

## *A Tribute to Sung Poetry*

*I do sing because I must,  
And pipe but as the linnets sing.*

So wrote Tennyson. Tennyson would have been right, were he born in the Elizabethan age, when a full array of poets vied to sing spontaneously without self-consciousness. The Victorian age, however, was the age of Darwinism. Thomas Carlyle wrote that his generation had "walked by the light of conflagration, and amid the sound of falling cities; and now there is darkness, and long watching till it be morning." Arnold, Clough, Swinburne, to name a few, were "poets between two worlds". Tennyson wrote "Crossing the Bar" at the last moment, but in his heart he knew

*Knowledge comes, but wisdom lingers.*

He would have also been right, were he born in the T'ang Dynasty of China, when hundreds of flowers blossomed in the field of poesy. Curiously enough, the T'ang poets had much in common with their Elizabethan brethren. They were born in an age of expansion, culturally, emotionally and nationally. The T'ang Dynasty lasted from 618 to 906 A.D. and later critics often divided it into four periods: the Early, the High, the Middle and the Late, each having its own major poets as its priests. Li Po (the celestial poet) and Tu Fu (the sage poet) towered among the lesser but nonetheless outstanding poets just as Shakespeare did among his contemporaries. A further point of similarity was that the T'ang and the Elizabethan poets completely overshadowed the Sung and seventeenth century poets that followed in their footsteps and relegated them to a minor position in the development of poetic literature of both China and England. The most popular anthology of poetry in China has been *300 T'ang Poems*, a collection produced in the 18th century, which still remains one of the best sellers of all time. Palgrave's anthology *The Golden Treasury of Songs and Lyrics* (1861), gave equal importance to the Romantics as well as the Elizabethans at the expense of Donne among other poets. It was used as a textbook and dominated the poetic taste for more than half a century.

While the affinity between the T'ang and Elizabethan periods is striking, the similar fate suffered by the Sung and Metaphysical poets is hardly a coincidence. The Sung Dynasty has been considered the age of prose or the culmination of a new genre, the Tz'u. Any Chinese youth who tried to learn to compose classical poetry was advised to model after the T'ang masters and to shun the bad examples of the Sung poets. The Metaphysical poets as a body have remained unnoticed by the English public, and were "more often named than read and more often read than profitably studied." The general reading public was led to

believe that anything worth saying and saying it well was already done by their predecessors. The Sung and the Metaphysical poets had to discover new ways to express themselves, such as the particular emphases on allusions, parallelism and rhyming effects on the part of the Sung poets and the reliance on conceits on the part of the Metaphysical poets.

Even in the Sung Dynasty itself, one of its major critics, Yen Yu 嚴羽 (1180-1235), cried out in his *Ts'ang-lang shih-hua* 滄浪詩話 (*Ts'ang Lang's Remarks on Poetry*):

The poets of the High T'ang relied on its inspired feelings, like the antelope that hangs by its horns, leaving no traces to be found . . . has limited words but unlimited meaning. As for recent gentlemen, they come up with strange interpretations and understanding (of poetry); and so they take (mere) words as poetry, take talent and learning as poetry, take discussions as poetry. . . . They are practically taking abusive language as poetry. When poetry has reached such a state, it can be called a disaster.<sup>1</sup>

No wonder the Ming poets and critics either created and rallied behind the "Restore Ancients (T'ang)" school or simply refused to read anything written after the T'ang Dynasty. Li P'an-lung 李攀龍 (1514-1570), one of the Late Seven Masters, compiled an anthology of poetry which skipped from the T'ang Dynasty to the Ming Dynasty and omitted the entire Sung period. There were, of course, a number of writers who held different views and made a few objective and balanced remarks. However, it was not until the late Ch'ing Dynasty and the beginning of the Republic that we began to witness a reappraisal and reevaluation of Sung poetry on its own merits. New anthologies and appreciations began to appear occasionally, and it has begun to receive its deserved treatment. The Metaphysical poets went through a similar wheel of fortune. Donne's fame sank to a low level in the eighteenth century, though it had remained high up to the Restoration. Nineteenth-century taste was hardly more favourable to him. Coleridge made some discriminating praise on Donne and his school, but Sir Walter Scott complained: "They played with thoughts as the Elizabethans played with words." It was not until the turn of the century that critical opinion changed in Donne's favour. In 1921, Sir Herbert Grierson published the anthology, *Metaphysical Lyrics and Poems of the Seventeenth Century: Donne to Butler*, of which T.S. Eliot wrote a favourable review. As a part of the general reaction of the modern poets against Romanticism, Donne's poetry became a vogue, to which T.S. Eliot himself contributed considerably. The Metaphysical poets finally enjoyed a period of glory.

It would not be responsible, or reasonable for that matter to dismiss the Sung poets as unworthy successors to the T'ang masters who had built up a poetic empire. As Ch'ien Chung-shu 錢鍾書 puts it succinctly in his Preface to *Sung-shih hsuan-chu* 宋詩選註 (An Annotated Anthology of Sung Poetry):

It was a great fortune and at the same time a great misfortune for the Sung poets to have T'ang poetry as their models. Fortunate, because Sung poets could learn the art of writing poetry the easy way, to perfect themselves in poetic technique and diction; unfortunate, because they could afford to be negligent, indulging in sheer laziness by imitating and relying on their previous models.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Taken from James J.Y. Liu's translation in his *Chinese Theories of Literature* (Chicago, 1975), P. 39. 宋詩選註 (An Annotated Anthology of Sung Poetry) (Peking, 1958), P. 13.

<sup>2</sup>Ch'ien Chung-shu 錢鍾書: *Sung-shih hsuan-chu*

It is our obligation, then, to study Sung poetry objectively, separating the deliberate search for new effects with emphasis shifted to the intellection and introspection from mere continuation and repetition of the excellences of T'ang poets. In his essay on Sung Poetry written in 1940, Professor Miao Yueh 繆鉞 lists the characteristics in which the Sung poets excelled their masters: (1) the use of allusion; (2) the sentence structure; (3) the rhyme and (4) the tonal uniqueness. He uses a striking metaphor to compare the two schools:

Tasting T'ang poetry is like eating a litchi; once one is put in your mouth, its sweetness and fragrance overwhelms your palate. Tasting Sung poetry is like eating an olive; at first it may be astringent, but its pleasant after-taste lingers on.<sup>3</sup>

In 1962, Professor Kojiro Yoshikawa 吉川幸次郎 presented us with some statistics to show that poetry was carried on and produced even more extensively in the Sung Dynasty than the T'ang Dynasty. *Sung-shih chi-shih* 宋詩紀事 (Notes on Sung poetry) compiled by Li Ê 厲鶚, a scholar of the eighteenth century, lists 3,812 poets. *Ch'uan T'ang-shih* 全唐詩 (Complete T'ang Poetry), also compiled in the eighteenth century at the command of the Emperor K'ang-hsi, on the other hand, contains works of a little over 2,200 poets. In the case of more famous poets, the numbers of poems handed down by individual Sung poets far surpass their counterparts in the T'ang Dynasty. Thus in the Sung Dynasty, we have

Lu Yu 陸游	9,200 poems
Yang Wan-li 楊萬里	over 3,000 poems
Mei Yao-chen 梅堯臣	2,800 poems
Su T'ung-po 蘇東坡	2,400 poems

It is to be noted that the existing poems of Lu Yu were almost all written when he was over forty. The most prolific T'ang poets are:

Po Chü-i 白居易	2,800 poems
Tu Fu 杜甫	2,200 poems
Li Po 李白	over 1,000 poems

If numerical superiority alone does not constitute poetic excellency, Professor Yoshikawa lists the following characteristics to set Sung poetry apart from the poetry that precedes it:— (1) its narrative tendency; (2) its concern for daily life; (3) its sense of social involvement; (4) its philosophical and discursive nature; (5) its transcendence of sorrow; (6) its attainment of serenity and (7) its deliberate attempt to shun elegance in expression. Strangely enough, with the typical oriental preoccupation with food, Professor Yoshikawa gives the following comparison:

We might say that T'ang poetry could be likened to wine, and Sung poetry to tea.<sup>4</sup>

It can be seen that Professor Miao's emphasis is on the technique and Professor Yoshikawa attaches more importance to the contents of Sung poetry. Of course, there are always

<sup>3</sup>Miao Yueh 繆鉞: *Shih-tzu san-lun* 詩詞散論 (Scattered Studies on Shih and Tz'u) (Shanghai, 1948), P. 17.

<sup>4</sup>Kojiro Yoshikawa 吉川幸次郎: *An Introduction to Sung Poetry*, translated by Burton Watson, (1967, Harvard), P. 37.

exceptions. We can locate some Sung poets who do not possess the qualities mentioned above; on the other hand, we may discover their presence in a number of T'ang poets. The boundaries of the Poetry World are not clearly divided by lines of demarcation into small nations and big countries. It must be said that both professors have made their point in establishing Sung poetry as an independent body, perhaps a negative reaction against the passion and elegance of the previous period, but nevertheless representing a different civilization and attitude towards life and nature, expressed in the conventional form but in an individual manner. Before Sung poetry can be properly appreciated by scholars as well as the man in the street, much solid work needs to be done. Complete Sung Poetry has to be compiled, despite the fact that its bulk may be several times more than that of the *Ch'uan T'ang-shih*. Anthologies, selections of individual authors with annotations, concordances and indexes and general and specialized studies have to be gradually produced in order to gain a true insight into the achievements of Sung poetry, which is only its due.

What is attempted below is a mere endeavour to display one minor facet of Sung poetry which has been more or less neglected. It is by no means a dominant trait but nevertheless differentiates itself from T'ang poetry. The seventeen poems selected have been collected for their outward appearance of being natural, simple, casual, straightforward and serene. But these qualities are deceptive and achieved only after a studied, contrived and deliberate effort. Some of the characteristics mentioned by the two professors can be found in these *chüeh-chü* 絕句 or quatrains. The first two lines of "Bamboos in Ink" contained two paralleled allusions. Antitheses can be found within one line, like line 1 of "Travelling", lines 2, 3 and 4 of "Occasional Poem", and line 3 of "At the Mouth of the River Tiao-po". Parallelisms can be found in lines 1 and 2 of "Spring Song at the Three Terraces" and lines 1 and 2 of "Written on the Walls of T'ai-I Palace". "Evening at Sea: An Occasional Poem" and "Bamboos in Ink" each comprise 2 parallelisms, rarely found in the quatrain form. The words Shuang 霜 (frost) and Yen 雁 (geese) are much abused clichés of classical Chinese poetry, but when the poet turns them from nouns into verbs in "Still Night" they suddenly acquire a new lease on life. Both the translator and the compiler have found it to be a labour of love and they entertain the idea of doing more work along the same line in future as their tribute to Sung poetry.

—STEPHEN C. SOONG