

Lǐ Shǐ-mín (597-649)

On Passing By His Former Residence

(c627)

Whatever family struggles lay behind him, it is as the founder of Táng that Shǐ-mín here visits his old home, obliquely named (lines 1-2) as the birthplaces of the dynastic founders Lyóu Bāng of Hàn (p68) and Tsáu Tsāu of Ngwèi. (p68). Line 3 shifts to the historic present, and lines 5-6 see the past as both vanished (dried water) and vital (flowering tree). This develops the in-and-out couplet which is nascent in Hý Sywǎn (p156) and realized in Yǔ Syǐn (p174), and will reach perfection in one more generation, with Wáng Wān (p195) and Wáng Wéi (p203). The last couplet lets the imperial present emerge in all its fullness. Overall, we may say that Shǐ-mín makes effective use of a situation which is given to very few poets: the memory of a time when he was not the ruler of the world.

I halt my entourage by Syǐn-fǎng City;
 I stop the music by the town of Chyáu:
 The garden bare, the single path choked off,
 The mosses old, the steps all anyhow
 Onetime water dried from all the ponds,
 Present flowers on a former bough;
 One morning long ago I left this place -
 The Four Seas have become my dwelling now

Kǔng Shàu-ān (577-c622)

Falling Leaves

Shàu-ān of Ywè was the son of Kǔng Hwàn, who held high office in Chín. His wide reading in his youthful years astonished his cousin, the famous Yw Shr̀-án. He was a Commissioner in the last years of Swéi. Under the new Táng Dynasty he was given a post in the History Office and assigned to the compilation of the history of Lyáng, but died before that work was completed. His collected works originally comprised 50 chapters, of which only seven poems now remain.

This one seems to express discomfort at the tree on which he finally roosted.

Early autumn sets the leaves to falling,
 Touching the traveler's sensibility –
 They fly about, unwilling to descend,
 As though to say, they miss their former tree

Chǔn Dǔ-lyáng (-632)

On the Seventh Evening

Seeing The New Bride's Carriage Waiting Across The Lane

Dynasties are founded by heroes, but they are built on lesser people such as Chǔn Dǔ-lyáng of Wú, birthdate unknown, who had served the Swéi dynasty after its brief reunification of China, and then held office under Táng; with several other poets he was on the literary staff of the Heir Apparent. The question facing the Chinese elite at these times of transition was when to jump, and how hard to land. Dǔ-lyáng, who must have been of ripe years when Táng proclaimed and then carried out its unification, only needed a brief sinecure in which to end out his days, and this, apparently, he got. Táng in return got the public adherence of one more educated person, and reduced by one the number of conspicuous holdouts. What the Heir Apparent got was lessons in poetry, a mandatory skill for emperors as well as their courtiers. They lessons need not always have been onerous, as witness this affectionate little piece in the vein of Shǔn Ywē (p141-142). It evokes the legend of the Herdboy and the Weaving Maiden (p110, p138), associated with the Seventh Evening festival on the seventh day of the seventh month. On this day, one of the separated pair was permitted to cross the River of Stars to join the other for one night of love. The poet sees a carriage ready for its more earthly errand, and the poem results.

This poem and the preceding are also attributed to other authors, perhaps a sign of their popularity. They fly about, unwilling to be attached to any one author.

Long, across the lane, the carriage waits,
 But not at all as slow as it might seem;
 For after all, the hour is early yet –
 It still is not the time to cross the stream

Wáng Jī (c585-644)

After Drinking

The new dynasty created a crisis for the officials of the former Swǎi. Their loyalty to the new order was sought, but was it prudent to accept? Among them, Wáng Jī chose to stay out. To get away with this, he adopted the dissimulative drunkenness of Rwǎn Jī (p93) and Táu Chyén (p126), both of whom are mentioned here, along with a dash of Wáng Hwèi-jī's spontaneity (p117). And so he spent his time under the Táng, 624-644, as a farmer, "living out his days" (p128), or at least sixty of the conventional "hundred years," in a continuous alcoholic stupor.

The list of Rwǎn Jī's sober hours is short,
 The tale of Táu Chyén's drunken days is long;
 What better way to pass your hundred years,
 Than spontaneity, and carefree song!

Lú Jàu-lín (c641-c680)

The Black Bay Horse

This poet, on the other hand, was born in Táng and spent his adult life under the reign of Lǐ Shr̀-̀mín's son and successor Lǐ Jǐ. Táng, whatever its perils, was a given for him. After positions at the capital, he was sent to Shú in the southwest, suffered paralysis from taking immortality potions (many of which were based on mercury compounds, and were highly toxic) and eventually committed suicide. This dynastic poem from his capital period depicts a warhorse in the strategic northwestern deserts, where, as in Hàn, the survival of Táng was being hammered out in league with the Turks of the steppe trade routes. The horse retreats from one encounter (first half of the poem), then goes forth on a night journey to another (second half; the "dark snow" of line 5 puzzles commentators, but backlit snow, seen against a moon directly ahead of you, is in fact black). Its gold saddle and jeweled harness ("singing gems," line 5) are ironically brilliant against its dangerous but colorful surroundings (the "liquid jade" of rivers from which it must drink, line 6, coldly paralleling the gems in line 5). The final line sympathizes with its sufferings, as part of the seemingly endless progression of horses and men expended to maintain the frontier. As in many prose and poetic works, this sudden last-minute change of standpoint (necessary in court rhetoric, where the ruler's attention is captured with verbal splendor and exploited with a quick moral thrust) does affect how we take the whole. But the poem does not become an antiwar tract; the splendors remain. Lú Jàu-lín does accept the empire; he here simply wishes that its struggles would achieve their end, and be done with.

Its golden saddle glinting in the eye,
 It turns from battle: Gāu-lán Fort is nigh.
 Against the gate, the probing winds blow sharp,
 Beside the wall, the cold stream surges high;
 The snow is dark, the singing gems are heavy,
 The hills are long, the liquid jade runs by –
 To cross the trackless waste it won't refuse,
 But when will all this flowing blood be dry?