

# 清 Qing Classical Poetry and Song Lyric

Like the Elizabethan period in the English-speaking world, the Tang Dynasty held for later readers an aura of unattainable perfection in poetry, an age when great poems seemed to come with ease, even to undistinguished writers.

The classical poetry and song lyric of the Qing Dynasty was, in many ways, far richer than the Tang, but the genius of Qing poetry has been obscured by several factors. First, the immense volume of poetry written during the dynasty and the huge collections of its most prominent poets make it difficult for individual poems to stand out and claim the degree of attention they deserve. Second, Qing poets drew on a great depth of learning and familiarity with earlier poetry that they took for granted in their audience. They could not foresee an age when their allusions would require learned footnotes and their fine turns of phrase would go unobserved by most readers. (Still less could they have imagined being translated into a language in which all their literature and culture was largely unknown.) Finally, the classical language they used had changed much since the Tang, whose poems can often be translated almost literally, leaving the beauty of their images still apparent. The literary language of the Qing was filled with set phrases, often figurative, that sound ludicrously artificial in English. Fortunately, there are poems and poets that can be understood with a minimum of annotation, and these will form the greater part of our selection below.

One of the most striking characteristics of Qing classical poetry is the degree to which it spread through all levels of elite society. The Ming and Qing saw a dramatic rise in literacy, and by the Qing, the size of the reading and writing public was very large in absolute numbers, if not as a percentage of the population as a whole. Poetry increasingly became the means to participate in subgroups within literate society. There was an interest in regional and local traditions as never before, with immense pride in earlier poets associated with a particular locale. Women poets formed groups, exchanging verses and defining a tradition of women's poetry in their prefaces. Family traditions were important, and families often bore the cost of publishing works by their members. Indeed, poetry became one of the many means to establish social prestige.

The history of Qing poetry is of such complexity that it cannot easily be represented in a short section such as this. The fall of the Ming and its aftermath was a profound shock to the culture, and it inspired some of the finest classical poetry since the Tang. Du Fu, the "poet-historian," was a powerful model, and numerous poems bear moving witness both to particular incidents in the Qing conquest and to the spirit of resistance. As the dynasty consolidated its rule late in the seventeenth century, the Manchu rulers were understandably disturbed by such poetry, and it was censored. Many remarkable poets were lost in obscurity and their works recovered and republished only in the twentieth century.

The turbulence of the conquest was followed by a long period of peace and prosperity, lasting from the late eighteenth into the early nineteenth century. With the Qing authorities ever vigilant against potential slights, poets tended to avoid political topics. The old disputes of Ming poetics resurfaced in new guises: a school of Formalists (*ge-diao pai*) reworked the old values of the Archaisms into something less wooden; the school of Natural Wit (*xing-ling pai*), represented in the present selection by Zhao Yi (1727–1814), carried on the late Ming interest in immediacy and genuine expression; and the school of Spiritual Resonance (*shen-yun pai*), led by Wang Shi-zhen (1634–1711), argued for the centrality of elusive poetic images that transcended both form and self-expression. And there were others, such as the Manchu lyricist Nara Singde (1655–1685) and the classical poet Huang Jing-ren (1749–1783), who belonged to no school, discovering their own distinctive poetic voices apart from contemporary literary debates. Although there was no shortage of poetic talent, the weight of the poetic tradition and the limitations it imposed made themselves felt. Poets had been writing on the same topics in the same poetic language for a millennium, and while there was a degree of innovation, in a large sense poetry had become a comfortably restricted mode of expression in a world that had changed profoundly since the Tang.

In the political and cultural crises of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, classical poetry was tested for its ability to account for a world that was being transformed with violent swiftness. Although it had some successes in adapting to the changes in the culture, classical poetry treating "modern" themes often calls attention to the disparity between the modern reality and the language of poetic representation. When a lyricist treated the Japanese Rape of Nanjing in the 1930s in the old poetic language, the unprecedented violence of modern warfare was recast in the guise of a tragedy that had befallen the city over and over again for fifteen hundred years.

It is artificial to declare the end of classical literature with the May Fourth movement of 1919, which advocated the exclusive use of vernacular Chinese and the replacement of traditional literary genres with the new genres from Japan and the West. Western influence had been slowly transforming Chinese literature for many decades prior to 1919; and although the young elite enthusiastically took up the vernacular literature movement, its goals were not fully realized until its gradual institution in the school system closer to the middle of the twentieth century. There is no question that classical poetry and, to a lesser degree, literary song lyric were weary forms, weighted down by their history, and unable to match the liberty of the new vernacular poetry (*xin-shi*) inspired by Western models. Nevertheless, valuable classical poetry continued to be written through the 1930s, and the form is still practiced today, primarily by older scholars.

## Gu Yan-wu (1613–1682)

Gu Yan-wu was one of the leading scholars of the early Qing: an historian, classical philologist, antiquarian, and poet. Though still a relatively young man at the time of the conquest, he remained passionately loyal to the Ming. "Autumn Hills" is one of his earlier poems, on the Qing conquest.

## Autumn Hills (first of two)

Autumn hills, more autumn hills,  
and through those hills swell autumn rains.

They fought by the rivermouth yesterday,  
today they fight beside those hills.

I've heard that our right flank crumbled,  
I now see the left's resistance fade.

Our banners and pennons lie buried in earth,  
by walls dance ladders and battering rams.

In but a morning, defeat at Chang-ping,<sup>1</sup>  
the corpses lie covering ridges and slopes.

Three hundred barges set off for the north,  
and on every barge are fair-faced girls.

Camels crowd river ports of Wu,  
fifes playing, they enter the passes to Yan.<sup>2</sup>

Men of Yan and Ying of olden days  
are still found south of the city.<sup>3</sup>

## Wu Wei-ye (1609–1671)

Wu Wei-ye (or Wu Mei-cun, as he is often known) was one of the two best-known poets of the period around the Qing conquest. A member of the Restoration Society, Wu belonged to the late Ming social world described in the play *Peach Blossom Fan*, and his poetry on the Qing conquest of the South and its aftermath is among the finest work in a period whose hardships inspired much memorable poetry. Reluctantly persuaded to serve in the Qing government briefly in the 1650s, Wu suffered a deep sense of having betrayed the Ming, and he gave up his post willingly on the death of his mother.

The following poem of 1645 is from a set in which Wu is fleeing with his family from the invading Qing army. Wu moves back and forth from the peaceful scene around him to the crumbling Southern Ming state beyond his vision. "Nature's Moat" was a kenning for the Yangzi River, supposed to protect the Southland against invasion from the North.

<sup>1</sup>Chang-ping was the site of a famous battle in the Qin unification when Qin armies were supposed to have massacred four hundred thousand soldiers of the state of Zhao.

<sup>2</sup>Yan, into whose passes the victorious Qing armies enter, represents the region around Beijing.

<sup>3</sup>Yan and Ying were two of the great cities of the ancient state of Chu. After the Qin conquest of those cities, Chu grandees, unwilling to serve Qin, settled south of the Qi capital at Lin-ze. Here, of course, the allusion expresses the determined resistance of southerners to the Qing conquest.

## Escaping the Fighting (fifth of six)

The moon came out, the village ahead turned white,  
on the creek its rays shone like washed silk.

We lifted oars and drifted midstream,  
sang bravely to winds that broke up sound.

Not that Nature's Moat could not hold,  
but constant depravities worked this grief.

Woe to you who made plans for our state—  
you have lost us half our rivers and hills!

The boatman prances, placing the punt,  
and our small boat runs swift as an arrow.

Too bad that troops of the Yangzi and Huai,  
our "dread berserkers," put up no fight.

To this lone cabin sounds of an iron flute come,  
hearing its notes, my tears fall like sleet.

What have I done in this life  
to live in such times of anguish and ruin?

In bygone days I roamed all the land,  
I come at last to the Five Lakes' shores.

Wearing hemp sandals and used to flight,  
on hard times fallen, a simple common man.

Du Fu's poems during the An Lu-shan Rebellion provided a powerful model for poets writing on the Qing conquest of the Ming. These could be simple narratives of small incidents that revealed the larger conditions of the times. In the following poem, a roving band of Ming soldiers, having fled the advancing Qing armies, plunder a village where Wu Wei-ye is staying. Wu cannot help think of the expenses lavished on the army, which now seeks only to get out of harm's way.

## Escaping the Fighting (last of six)

Marauders came when I rose at dawn,  
a warship was moored by the market bridge.

A disorderly band of a dozen or so  
came on shore to buy local beer.

Their gear was not a civilian's,  
but swords and bows had been lost.

They bullied and beat an old shopkeeper,  
men of no account, with raging looks.

And I wondered who their commander was,  
coming here from an urge to roam carefree.

Our army used to press hard for taxes,  
its orders were strict, no leeway at all.

They spoke ever of hardships for men on campaign—  
unpitied, the plowman's grueling toil.

The Southland now is defeated,  
desolation spreads a thousand miles.

In this place only villagers dwell,  
there's no room for your banners and pennons.

Go show the enemy your daring—  
don't use it to frighten folk like us.

The relation between the details of a poet's experiences and the poetic past is complicated in Qing poetry. Old poems echo in the background of Qing poems, but this may be something more than literary allusion: familiar old poems were probably a part of making sense of experience itself, and they provided models for response.

The following poem, in which Wu Wei-ye laments the death of his infant daughter, is no less moving and no less heartfelt for being in the style of Du Fu. The poet's real fear that his newborn daughter's cries would reveal the family's hiding place also recalls Du Fu fleeing the "death and destruction" of the An Lu-shan Rebellion with his family in a passage from "Song of Peng-ya."

My baby girl gnawed at me in her hunger,  
and I feared wild beasts would hear her cries:  
I held her to my chest, covered her mouth,  
but she twisted and turned, crying louder in rage.

#### A Lament for My Daughter (first of three)

You were born amid death and destruction,  
the whole family lay hidden by roadside.

I feared your cries, thought of leaving you there,  
we got away, and I loved you much more.

Children caught in catastrophe's course,  
pike and shield harassed your brief years.

State's rise and fall affects all the world,  
but when I think back, my distress is doubled.

"West Fields" is an idyllic poem on visiting the estate of Wu's friend Wang Yan-ke after the Qing conquest. Behind this and other poems in the set is a long tradition of lyrics, from Tao Qian to such works as Du Fu's "Autumn Wilds" and Su Dong-po's "East Slope," about withdrawing to farming in face of adversity.

#### West Fields (first of four)

You dig and build, of world's troubles weary,  
in wilderness fields you find nature's way.

Here north of the city you came by chance,  
beside the west creek studied Halting.<sup>4</sup>

Your greatness makes practice of privacy hard,  
region's remoteness stirs report by the crowd.

Then I, all at once, come to visit you,  
oars enter this reed and cattail sky.

The setting sun floats over distant trees,  
in mulberries rises a faint hint of smoke.

The path turns, I lose my way on the creek,  
but the ducks precede me, leading the boat.

A fragrance close by, I smell lotuses,  
recumbent, I enter blooms fresh and lovely.

Men's voices emerge from weeping willows,  
a fishing raft slants by the bending shore.

You take my hand, look at me, smile:  
"These are indeed my 'Western Fields.'"

If always I could get a guest like you,  
we'd enjoy the delights of the wilds together.

We'll sit on the grass, drain a jug of beer,  
and find some joy in the years that remain."

#### Mooring in the Evening

Winter hoes go in line along the shore,  
light oars yaw, swept by the tide.

<sup>4</sup>"Halting" is the Buddhist cessation of desire and activity.

The trees shed the last of tattered leaves,  
winds blow a tangle of evening crows.  
Where sand is deep, it holds the tracks of pigs,  
the stream grows still and echoes with a fish spear.  
We ask for fire, the village beer comes,  
our cooking smoke rises through reed flowers.

Some of Wu Wei-ye's finest poems are long narratives filled with allusions and historical references, which unfortunately do not fare well in translation. In the following poem, of which only the opening is translated, Wu Wei-ye returns to Nanjing (formerly Jin-ling) after the Qing conquest. From the ruins of the Ming Imperial Academy, where Wu had served, he turns to the other Ming sites in this city that had been both the first and final Ming capital.

#### from Thoughts Stirred on Meeting the Gardener of the Royal Academy in Nanjing

Cold tides dashed on the ruined fort,  
fiery clouds set Red Hill ablaze;  
it was June when I reached Jin-ling,  
on the tenth I crossed Great Pontoon Bridge.  
The spots I had visited serving here  
have all of them slipped from memory.  
I met an old gardener on the road,  
who asked me from where I had come.  
Then I vaguely recognized a former employee,  
and the circumstances caused heart's pain.  
He opened the gate and invited me in,  
broken buildings, a low surrounding wall.  
Then he pointed into a clump of weeds,  
saying this was the Royal Academy.  
The office buildings were rubble piles,  
which he gardened on lease to pay his tax.  
He had changed the means of his livelihood,  
but had made this his garden from nostalgia.  
In troubled times he had kept to this land,  
unwilling to go to another place.  
I took the chance to walk over the site,  
and at every step my brooding increased.  
On the gray slopes backed against the water  
had been the hall where I used to stay.  
From all the world students gathered here,  
compositions turned in at the Six Lodges.

Pines and junipers, all ten spans in girth,  
and the ringing sounds of pipes and bells.  
A hundred-acre clear and rippling pond,  
with drooping willows all around the shore,  
splendid porches overhanging pools,  
where fragrant scent of lotus blew.  
Chatting and laughing, all noble companions,  
in flowers and moonlight we drained our cups.  
There was a pavilion to the south  
where beech and bamboo gave off a light cool. . . .

#### Wang Shi-zhen (1634–1711)

If the poetry of the mid-seventeenth century wears well, it is because the dissolution and fall of the Ming provided an immediately engaging topic that went beyond the arid literary disputes of the preceding era. Wang Shi-zhen was the most influential poet of the first post-conquest generation. Wang and his poetry are known for a principle, *shen-yun*, roughly translated as "spiritual resonance." This is a vague, evocative term for a vague evocative quality that was associated with certain High Tang poets and especially with their quatrains.

Wang Shi-zhen represents both some of the best and the worst sides of Qing poetry. Much of his poetry was about either social exchange or capturing moments on his travels; the engagement of poetry around the Qing conquest was gone. Wang was a craftsman, who could turn the situation or the beauty of the momentary scene into polished poetry.

#### Crossing the Ancient Barrier Pass in the Rain (1672)

Perilous walkways, flying cascades,  
the mountain a thousand yards high,  
I point afar to a fortress tower  
there among twilight clouds.  
And suddenly the west wind brings  
whooshing gusts of rain—  
ash tree flowers will fill the road  
as I cross the ancient pass.

#### On the Ba River Bridge: Sent Home to My Wife (second of two)

Mount Tai-hua and Mount Zhong-nan  
are here thousands of miles away,  
not a place in this westward journey  
that doesn't break my heart.  
Should my lady happen to toss a coin  
to find out of my fate—

in autumn rain and autumn wind  
I cross the Ba River Bridge.

If Wang Shi-zhen sometimes sounds like Wang Wei, it was because the perfection of Wang Wei's poetic art (rather than Wang Wei's values) captured Wang Shi-zhen's affection.

### Farm Home by Cu-lai Mountain

On I go through empty azure mist,  
appearing, fading, still more lovely shapes.  
Road to the village through sapphire trees,  
the green hill faces a shrine on the peak.  
In deep woods chickens and dogs grow still,  
after much rain, sprouts on the slope are rich.  
Someday I'll plant the north slope of Gui—  
nor will I be slow to plow on my own.

### On the Qing-yang Road

Tall bamboo blanket a sunlit stream,  
whose rippling glints by an empty bend.  
As the sun goes down, snow melts away,  
and homes are right there in the cold green.

### What I Saw on the Northern Outskirts of Zhen-zhou

The cloud cover pressed on the city walls  
as I left Zhen-zhou's outskirts at dawn.  
Past the outskirts, a striped bamboo grove  
and the wind blew down the last of the snow.

### At Daybreak I Crossed the Ping-jiang River and Climbed on Foot to the Summit of Crossing-Above-Clouds Mountain

I really did "cross above clouds,"  
roaming wine in hand,  
the utter wonder of Han-jia  
crowns all this western land.  
Its nine peaks face to the sun  
and chant the river leaves,  
three watercourses flood on through,  
embracing the district hall.

From the old man of Fu's pavilion  
the mountains grow more fair,  
and springs gush from the coiled hair  
of an ancient statue of Buddha.

As Su Dong-po grew older,  
his home in Shu was on his mind,  
he wanted no fief of ten thousand homes  
in the world of mortal men.

### Nara Singde (1655–1685)

Nara Singde (or, in the sinified version, Na-lan Xing-de) was a Manchu bannerman (a member of the Qing military caste) and an officer in the imperial guard. He often accompanied the Kang-xi emperor on his various journeys of state.

The early seventeenth century had seen a major revival of the song lyric as a purely literary form. Song Dynasty tune patterns were still used, even though the original music had been long lost. The song lyric took on a very different tone from classical poetry: it was often dreamy and evocative, the preferred form for love poetry. Nara Singde's lyrics, particularly a number of pieces on the death of his wife, are considered among the finest in the dynasty.

### to "Like a Dream" (*Ru meng ling*)

It was the moment when the pulley creaked  
on the golden well, and fallen petals  
filled the pavements, cold and red.  
All at once I met her—  
no telling for sure  
what lay in her heart  
or the look in her eyes.  
Who can think it through and know? But now  
it begins:  
striped marks on body from bamboo mat,  
a shadow in candlelight.

### to "Clear and Even Music" (*Qing-ping yue*)

Tresses in stormy tangles and coils,  
she comes and I never know just when.  
Weary we lean  
on marble railings of balconies  
watching the halo around the moon,  
Easily then  
talk turns to whispers,  
her fragrance draws near.

A soft breeze blows past the window screen,  
meeting her now is a world away.  
And from this moment on:  
all the pain of spring and being apart,  
in growing dusk facing the blossoms of pear.

to "Seeking Fragrant Plants" (*Xun fang-cao*),  
Account of a Dream in Xiao Temple

How can I pass these nights far from home?  
I dreamed I was with her,  
reciting poems together,  
by the latticed window. And annoyed,  
she feigned a smile and said,  
"If you weren't so lonely there,  
would you still have wanted to come?"  
I had to leave all too quickly;  
I had planned to stay  
until temple bells were struck at dawn.  
She suddenly pressed close to me—  
then a spark flashed from lamp wick falling,  
and I was here facing  
fire in a globe of glass.

to "Golden Threads" (*Jin-lü qu*),  
Thoughts on the Anniversary of My Wife's Death

When will this misery end?  
Dripping on empty stairs, the rain  
of night's coldest hours is done,  
a weather for funerals of flowers.  
These past three years went on and on,  
her soul, too far to come in dreams,  
and may I wake from this dream soon!  
I guess by now I've grown aware  
this mortal world holds no appeal.  
Better to be  
below the soil  
in those halls of endless night,  
cool there and clear,  
a plot of earth to bury care.  
The pact of love, hairpin and box,  
is forsaken in the end.

If I could get a letter  
from streams in the world below,

I'd like to know  
her joys and sorrows this past year,  
who she's staying with. For me  
it's restless tossing all night long;  
I cannot bear to hear  
strings of marriage played again.  
I hope we'll be  
true lovers in a life to come, then fear  
we both have luckless destinies,  
and future fate will be unkind  
in last moonlight and failing wind.  
My tears are gone,  
ashes of paper rise.<sup>5</sup>

to "Like a Dream" (*Ru meng ling*)

In thousands of tents the men are drunk.  
Starlight shimmers, about to sink.  
My homeward dreams are blocked  
by Wolf River  
and poked to pieces by river sounds.  
Then I go back to sleep,  
go back to sleep understanding  
that waking has no appeal.

to "Butterflies Love Flowers" (*Die lian hua*), On the Frontier

The rivers and hills have no single master  
in ancient times and now,  
and in the notes of the bugles  
herdsmen's horses constantly come and go.  
Of this bleak wilderness filling my eyes  
Whom can I tell?—  
west winds blow red maples  
and make them old.  
Where could pains suffered silently here  
ever find expression?  
Lances and armored horses,  
the road to Green Tomb in twilight.<sup>6</sup>  
Carried away, my feelings deepen,  
how deep do they go?—

<sup>5</sup>The "ashes" are from the paper money burned in commemoration of the dead.

<sup>6</sup>Green Tomb was the legendary burial place of Wang Zhao-jun, a beautiful Han court lady who was married against her will to the Khan of the Xiong-nu.

evening sunshine deep in the mountains,  
deep in autumn, the rain.

### Zhao yi (1727–1814)

Zhao Yi was one of a group of poets associated with the "school of Natural Wit" (*xing-ling pai*), whose most prominent advocate was Yuan Mei (1716–1798) and which played an influential role in the literary world of the eighteenth century. The school of Natural Wit advocated a spontaneous ease in composition and lightness of touch in poetry that was opposed to the elevated "spiritual resonance" of Wang Shi-zhen and his followers. Zhao Yi was an historian, literary critic, and eminent intellectual, who for a period in his life served in the Qing government with distinction.

#### Poems on My Dwelling in the Rear Park (second of nine)

I've suffered poverty years on end,  
but this year's been especially hard.  
My wife and children came in and declared  
there will be no breakfast tomorrow.  
I laughed and told them to go away,  
that I couldn't be bothered just now.  
I'm presently writing a little poem  
and there's still a word not quite right.  
Just wait until I finish the poem  
and I'll take care of the groceries.  
Look on the streets of the capital—  
no civil servants lie there starving to death!

#### Poems on My Dwelling in the Rear Park (third of nine)

A visitor suddenly knocked at my door  
with an offer of cash for some writing.  
He asked me to do a tomb inscription  
and insisted I make it flattering:  
in political life, a Gong Sui or Huang Ba;  
in learning, a Zheng or Zhu Xi.  
I thought it would be amusing,  
so I did just as he required.  
I patched a piece of fine phrases together,  
and, lo and behold, a true gentleman!  
I checked this against what he really did,  
it was hardly an ounce to my ten pounds.  
Suppose what I wrote is handed down—  
who could tell if the man was a fool or wise?  
And perhaps they will cite it as evidence,

to be copied at last in historical tomes.  
Now I see that in histories of old  
the most part belongs to pure puffery.

#### Returning on Yang Lake

My canvas sail billows lightly,  
the evening breeze is soft,  
I turn to look at Yang Mountain,  
set right in the sunset glow.  
Egrets dot the sapphire sky,  
a flying word writ in white,  
the trees dress up in red leaves,  
presented with scarlet gowns.  
The poet's mood, the limpid waters  
empty without a speck,  
the heart's concerns, a peaceful cloud  
distracted, not flying away.  
I most enjoy the fishermen's songs,  
their sounds in the creaking of oars,  
and rapping the rhythm on boatsides,  
going with me all the way home.

Zhao Yi served a period as a magistrate of a district in Guang-xi, which was populated primarily by non-Chinese. These indigenous peoples of southwestern China evoked many of the same responses in eighteenth-century Chinese intellectuals that the native peoples of the Americas evoked in Europeans. Sometimes they were described as murderous and thieving savages; at other times they were the "noble savage," whose natural behavior put to shame those with the artificial trappings of civilization. In the following verse, Zhao Yi describes their courtship customs involving song exchanges between young men and women. Zhao Yi associates the freedom to choose one's own mate (not to mention unbound feet) with primal antiquity and an innocence lost in China.

#### Local Song

In months of spring, April and May,  
the fairgrounds are in flower,  
girls of the tribes, primped and rouged,  
go to the fairgrounds to court.  
Long skirts and wide sleeves,  
all in fresh finery,  
one sees no bow-bent slippers  
and dainty feet three inches wide.  
A young man of unknown family  
comes to sing her songs,

it's not necessary that he be  
 kin by marriage or blood.  
 She only looks at his young face  
 fresh as a blossom of peach,  
 and as he sings, so she sings back  
 in verses never-ending.  
 In every single note is borne  
 currents of tender passion,  
 light as the drifting floss  
 that curls through the sky.  
 There are times when suddenly  
 it is blown apart by the breeze,  
 notes carried over the hills ahead,  
 in quavering afterechoes.  
 And touching, when the song concludes  
 fervent glances are cast,  
 and she promises to meet him  
 by night in the glow of the moon.  
 These melodies speak mostly  
 of the red berries of passion,  
 folkways that rarely write  
 of green plums as they fall.<sup>7</sup>  
 Here in our age we truly find  
 unimpeded succession,  
 it is as if entering the hazy space  
 of the Hua-xu dream.<sup>8</sup>  
 I see now that our ritual laws  
 arose in later times,  
 folk of No-Care's and Ge-tian's day  
 knew nothing of them at all.<sup>9</sup>  
 Have you not seen how two by two  
 the butterflies form pairs,  
 and without need of a go-between  
 they settle the marriage bond?

### In Bed

Lying in bed I thought of a poem  
 and worried that I would forget,  
 I threw on my clothes and got up to write  
 in the dying light of the lamp.

<sup>7</sup>"Green plums as they fall" refers to a poem in the *Classic of Poetry*, traditionally interpreted as referring to marriage in the appropriate season (these young women seem to be rushing it).

<sup>8</sup>The "Hua-xu dream," described in the Daoist Classic *Lie-zi*, was the Yellow Emperor's dream of a primordial world of innocence.

My wife broke out in laughter:  
 why take such pains, old man—  
 when the youngsters are at their studies  
 they're not so caught up as this?

### Livelihood

Our subsistence grows steadily bleaker,  
 the harvest was bad; just stony fields remain.  
 For fuel, we burn trees that stood leaf to leaf,  
 for meals, count on cash from writing inscriptions.  
 The servant is young, I send my son on errands,  
 the house so bare the watchdog sleeps freely.  
 And faintly I hear the maids telling stories  
 of our days of feasting and me in official robes.

### On Poetry (two of five)

I  
 The life I see all around me turns  
 on the Potter's Wheel of Change:  
 Heaven's skill and human craft  
 always compete for the new.  
 The poet provides a new idea  
 that lasts five hundred years,  
 but when it's reached a thousand years,  
 it seems like a cliché.

II  
 Poems of Li Bo and Du Fu  
 have passed through thousands of mouths,  
 and by now they've come to seem  
 not vivid or new at all.  
 In every age our hills and our rivers  
 bring forth men of talent  
 and each holds sway over poetry  
 for a span of five hundred years.

<sup>9</sup>No-Cares and Ge-tian were mythical rulers of earliest antiquity.