

Huang Jing-ren (1749-1783)

Huang Jing-ren perfectly fulfilled the expectations for a certain type of Chinese poet: talented, unsuccessful, impoverished, and doomed to die at a relatively young age. It was a role Huang Jing-ren accepted completely, and though there was an element of posing, it sometimes made possible a poetic daring that is lacking in more socially successful writers. Many critics believed, with some reason, that Huang Jing-ren was the outstanding poet of the dynasty.

Written at Night at an Inn in the Hills (second and third of three)

The city people are different
in their troubling fantasies;
to my eyes this world and I
are a wisp in autumn sky.
Just now those thousands of homes must all
be sharing the very same dream:
above them, a white haze,
hangs low, then rises high.
All night long these mountain windows
stand open on every side,
with rivers and lakes before and behind,
where my thoughts go on and on.
So stand at the window, set torch ablaze,
hold it high,
and watch the fish and dragons come,
to drink in the light.

[title lost]

My home lies east of the eastern sea:
sea-castle mirages, familiar sights
for a mind that is the same.
I shed ten years of tears for my shadow
in the deepest parts of hills,
but when I glimpsed a mountain ape,
my heart knew also delight.
Is this life perhaps? Or death? Neither
are worth my shouting in rage;
brows knit in a frown, then form a smile—
which of those moments is real?
Magnificent is the Shaper of Things—
how will he use me now?

Not of mist and cloud does he conjure shapes,
he conjures his shapes in me.¹

Visiting Ju-fa-yuan Temple with Wang Qiu-cheng and Zhang He-chai

I left the ancient temple in twilight mist,
afraid on my return to find
my study in its autumn
as empty as these waters.
As night's black colors grew on my clothes,
I could not brush them away,
and wondered where to find other hills
still red in the evening sun.

A Companion Piece to a Poem by Qian Bai-quan

Here where the master, his whisk in hand,
once discoursed on the sutras,
we feel now the autumn chill
in August already upon us.
So much noise from crowds,
travelers outside these gates—
yet after the great bell's single sound
there is sound no more.

Dreaming of a Friend One Night

I am in halves: half here far from home,
and half in a dream of home,
as the west wind rolls the leaves along
and rain beats on corridors.
I am a shadow, accompanied by clouds
threading through the passes;
now the moonlight joins me as always
under this roof and rafters.
You speak to me with such kindness and care,
but somehow I don't comprehend,

¹The last couplet refers to a passage in the *Zhuang-zi*, in which one zany Daoist visits another, wracked by disease and dying: "Then Zi-li leaned against the doorway and spoke to Zi-lai, 'Magnificent indeed is the Shaper of Things. I wonder what it's going to make you into; I wonder where it's going to have you go. Will you be a rat's liver? A bug's arm, perhaps?'"

and cannot see what would stop me
from taking your hand right now:

Then I wake up: on my pillow
there's not a spot left dry;
through the open curtains the hazy blur
of the long road to be traveled.

Offhand Compositions: New Year's Eve 1774

I
Laughter and talk in a thousand homes,
the water-clock drips on,
yet I feel a misery coming unseen
from beyond the world of things.
Silent, I stand on the market bridge,
recognized by none,
watching a single star like the moon
such a long, long time.

II
Year after year I waste this eye
reciting poems,
beside the lamp my children
often secretly laugh at me.
Yet how could the likes of you understand
how much I regret
wastefully spending the heart's strength
to be a poet.

Although classical poetry continued to be written using the old circumscribed range of topics throughout the nineteenth century, some voices were trying to express the new cultural realities that China was confronting with the slow dissolution of Qing rule and the intrusion of the West. The corruption and sporadic violence of nineteenth-century China again and again were met with a desire to bring about reform. Classical literature and classical writing in general can be taken as an emblem of the cultural problem. Historical depth was the virtue of classical writing, but by figuring everything in terms of precedents and prior usage, critics and writers alike had difficulty accounting for what was truly new.

Gong Zi-zhen (1792–1841)

Gong Zi-zhen's most famous poems are the 315 quatrains written in the cyclical year *ji-hai*, 1839, on a journey from Beijing to his home in Hang-zhou. Poets and lyricists like Huang Jing-ren or Nara Singde complicated the clichés of the poetic

language to the point where they created something unique and fresh. Gong Zi-zhen's quatrains are often epigrammatic: he addresses poetic clichés and the commonplaces of cultural response directly. At other times, the quatrains suggest an almost melancholy resignation. Many are extremely allusive; given below are just a few of the most famous that can be done in English without extensive annotation.

Poems of the Year *ji-hai*, 1839

V
The sorrow of leaving sweeps over me,
the bright sun sinks in sky,
a poet on horseback heads eastward
and at once is past the horizon.
The fallen red petals are not
things without a heart—
they change into the mud of spring
to nurture still more flowers.

The following piece is on opium addicts, who filled the levels of officialdom during the opium scourge of the nineteenth century. The first couplet seems to describe an opium den. In the second couplet, Gong suggests that the addict go take a provincial post in the poppy-growing counties of West and Southwest China, where even during the Cold Food Festival, when cooking fires (and by implication, the burning of opium) are supposed to be extinguished, he could stay high (perhaps fancifully under the influence of the poppies?).

LXXXVI
The addicts' lamps are ranged in groups,
scattered autumn fireflies,
a registrar, fallen on hard times,
his tear-filled eyes aglow.
Why not go govern a city
in some county of poppy flowers,
and sleep through spring never waking
in the Cold Food Festival?

CXXV
All life in China's nine regions
depends on the thundering storm,
thousands of horses all struck dumb
is deplorable indeed.
I urge the Lord of Heaven
to shake us up again
and grant us human talent
not bound to a single kind.

When I was passing Zhen-jiang, I saw a service for the Jade Emperor, the Wind God, and the Thunder God, with thousands and thousand of worshippers. The Daoist priest begged me to write a supplicant verse.

CLXX

The sorrows and joys of my youthful years
surpass those of others,
I wept and sang without cause
and every word was true.
A grown man now, I get around,
naïveté mixed with guile,
but the "child-mind" returns again
to this body in its dreams.

Another Repentance

Buddhists tell of kalpa fires
dissolving all when they come—
what is it endures a thousand years,
raging like tidal bore?

I have ground away the light of day
in writings to save the state,
dark insights and mad ingenuities
recur in midnight hours.

They surge in me like a boiling flood,
needing a sword's blow to sever;
once gone, they are tangled still in thought,
consigned to the flute of poetry.

Heart's medicine, heart's native wit
are both the heart's disease:
I am resolved to burn in the lamp
these words of parable.

"From Spring to Autumn . . ." makes use of one of the favorite figures for representations, and for poetic representations in particular: the dragon flying in the sky with the clouds that accompany it. In order to catch its animate changes, the best representations of the dragon were supposed to show only fragments of the creature behind the cloud, from which the whole could be inferred.

From Spring to Autumn of 1827 Some Things Came to Me
Which I Wrote Down Haphazardly (last of fifteen)

I once wrote a poem swearing off poems;
it was 1820, the poem was wordy.

The most pressing things you want to say
have always been hard to say clearly.

So I'll try to say them with cunning words,
but before I can say them, my voice fails.

I seek no forgiveness from the gods,
and would even less speak it to living men.

To the east of a cloud, one scale exposed,
one claw is exposed on the other side.

But better than showing scale and claw
is to show no claw and scale at all.

More true still of the things I've said—
of scale and claw the lingering trace.

I repent my writings from the very first,
in heart's silence I will strive for Void.

This year I truly swear off poems—
the problem is not that my talent is gone.

Huang Zun-xian (1848–1905)

Not only did Huang Zun-xian represent the most important attempt to reform classical poetry in the nineteenth century, he was also a Qing diplomat and political figure of some note, serving in Chinese embassies and consulates in Tokyo, San Francisco, London, and Singapore. He tried to strip away the allusions, the clichés, and the commonplaces of response in classical poetry and to open up the poetry to the objects and experiences of the new world China was entering. The Chinese poetic language was, however, a stubborn thing. The poems written in the West, such as a long, rather horrified verse narrative on witnessing the turbulent party politics of the 1884 American election, offer rare and frequently surprising perspectives. The following political epigram, written in 1885, protests the British occupation of Hong Kong.

On Reaching Hong Kong

The waters are those of Yao's time,
the sun is the same as Xia's,
also the cap and gown I wear
are the uniform of Han.

Climbing the tower, I look all around—
this truly is my land,
yet on the great flags I do not see
our yellow dragon.

The greater part of Huang Zun-xian's collected poems are on the standard topics of classical poetry; though good, these poems do not stand out strongly. More interesting are those works where the sensibility cultivated by practicing classical poetry accounts for a new experience. In the following quatrain, Huang crosses the international dateline on the second day of the second month, known as the "dawn of flowers." Not only are there no flowers here to enjoy on the two "dawns of flowers." An additional day seems a gratuitous gift for someone worried about wasting the time of his life. It produces a particular problem in arranging the diary—the repetition of a day, but one that is little different from the adjoining day of the same name.

Various Responses on an Ocean Voyage (one of fourteen)

On the eighteenth day of the first month I set off from Yokohama by paddle-wheeled steamer to America, and arrived on the twelfth of the second month. I had nothing to do in the boat, so I wrote these lines haphazardly.

In the years and months of my middle age

I endure being tossed by winds,
more than half of the time of my life
has been thrown away in travels.

Today to break my melancholy

I edit my diary:
in only one year I have received
twice the "dawn of flowers."

Qiu Jin (1879–1907)

Qiu Jin was a member of the revolutionary generation and a martyr of the Revolution. Married and with two children, she left her family in 1904 and went to Japan to study. There she joined the movement to overthrow the Qing government. After returning to China, she founded a newspaper for women and continued her revolutionary activities. Involved in an abortive uprising in An-hui and Zhe-jiang in 1907, she was captured by Qing authorities, and executed.

This poem was written in 1904, after China's various humiliations at the hands of Japan and the Western powers. Qiu Jin was then on her way to Japan. The "bronze camels" were originally in Luo-yang. Suo Jing in the Jin prophesied that he would see them growing with scrub and thorns, and the demise of the Western Jin fulfilled his prophecy. Later the bronze camels came to stand for dynastic ruin.

Mr. Ishii of Japan Seeks a Matching Verse (using his rhymes)

It is rash to say that a woman
can never be a hero,
I ride the wind thousands of miles
heading eastward alone.

The poet's mood: a single sail
on the vast expanse of sea;
soul in dream: the sparkle of moonlight
on three isles of Japan.

The bronze camels have fallen,
in sorrow I turn to look;
the sweating horse at last is shamed
that the deed is left undone.

Such as this is heart's pain
and anger for my own land—
how could I dare in my travels
just pass through the breeze of spring!

On the Yellow Sea: A Man from Japan Sought Some Verses and Also Showed Me a Map of the Russo-Japanese War

Riding the wind for thousands of miles
I left and now return,
a lone body on the eastern sea,
spring thunder in her breast.

Can I bear to look at this map and see
how the colors change;
am I willing to let our rivers and hills
be left to the kalpa fires?

Strong wine can't melt away
tears of care for our land;
to save these times we must depend
on talent beyond the common.

We will spend the blood that flows
from a hundred thousand skulls,
but we must exert our strength to turn
Heaven and Earth aright.

Wang Guo-wei (1877–1927)

Wang Guo-wei was one of the most remarkable late Qing and early Republican intellectuals. He was a scholar of Western philosophy and lover of Schopenhauer; a critic who wrote studies (still used) on the novel *Story of the Stone*, on early drama, and on song lyrics; a scholar of ancient epigraphy; and an historian of the Yuan Dynasty. He was also an ardent Qing loyalist, which is one of the reasons offered to explain his suicide in 1927.

Not only was Wang Guo-wei probably the single most influential critic and theorist of the song lyric, his own works are some of the finest examples of the genre in

the early twentieth century. During an age when momentous political concerns often dominated literature, Wang Guo-wei's song lyrics kept to the old motifs and perfected them according to his own theories of *jing-ji*, the visionary "world" created in a poem.

to "Putting on Lipstick" (*Dian jiang chun*)

Waves follow the currents of cloud,
and the oarsmen's song goes slowly
over the waves away.

Several sounds of the oarlocks
go far into shores of cattails and rushes.

Where setting sunlight strikes current
are several specks of idle egrets and gulls.
At the spot where they fly off low
are countless reeds
that speak in the rustling wind.

As a student of Western thought and literature as well as of Chinese literature, Wang Guo-wei well understood the artificiality of the form in which he worked. More than many of his best-known Chinese contemporaries, Wang gloried in that special poetic world, like many of his Western counterparts. Perhaps such aesthetic radicalism (confined to his work in song lyric) permitted him the whimsical insight of the lyric that follows.

to "Washing Creek Sands" (*Huan xi sha*)

Does something real lie behind
the words in your new songs?
Fancy phrases such as these
can make you want to laugh.
"Broken-hearted in lamplight"—
now who did you write that for?

I lean on the desk and peer around
at recent compositions,
then turn off the light and reckon up
joys known in the past—
trivial passions of the heart,
and nothing corresponds.

This lyric is a fitting coda for classical Chinese literature. Wang Guo-wei is the modern poet, familiar with Western thought and literature, who chooses to work in the old forms. From ancient times, poetry in its various forms was supposed to give outer expression to what lies in the heart. But there is a moment when Wang looks back at his lyrics and realizes they are just words, old clichés, that no longer match what he really felt. If the old poetry is no longer adequate for the consciousness of the modern Chinese writer, however, it is adequate—in this lyric—to declare its own failure.