Chinese Poetry

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The earliest Chinese poetry begins with the *Shih Ching*, a collection of 305 poems of varying length, drawn from all ranks of Chinese society. The title *Shih Ching* is usually translated in English as *The Book of Songs* or sometimes as *The Odes*. *Shih* means "song-words." *Ching* can mean "classic" or "traditional" or in the context of literature, it means "writings" or "scripture." Commentator Mao ordered the poems and assigned each one a number, and his number is still used as the primary means of referring to each poem in Chinese texts, though I have chosen to list my samples below by first lines and titles.

Some of these poems may date back to 1000 BCE. The oldest poem in this collection that can be pinpointed precisely dates back to 621 BCE, the date of the death of Duke Mu of the state of Ch'in. The various poems probably were compiled over several centuries, most of them during the Zhou (also spelled Chou) period around 600 BCE. This treasury of traditional songs is the oldest collection of poems in world literature, and it became one of the Five Confucian Classics.

In spite of the many centuries that the *Shih Ching* embraces, there are several traits prevalent in the poems that later became traits of Chinese poetry generally.

Traits of Classical Chinese poetry:

(1) **Usually, the Chinese poem is fairly simple on the surface.** Western culture, which was influenced by Shakespeare, Milton, and the Romantic poets, had a pronounced tendency to think of poems as ornate, elaborate creations made by a few men of genius. Chinese culture, influenced by the anonymity of the *Shih Ching*, had a tendency to think of poems as something written by common humanity for the eyes of other humans.

(2) **Usually the poem deals with either agrarian imagery, courtship and marriage, or dynastic concerns.** The Zhou (or Chou) dynasty was agrarian in its roots, and for its people, "their sense of beauty and order is closely related to the cycles and abundance of the agricultural year," as Stephen Owen suggests (xx). Likewise, the poems often revolve around the sorrows and joys of romance, or dealt with the heroic and legendary exploits of rulers and kings. Other poems, which probably originated in folk-songs, deal with the everyday trials and tribulations of love, life, and the family.

(3) **Each poem is usually composed of lines of four syllables**, usually with rhymed endings in the original Chinese. Often these four syllables appear as four pictograms. The normal form of the courtship and marriage songs is three verses of four lines each.
Only a single non-fragmentary poem consists of a single quatrain, the form that later became popular in modern Chinese poetry.

(4) The poetic principle organizing the poem is often one of contrast. Often Chinese poetry will juxtapose a natural scene with a social or personal situation. The reader of the poem sees the similarity in the natural description and the human condition, and comes to a new awareness of each by this contrast. In Chinese, this idea is embodied in the terms fu, bi, and xing (pronounced "shing"). Fu refers to a straightforward narrative with a beginning, middle, and conclusion, that stands by itself. Bi, literally "against," implies a comparison or contrast, placing two things side by side. When one takes two different fu, and places them together, the two create a bi. This results in xing, a mental stimulation or "lightning" that pervades the mind of the reader, bringing new insight or awareness into the nature of the individual fu that compose the poem. Confucius stated that this xing is the purpose of poetry, that the point of a poem was to make the mind contemplate its subject deeply.

Like European poetry, Chinese poetry often relies on alliteration, repetition, and onomatopoeia to create its effects. Song #1 of the Shih Ching (#87 in the Waley anthology) illustrates this point when we contrast the original Chinese with the English translation of the poem.

Additionally, the Shih Ching contains four general subtypes of poems:

1. Feng, (folk-songs or aires, which I find the most beautiful of all the poems)
2. Minor Odes
3. Major Odes
4. Dynastic Songs

Some samples of the poems appear below. They are all in English translation. Most are based on the 1937 translation by Arthur Waley, with a few select notes culled from the 1987 reprint and a few minor revisions of my own based on my limited knowledge of Mandarin. The excerpts from the Tao Te Ching are from D. C. Lau’s translation, with minor emendations of my own. I am not a fluent speaker of Chinese, however, so students might wish to trust Lau and Waley’s judgment more than my own. Poems not from the Tao Te Ching or the Shih Ching include explanatory notes stating from which poet or poetic work they originate.

"Fair, Fair,' Cry the Ospreys" (a Chinese poem in celebration of a royal marriage)

"Falling Flowers" (a short poem--the party is over)

"Impromptu" (the poet Meng Chiao’s advice to young men concerning women)
“Inch of Ashes: The East Wind Sighs” (heartbreak and illicit liaisons by night)

“In the Wilds There is a Dead Doe” (a Mandarin poem about a lady seduced by a knight in the woods)

“King Wên is on High” (a dynastic poem celebrating the nobility of Zhou and the Mandate of Heaven)

“Mighty is God on High” (a dynastic poem celebrating the rise of the Zhou and the fall of the Yin,)

“Outside the Eastern Gate” (a love-sick young man's lamentation as he seeks "Mrs. Right")

“Song of the Bronze Statue” (a haunting and beautiful poem about past civilizations and the passage of time)

“Starshine and Non-Being” (a philosophical conundrum by Chuang-Tzu)

“The Stones Where the Wood Haft Rotted” (the passage of time told in the imagery of Chinese folklore)

Ta Ssu Ming (“The Greater Master of Fate”)

Tao Te Ching (some excerpts from Lao-Tzu's philosophical and poetic work on the Tao-the Way)

To Li Chien (an old soldier thinking back on his friends in youth)

Toward Evening (a short poem about an unhappy marriage)

“Unsteady is that Cypress Boat” (a poem about romantic betrayal)

“A Very Handsome Gentleman” (a poem about a girl's regrets and the strictness of her family)

“When I Was Alive” (alias "Bearer's Song"--a poem about death from the viewpoint of the dead).

Works Cited:

