanders harm the public weal,
 Drifting clouds obscure the brilliant sun
 There is no faithfulness in flattery,
 Nor substance in the honors man has won.
 Men have double, even triple, hearts,
 Who could ever join them into one?
 Three men create a tiger in the square,
 Lacquer and size dissolve their unison;
 While life remains, we've much to fret about –
 In endless sleep shall all our cares be done.

Tsáu Jí (192-232)

Fighting Cocks

Tsáu Jí, the son and brother of emperors but never an emperor himself, was at any rate the finest poet of his generation. He was famous in later ages for the parties he hosted; this piece presents him instead as a guest. This cockfight is surely one of the best-documented in all literature: Lyóu Jǎn and Yìng Chàng, two of the Seven Jyèn-ān Masters, were also present, and their poems are preserved. This poem has one rhyme. It concludes with a quote, not a flashback, as on p25, but simply a final moment of sudden immediacy.

Fox-grease, according to a lost Jwāngdǐ passage, was smeared by owners on their worthless fighting cocks, the smell of the predator terrifying the opponent, and so leading their worthless cock to an unbroken string of victories.

Listless eyes are tired of dancing girls,
 Languid ears are bored with melody;
 The host just sits, with nothing going on,
 The guests drift off in search of revelry.
 On mats in rows the players are arranged,
 The fighting cocks regard them haughtily;
 Now the valiant ones are at the mark,
 Now the pairs of wings come flashing free
 Whirring feathers stir up gusts of wind,
 Narrowed eye-slits glitter crimsonly;
 The beaks descend, the downy feathers fly,
 The fearful spurs tear in repeatedly
 A long-drawn cry goes echoing above,
 Flailing pinions rise triumphantly –
 “With a little fox-grease helping out,
 We’d be always sure of victory.”

Seeing Off Ying Chàng

(c211)

Tsáu Jí here returns to Lwò-yáng after its destruction in the wars of the time, and sees off his friend and fellow poet who is departing for the north. Běi-máng, outside the city, was the site of the tombs of the mighty; from its height, the poet's gaze reaches in widening circles from the city below to the fields around and to the open country beyond, in which "smokes of men" are signs hearthfires, and thus of human habitation. These gloomy surroundings set a tone of broken continuity; in the second poem of the set (not given) Jí laments the friendship which is about to be interrupted by the parting. As in Tsáu Tsāu's drinking-song (p93), the focus changes during the course of the piece; here, between the outer ruin and the poet's disorientation. Later poetry preferred linear development, but double development has its own kind of force: the geographical and human costs of empire-building jostle each other, as it were, for precedence.

1

I climb on foot into the Běi-máng height,
 Afar, the Lwò-yáng mountains I descry:
 How silent and deserted Lwò-yáng is,
 Its palaces burned down in years gone by
 Walls and fences lie about in ruins,
 Thorns and brambles reach into the sky;
 The elders of before I do not see,
 The youths of now are all whom I espy
 My foot can find no road on which to tread,
 No plough has turned these plots that vacant lie.
 The wanderer for long has not returned,
 The grid of paths means nothing to his eye.
 How desolate are all the plains beyond:
 For a thousand leagues, no smokes of men rise high;
 Remembering the place where once I dwelt,
 My breath is stopped; to speak I cannot try.

Tsáu Jí (192-232)

Ascending To The Heavens

This piece is classed in Jí's collection as a lyric, perhaps invoking the Old Lyrics of Hàn (see the military ones on p86-87), but here on a more exalted theme. It is the standard escape-poem of this period: the wish (often, as here, described as fulfilled) to leave the earth and roam in some higher realm, free of pain and death. The traditional guarantors of such an escape were immortals, masters in the art of levitation (they are often represented as riding on cranes), and of alchemy. It need not necessarily be inferred that the authors of such poems themselves believably cultivated alchemy and other arts; the language is conventional.

The poet, here guided by an adept, reaches the fabled mountain of P'ýng-lái (first couplet), describes its setting (second) and inhabitants (third), and ascends to join the Immortals in the heavens (last couplet). Nothing could be simpler. Except that the poet only "seems" to behold the Immortals arrayed before him. The poem is after all only a vision.

Its eight lines are in four couplets, with close parallelism in the middle two. This (in pentameter as here, or heptameter) becomes the standard Chinese poem. The emergent new style is finding its voice.

On magic sandals I follow the master's steps
 Til far-off P'ýng-lái Mountain I espy:
 Uncanny oceans break in waves of white,
 Orchid and cassia reach into the sky;
 Shadowy panthers round its foot go prowling,
 Soaring cranes above it wheel and fly –
 Upon the wind I'm suddenly wafted up,
 And many Immortals seem to meet my eye.