

SOME ASPECTS OF CHINESE POETRY

BY FREDERICK W. DUPEE

THE westerner who approaches with sympathy and understanding the fascinating yet little-explored field of Chinese poetry cannot fail to be impressed, first of all, with the tremendous age of the Oriental culture which forms its background. Before Shakespeare, before Horace, before Homer, before our Occidental civilization had even begun to take root, the Chinese people were singing their delicate lyrics of human longing, of valiant deeds, of unfulfilled love, and of nature's placid beauty. And with one's appreciation of the spirit of Chinese poetry there comes a realization how little man's fundamental nature is changed, after all, by time and place; how closely akin we are to these Oriental singers; how like our own their sorrows and pleasures, their aspirations and their failures.

While in our modern western world the poet is a highly specialized literary craftsman, and poets are consequently few in proportion to the population, in China during the classic age of Chinese culture every man was a poet and therefore the poet expressed not the ideas of the exceptional but of the ordinary man. And so it is that these ideas seem so like those of the common folk of today. They are expressive of human experience, unaffected by the limitations of time and geographical boundaries.

The educated Chinese, indeed, has always expressed himself almost as commonly and naturally in poetry as in prose. Training in poetical expression has been an essential part of his education. If he takes the examinations for a civil office, he must be prepared to exhibit his skill in verse construction. If he wants to write a letter or send an invitation, he is as likely to do it in poetry as in prose. In the days of the empire, if he heard a royal proclamation read he was chiefly impressed by its poetical qualities. He praised the cleverness of the verse or else he concluded that His Majesty was a poor

poet. If one can imagine President Coolidge delivering his recent message to Congress in the form of a Whitmanesque poem, one can appreciate somewhat the place which poetry held in the official life of China. It is said that a great emperor of the Sui dynasty once ordered a subject executed whose poetry, he feared, rivaled his own. Perhaps it is well that we Occidentals take literature a little less seriously. At any rate, European and American potentates are not as a rule over-jealous of their literary reputations. Frederick the Great, it is true, nourished poetical aspirations, but his relations with his illustrious temporary subject, Voltaire, so entertainingly described by Macaulay, led to ludicrous rather than tragic results.

The very antiquity of poetry in China explains, in a measure, the depth to which it has taken root in the Chinese mind. Scholars disagree considerably as to the date of its beginnings, but it is safe to say that the Chinese were writing verse as early as 1700 B.C. In the time of Confucius, three hundred lyrics, or odes, as they are called, were collected and polished up, and are extant today. These odes were remarkably naive pieces of work, written with the same unconscious art which characterizes the old English ballads, with something of the same element of tragedy in their content.

It was not, however, until the coming of the Han dynasty, in 200 B.C., that poets began to realize that they were poets, and that poetry began to be considered a serious art. The period of the Han dynasty, like the pseudo-classical age which followed the early era of poetry in England, began to show an elaborateness and artificiality, evident in technique as well as in subject matter. There was a stereotyped way of saying things, and only conventional things could be said.

When the Han family died out in 200 A. D., several minor dynasties occupied the throne of China for the next four hundred years. During this period, poetry experienced a distinct growth and began to react the influences of Taoism or the philosophy of inaction—"Do nothing and everything will be done." Poetic dreamers revelled in indolence. Like a subtle yet far-reaching perfume, this spirit pervaded all the works of the age, and went far on into the Tang period, giving everything a touch of its characteristic scent.

The Tang period was the ripe, abundant age of Chinese literature, the glorious age of fertile genius. Men like Li Po, Tu Fu, and Po Chu-i, produced a vast amount of unequalled poetry, and thrived under the adoring patronage of the emperors and the idealization of the people. Fully as colorful as the Romantic period in

England, the Tang era had its Keatses and Shelleys and Wordsworths, to whom poetry was more than art and more than religion. It was the age of natural idealists who saw life as it was, not all bitter nor all exultant, but an exhilarating mixture of the two.

A very definite verse form came to be adopted, more rigorous than our sonnet in its limitations, and made vivid by an element known as "tone." Somewhat like the difference between our stressed and unstressed syllables, all Chinese vocables have a difference of tone, the first being known as the flat, and the second as the deflected tone. Waley, in his introduction to *One Hundred and Seventy Chinese Poems*, explains the method by which they are used: "In the first (the flat tone) the voice neither rises nor sinks. In the second (the deflected tone) it (1) rises, (2) sinks, (3) is abruptly arrested." These tones are arranged in the line in somewhat the same manner as our stressed syllables are arranged to form a metrical line.

Rhyme in Chinese verse was standardized in the eighth century on the basis of a likeness of vowel sounds, and although some of these, through changes in the language, have ceased to be rhymes, they are still used in good verse just as they were in the time of the Tang dynasty.

Real verse writing, however, included something more than the mechanics, which were difficult enough; it included a certain concentration of ideas, so that brevity, the great desideratum, could be achieved. We put no limits on our poets, but in China they are forced ordinarily to keep within eight, twelve, sixteen, twenty, or twenty-four lines. There are, in fact, very few longer poems in the language.

The four-line stop-short is a very popular although epigrammatic mode of poetical expression and calls for a great deal of skill in construction. The third line is supposed to lead up cleverly to the fourth, which expresses a surprise, or a "denouement," as Giles terms it. The following stop-short translated by him is illustrative:

"The bright moon shining overhead,
The stream beneath the breezes touch
Are rare and perfect joys indeed
But few are they who think them such."

The element of brevity is especially important to the Chinese, because they do not read poetry with the idea of having an emotion or story fully described or told to them, but only to receive a sug-

gestion which will stimulate their imagination. The stage is set for them, there is a whispered hint, and then the words stop; but, as the notes of a bell continue to vibrate in the air after the ringing has ceased, so the thread of thought continues to unwind long after the poem has ended. This quality, when it is employed with clarity and simplicity, gives the verse a very appealing slenderness and subtlety, as well as a certain rather gripping charm.

A writer in the London *Times* very aptly expresses this aspect of Chinese poetry by saying: "The Chinese seem to play on a penny whistle, and then suddenly, with a shy smile, to draw the most wonderful thin music out of you." Another writer remarks that this quality has made Chinese poetry "the well and source of the diaphanous in literature."

Two poems of Li Po's, the first translated by Cranmer-Bing and the second by Shigeyoshi Obata, best illustrate this suggestive quality:

"The yellow duck winds round the city wall;
 The crows are drawn to nest,
 Silently down the west
 They hasten home and from the branches call.
 A woman sits and weaves with fingers deft
 Her story of the flower-lit stream,
 Threading the jasper gauze in dream,
 Till like faint smoke it dies; and she, bereft,
 Recalls the parting words that died
 Under the casement some far eventide,
 And stays the disappointed loom,
 While from the little lonely room
 Into the lonely night she peers,
 And like the rain, unheeded fall her tears."

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"Blue water and a clear moon. . . .
 In the moonlight the white herons are flying.
 Listen! Do you hear the girls who gather water-chestnuts?
 They are going home in the night singing."

The latter, in its cameo-like beauty and transparent clearness, might have been penned by the great poet-seer of modern India, Rabindranath Tagore.

Li Po seems to be accepted as the foremost Chinese poet, although he shares his honors to some extent with Tu Fu, his contemporary

and close friend, and with Po Chu-i, who lived nearly a century later. The lives of all these poets appear to have followed a rather similar pattern. All were literary prodigies in their childhood; all went to the capital as young men and became favorites of the emperor or attempted to fill official positions. Then there came disgust with the artificialities of court life and a longing to get away again to the hills and fields. Inevitably there was flight or exile due to political intrigue, some years of wandering, and finally a settling down with a group of congenial companions, who drank a great deal of wine and who wrote melancholy verse to their hearts' content.

The familiar strain of grief and sadness runs like an obligato through all Chinese verse. The poet is ever yearning for the home he has left, for the friend he has lost, or for the happiness of other days. He sees an old pile of ruins and they recall to him the glories of a departed age. Frequently he chants in minor key the woe of a woman whose love has been unfulfilled. Times without number he pens poems of parting, inscribing them on trees or pillars, or presenting them on a piece of parchment to the friend from whom he is about to separate. Then there are the poems in praise of the emperor, of good wine, and of the beauties of nature.

Like Swinburne, the Chinese poets gloried in the sensuous imagery of nature, without attempting to attach any moral significance to it. Nature was their mistress and they threw themselves recklessly into her arms, giving themselves up to the gratifying of the senses, without any stirring of the intellect. These lines by Po Chu-i are aesthetic enough to be worthy of Keats and accurate enough to be Rossetti's own:

“ . . . At last

Slow yielding to their prayers the stranger came,
 Hiding her burning face behind her lute;
 And twice her hands essayed the strings, and twice
 She faltered in her task; then tenderly,
 As for an old sad tale of hopeless years,
 With drooping head and fingers deft she poured
 Her soul forth into melodies. Now slow
 The plectrum led to prayer the cloistered chords,
 Now loudly with the crash of falling rain,
 Now soft as the leaf whispering of words,
 Now loud and soft together as the long
 Patter of pearls and seed pearls on a dish
 Of marble; liquid now as from the bush

Warbles the mango bird ; meandering
 Now as the streamlet seaward ; voiceless now
 As the wild ice torrent in the strangling arms
 Of her ice lover, lying motionless,
 Lulled in a passion far too deep for sound.
 Then as the water from the broken vase
 Gushes, or on the mailed horseman falls
 The anvil din of steel, as on the silk
 The slash of rending, so upon the strings
 Her plectrum fell. . . ."

This is from the "Lute Girl," perhaps the longest poem in the language and one of the few which tells a complete story. The story is a tragic one, but there is no moral to it and not a murmur of complaint or discontent ruffles its complacency. There is merely an acceptance of things as they are, without any attempt to alter them or to seek an explanation for them. And that is, after all, the primary expression of Chinese philosophy.

One who delves into the poetry of the Chinese is certain to be rewarded by an insight into the life of the people and a feeling for their philosophy. One experiences the same sensations as a traveler on shipboard who awakes in the morning to find himself anchored in a strange harbor, where the wind off-shore brings him his first whiff of the new land. He quaffs it, he breathes it in, he feels it taking hold of him, entering his blood, spreading through his system and although he is not a part of the busy life going on before his eyes, nevertheless by some mysterious process an understanding of that life and a certain sympathy with it, which perhaps he cannot fully explain, stirs within his being.

And in brooding over this rich field of poetry, one senses clearly the Chinese outlook on life, which is distinctly pagan, and contains much that is suggestive of the Roman Epicureans and of Omar Khayyam. "Carpe diem," and "eat, drink, and be merry"—there is something of them both in the Chinese philosophy. Life is short and unutterably sad. The poet weeps as easily as he laughs, and even his sincerest laughter with some pain is fraught. Here is the essence of the Chinese idea expressed in two lines :

"Oh, ruthless fate ; oh, cruel boon !
 To meet so late, to part so soon !"

This is as far as the poets of China ever go in lamenting the sadness of life ; the nearest they ever come to a protest against it. They feel little resentment toward the ills of mortal existence ; they would

change but little. They are quite well satisfied with things as they are and they find their solace in the external pleasures of the world. They immerse themselves unreservedly in nature, though they may dream at times of other and better worlds—the dream worlds of fantasy and imagination. Then, too, they have their friends, and an important part of Chinese philosophy is the glorification of friendship. To the Chinese philosophers, as to the Greeks and to some of the poets of the Renaissance, friendship between men partakes of a higher nature than love between the sexes. Women are apt to be looked upon with contempt, as a temptation to folly, and their pursuit regarded as degrading.

But perhaps a greater solace to the poet than nature, his dreams, or his friendships, is his wine cup. He loves to lie in the sunlight and drink himself into such a stupor that no tremor of conscious thought disturbs his inward peace. His jug, like Omar's, is always close at hand, and he has few other cares. After all, he wants very little from life:

“Tell me now, what should a man want
 But to sit alone, sipping his wine cup?
 I should like to have visitors come and discuss philosophy.
 And not to have the tax collectors coming to collect taxes.
 My three sons married into good families,
 And my five daughters married to steady husbands.
 Then I could jog on through a happy five-score years
 And, at the end, need no Paradise.”¹

Although life seems to him an experience shot through with sadness, we find the poet clinging tenaciously to it with both hands, and exhibiting an almost childlike dread of the inevitability of death. He does not try to comfort himself with the thought of immortality and a Deity; he is blind to all that and sees only the darkness and oblivion which lie beyond life. He is altogether a fatalist and cares little whence he came or whither he is bound. Life is a voyage on a rudderless ship; man must let the wind and tide bear him whither they will, though there may be sunken reefs along the course and he knows not the port toward which he is headed—if indeed there be any port at all. In the words of Li Po:

“In vain we cleave the torrent's thread with steel,
 In vain we drink to drown the grief we feel;
 When man's desire with fate doth war thus, this avails alone—
 To hoist the sail and let the gale and waters bear us on.”²

¹ Arthur Waley: *One Hundred and Seventy Chinese Poems.*

² Cranmer-Byng: *A Lute of Jade.*