

繆鉞：論詞

The Chinese Lyric

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Origins

CHANG HUI-YEN 張惠言, in the Preface to his *Lyric Anthology* 詞選序, gives a most succinct account of the origins of the lyric: "It originated," he writes, "with the poets of the T'ang dynasty, who made new metres out of popular songs, adding their own words, or 'lyrics'."

T'ang verse, though written in lines of regular length, was sung to irregular tunes, and the singer had to match text with music by adding words as he went along. In time this practice was felt to be too clumsy, and poets, either in response to musicians' requests or on their own initiative, created the new lyric form, which followed the melodic pattern and was easier to sing. The biography of Wen T'ing-yün 溫庭筠 in the *Old T'ang History* 舊唐書, for example, says that "he followed the music of strings and flutes to create his original and captivating lyrics". Such were the beginnings of the lyric as a poetic form.

The new form was at first called "lyrics to music" 曲子詞, then "lyrics" for short. So lyrics are just words to music, and there is no deeper significance in the derivation of the term. It is true that in the ancient dictionary *Shuo Wen* 說文 we find the word *tz'u* 詞 defined as "the Outward Expression of an Inward Idea". But this refers to *tz'u* in the compound *yü-tz'u* 語詞, "verbal expression". Tuan Yü-ts'ai 段玉裁 glosses it as "words with either a descriptive or an expletive function". *Tz'u* as a literary term has a quite separate history. The pregnant nature of lyric verse, which coincided so well with the Inwardness of the *Shuo Wen* definition, may have led writers of a later age to invent this derivation. We come across it for the first time in the Sung dynasty, in Lu Wen-kuei 陸文圭's Preface to the lyrics of Chang Yen 張炎: *White Clouds in the Hills* 山中白雲詞序. Later Chang Hui-yen was particularly fond of the theory, and it became accepted as part of the critical orthodoxy. But the first lyric poets of the Middle and Late T'ang had no such meaning in mind.¹

¹The lyrics traditionally ascribed to Li Po have been shown in recent times to be forgeries. The first lyrics date from Middle T'ang.

Form

THE LYRICS OF MIDDLE and Late T'ang, of the Five Dynasties and of the early years of Northern Sung were all *hsiao ling* 小令, or Short Snatches, and their prosodic features were still similar to those of regular verse.² For example: *Sheng-chatzu* 生查子 (The Hawthorn Song) resembles a double five-syllable quatrain in Oblique rhyme; *Yü-lou ch'un* 玉樓春 (Spring in the Jade Pavilion) resembles a double seven-syllable quatrain in Oblique rhyme; *Che-ku t'ien* 鷓鴣天 (Partridge Skies) resembles a double seven-syllable quatrain in Level rhyme, except that the first line of the second quatrain is divided into two three-syllable lines. Other metres, including *Lang t'ao sha* 浪淘沙 (Waves Wash the Sand), *Lin-chiang hsien* 臨江仙 (Fairy at the Riverside), *Yü mei-jen* 虞美人 (Beautiful Lady Yü), *P'u-sa man* 菩薩蠻 (Strangers in Saint's Coif) are all basically five-syllable or seven-syllable metres, with the addition or subtraction of an occasional syllable. In most cases the rules for tonal euphony within the line are similar to and no stricter than those of Regulated Verse.

By the reign of the Sung emperor Jen-tsung 仁宗 (1023-1064), the longer *man tz'u* 慢詞, or Slow Songs, had come into fashion, and in subsequent years musical specialists like Chou Pang-yen, Mo-chi Ya-yen 萬俟雅言 and Chiang K'uei 姜夔 created new metres, and lyric prosody began to acquire a greater complexity. Tonal rules became stricter, and finer distinctions were drawn between both *Yin* and *Yang* tones and Rising and Falling tones. Sometimes lyric poets deliberately created a distorted sound (by the use of irregular tonal sequences), in order to give a feeling of agitation or distress. The later lyrics were moving further and further from the prosody of Regulated Verse and of the earlier Snatches.

An example of the new tonal finesse can be found in the last line of the metre *An hsiang* 暗香 (Faint Fragrance), where the four syllables must be

1. Rising
2. Level
3. Falling
4. Entering

in that order, with no substitution allowed between the three Oblique Tones. e.g.

幾時見得 (Chiang K'uei)

兩隄翠匝 (Wu Wen-ying 吳文英)

In addition to the tones, there were four further subdivisions: Stressed and Unstressed, Voiced and Voiceless. Chang Yen tells how his father, Chang Shu 張樞, when composing a lyric to the metre *Hsi hua ch'un* 惜花春 (Treasuring Spring Blossoms), found the word "deep" 深 in the line "the latticed casement deep" 瑣窗深 unmusical. He changed it to "dark" 幽. He was still not satisfied, however, and only thought the line sufficiently musical (i.e. singable) when he changed the last word again, this time to "bright" 明. All three words are in the old Level Tone, so what was bothering him? The answer is to be found in the phonetic niceties of the Five Sonorities—labial, dental, guttural, lingual and nasal—and in the associated qualities of Stress and Voicing (see Chang Yen's *Origins of the Lyric* 詞源). Distinctions as fine as this had never been observed in Regulated Verse.

²Prosody is used here as a conventional equivalent of *chü fa* 句法, and refers to pattern of line length.

There were also strict rhyming rules in lyric composition. Oblique rhyme usually included all three Oblique Tones. But some metres specified the Entering tone. The *Tz'u-lin cheng-yün* 詞林正韻 by Ko Tsai 戈載 lists more than twenty such metres. If we check them against existing lyrics written in Sung times, we find that not all conform to this rule. But some do, like Chiang K'uei's *An hsiang* (Faint Fragrance), *Shu ying* 疏影 (Scattered Shadows), *P'i-p'a hsien* 琵琶仙 (Fairy with the P'i-pa), and *Ch'i-liang fan* 淒涼犯 (Lonely Song in Parallel Keys). These all have a strong, stirring sonority, and for such "blasts on a muted Tartar pipe", rhymes on the Entering tone were clearly suitable.³ Rhymes on Rising or Falling tones, while permissible, would somehow alter the effect. *Ch'iu hsiao yin* 秋宵吟 (Autumn Nocturne) and *Ch'ing shang yüan* 清商怨 (Elegy in the Key of Ch'ing-shang) should have a Rising rhyme throughout; *Ts'ui lou yin* 翠樓吟 (Song of the Blue Pavilion) and *Chü-hua hsin* 菊花新 (Fresh Chrysanthemums) should have a Falling rhyme throughout; while some metres have a Rising rhyme in some lines and a Falling rhyme in others, or have set rhyming tones only at the beginning and end of the stanza. It has been said that overstrictness in the rules of regular verse is akin to hardness of heart; but the rules of lyric verse are even stricter—sometimes indeed as rigorous as the proverbial laws of Shen Pu-hai 申不害 and Han Fei-tzu 韓非子.

So, although the lyric was at first only an offshoot of regular verse (as evidenced by another of its early names, Ends of Verse—詩餘), it subsequently flourished in its own right. Like a satellite state, that grows into an independent nation, the lyric grew to maturity, acquired its own unique forms and with the passing of time underwent a more and more complex transformation.

Content

WE SHOULD NOT HOWEVER give the impression that the lyric differs from regular verse only in its outward form, its prosodic structure and tonal rules. There is also a marked difference in its content, in the moods it evokes and the worlds it creates.⁴ Outward form may be more crudely tangible than inner content, and in a superficial way easier to differentiate. But at a deeper level content is cause and form only effect. In other words, difference of content precedes difference of form, and if we wish to understand how lyric verse differs from regular verse, and how it grew out of the regular mould and established its own separate identity, its own world, we

³C.N. Tay, in his article "From Snow to Plum Blossoms", *Journal of Asian Studies*, 25 no. 2, 1966, compares the "abrupt Entering tone" to a "thud on a muffled drum". Level, Rising and Falling tones he compares respectively to a "dong" (the drum struck at the centre), a "drone" (near the periphery) and a "tom" (forcefully at the centre). He also observes that the two tone categories (Level and Oblique) perform a function in Chinese verse similar to that played by stress in English verse. They are, he says, analogous respectively to "reverberant bells and drums, and dull rapping on wood and rock".

⁴For a good synopsis of the meaning of "world" in Chinese poetics, see James J. Y. Liu, *The Art of Chinese Poetry*, pp. 81-87.

must examine not the secondary differences of form, but the primary differences of content.

When men commit their inner experiences to paper, they may begin by writing prose. But some of these experiences may be too abstruse and subtle for the medium of prose. It is to express these that poetry comes into being. Prose is explicit statement, poetry veiled innuendo; prose is plainspoken, while poetry abounds in metaphors; prose is full and exhaustive, poetry restrained and suggestive. These two forms differ in accordance with the subtlety of their content. Each has its limitations. Poetry can reach beyond the bounds of prose, but cannot encompass the same range.

Although poetry in general deals with the subtler aspects of human experience, there is a still more elusive and refined level of subtlety, a still greater delicacy of nuance, that cannot find expression in the regular poetic forms, even if these are stretched to their utmost limits. A new form is needed. This is where the lyric comes in. Not as the conscious creation of one or two individuals, but as the natural product of experiment and evolution. We have already described how poets of the Middle T'ang, who had previously written in the regular forms, began to write in lines of varying length, in order to fit the irregular melodic patterns. The very first lyrics were in one sense no more than a solution to a musical problem, and the lyric verse of Po Chü-i 白居易, Liu Yü-hsi 劉禹錫 and their contemporaries was not so very different in mood from their regular verse. But once they had led the way, more and more poets experimented with the form, and as they gradually discovered the wealth of different metres, each with its distinctive pattern of varying line-length and its own rhythmic lilt, they realized that here was a form at once lighter and more supple than regular verse. It was perfectly suited to the expression of those very experiences, those subtle feelings and fugitive melancholy moods, that were beyond the reach of the old regular forms. Once one or two writers of genius had exploited its special qualities and revealed its unique possibilities, the lyric was established as an independent literary form.

Wen Ting-yun and Wei Chuang 韋莊 wrote both regular and lyric verse. Wen's lyrics have a wistful melancholy and a mellifluous beauty. Here is one, to the tune *Keng-lou tzu* 更漏子 (The Water Clock):

*Embers of incense
In the jade brazier
With candle's crimson tears
Conspire
To glow on gilded walls,
Autumnal mood,
Faded make-up, hair awry,
Coverlet and pillow cold,
A long night
Ahead.*

玉爐香
紅蠟淚
偏照畫堂秋思
眉翠薄
鬢雲殘
夜長衾枕寒

*At midnight the rain
On the wu-t'ung tree
Not knowing the pain
Of loneliness
Falls leaf to leaf
Dripping
On the bare steps
Till dawn.*

梧桐樹
三更雨
不道離情正苦
一葉葉
一聲聲
空階滴到明

Wei Chuang's lyrics have a quiet charm, a subtle enchantment. Here is one, to the tune *Ho-yeh pei* 荷葉杯 (The Lotus Leaf Cup):

*I remember
That year among the flowers
Deep in the night
Meeting my love
For the first time:
West of the Water Pavilion
Behind painted curtains,
Holding hands,
A secret tryst.*

*Heart-ache
At the morning oriole's cry,
As the tattered moon went down,
And we said goodbye!
Since then,
Not a word.
We are both far from home;
Why should we ever meet again?*

記得那年花下
深夜
初識謝娘時
水堂西面畫簾垂
攜手暗相期

惆悵曉鶯殘月
相別
從此隔音塵
如今俱是異鄉人
相見更無因

Wen T'ing-yün and Wei Chuang have created a new world. Nowhere in their regular verse is such an atmosphere as this to be found. If the lyric form had not existed, they could never have embodied this inner world so fully. Li Shang-yin 李商隱 stretched the regular verse-forms to their limit of subtlety and refinement. Beyond this limit, poets were compelled to strike out and find a fresh form, just as water breaks out of an old course into a new channel. It was a natural process. As so often happens, simple beginnings led to far-reaching consequences. The poets of Middle T'ang, when they first modified regular verse to make it easier to sing, could hardly have foreseen what their simple innovations would lead to.

So although in a loose sense lyric verse is akin to regular verse and distinct from prose, if we look more closely we find that it is also quite distinct from regular verse. Regular verse seems explicit when compared with the even more suggestive and veiled mode of expression found in the lyric; it seems plainspoken and exhaustive, when compared with the even more symbolic and restrained style of the lyric. To quote Wang Kuo-wei 王國維:

“The lyric form is one of exquisite refinement and sophisticated beauty. While this enables it to deal with subjects that are beyond the scope of regular verse, it also limits its range. Regular verse is broader in scope, the lyric deeper in expression.” This is the principal distinction between the two forms. (*Lyric Remarks for the Human World* 人間詞話)

Since the lyric is concerned with the subtlest levels of human experience, its chosen themes, the worlds it creates, its sounds and colours must be correspondingly subtle. We can summarize these under four broad headings.

I. *Delicacy of Language*

While both the writer of regular verse and the lyric poet embody human experience through imagery, while both use natural scenery and living things—animals, birds, plants and trees of all kinds—to create moods, the lyric poet will always choose the more ethereal and exquisite image. When describing the sky, he will prefer a faint rain, a solitary cloud, scattered stars and a pale moon. His landscape will tend to be one of distant peaks, meandering banks, misty isles and fishermen’s shoals. For his creatures he will prefer the petrel, the flitting oriole, the cold cicada or newly-arrived geese. For vegetation, wilting blossoms, floating catkins, fragrant herbs and weeping willows. His buildings will consist of painted ceilings, gilded halls, fretted casements and carved portals. His household objects will be such things as silver lamps, golden censers, phoenix screens and jade goblets. When describing jewelry and clothes, he will imagine iridescent sleeves, gauze apparel, jasper hairpin and kingfisher diadem. His preferred emotions will be groundless grief, sweet musings, quiet enjoyment, and feelings of seclusion. Even the language used to describe the most ordinary setting will be exquisite and delicate. For instance, pavilion and hall are common enough things. But “windswept pavilion, moonlit hall” (from one of Liu Yung 柳永’s lyrics) are at once part of a more rarefied world. Again, flowers and willows are common enough. But “willows at dusk, flowers in the twilight” (from a lyric by Shi Ta-tsu 史達祖) evoke a very special atmosphere of quiet seclusion. While this type of language is inappropriate in prose, and even in regular verse can seem precious if not used with discretion, in lyric verse it is perfect. Each form has its own standard of appropriateness.

A lyric poet will use delicate imagery to express even a tragic or heroic sentiment. When Chiang K’uei passed through Yangchou, he wrote in his *Yangchou Man* 楊州慢 (Yangchou Elegy) of his grief at the aftermath of the Jurchid incursion led by Wan-yen Liang 完顏亮:

*After the raid,
The Tartar cavalry have gone,
Leaving behind
Ruined ponds,
Withered trees,
And a people
Loth to mention war.*

自胡馬窺江去後
廢池喬木
猶厭言兵
.....

And later in the same poem:

*The Twenty Four Bridges
Have survived:
A ripple in midstream,
Cold moon,
Silence.*

二十四橋仍在
波心蕩
冷月無聲

Ponds, trees, ripple and moon—all delicate touches. Lamenting the decline of the Southern Sung, Chiang wrote the lines:

*Alas! a whole nation
Made over to cuckoo-song!*

Pa Keui 八歸

最可惜
一片江山
總付與啼鳩

Here again, a delicate image, this time of the cuckoo.

Hsin Ch'i-chi's lyrics are powerful and free, and yet, when he wished to express his bitterness at the national decline and at his own personal rejection, he wrote lines such as these: from the end of *Mo yü-erh* 摸魚兒 (Catching Fish):

*Do not gaze
From that high balcony:
The sunset
And misty willows
Are a sight to break the heart.*

休去倚危闌
斜陽正在
煙柳斷腸處

Images like the "high balcony" and the "misty willows" convey his passionate indignation with a subtlety and delicacy appropriate to the lyric form.

As a final example of delicacy, here is Ch'in Kuan 秦觀's lyric to the tune *Huan hsi sha* 浣溪沙 (Wash Creek Sand):

*Silently a light chill
drifts up to my chamber.
Dawn shadows loiter
like autumn lees.
Pale haze
on the moving stream—
The painted screen
encloses a sequestered ease.*

漠漠輕寒上小樓
曉陰無賴似窮秋
淡煙流水畫屏幽

*Carefree flying petals
light as dreams,
Endless silken threads of rain
fine as care.
Limp,
from its tiny silver hook*

自在飛花輕似夢
無邊絲雨細如愁
寶簾閒掛小銀鉤

Hangs
the embroidered portière.

In this perfect fusion, emotion and setting enhance each other like pearl and jade in a necklace. It is one of Ch'in Kuan's finest poems. Take the setting: a little room, and within it a painted screen; on the screen, a pale haze on the stream; an embroidered portière hangs from a tiny silver hook. The physical details are all exquisite. The time of day is dawn, when shadows loiter and a light chill drifts silently upwards. Not just any shadows, but dawn shadows, not just an ordinary chill, but a light chill. And both further attenuated by the words "loiter" and "silently": Outside, the petals fly, carefree and light as dreams; the rain falls in threads, endless and fine as care; throughout the poem, the choice of images and the way in which they are used show a masterly skill, a wonderfully suggestive and delicate touch.

The five-syllable Regulated Octet has been compared to an élite gathering of cultured gentlemen, to which butchers and wine-merchants could not possibly be admitted. I would compare this lyric of Ch'in Kuan's to a gathering of beautiful ladies and young maidens in a garden pavilion, too select not only for commoners but even for scholars and hermits. Its exclusive quality enables it to capture the subtle fragrance, the ineffable essence of an experience, and in reading it we feel transported to a purer and more mysterious realm, and my heart is filled with an almost unbearable melancholy. Even the regular verse of Li Shang-yin does not have such a haunting and magical effect. This is the peculiar power of the lyric poet, to create with delicate imagery a unique world embodying his intimate personal experience. The words are tangible, but their ultimate meaning is elusive. Though small and delicate in themselves, they have the power to suggest something much larger. At a first reading they strike the ear and eye with a vivid impact. Prolonged recitation brings out their deeper and more abiding fascination.

II. *Lightness of Substance*

Chen Tzu-lung 陳子龍 wrote: "The lyric is a fragile form. Pearls and kingfisher feathers are too heavy for it, let alone dragon and phoenix." It is only natural that with delicacy of language should go lightness of substance. Although regular verse and lyric verse are not material objects, and we cannot actually put them on the scales, if we recite them to ourselves and mull them over, we become aware of a relative difference in weight. That is not to say that the lyric is trivial. In a lyric, a very serious idea would still be expressed in a light and ethereal fashion. This is dictated by the nature of the form. Let me give an example. We all know what it is like to be reunited with family and friends after a long absence. The joy is so intense, we feel almost as if in a dream. Tu Fu, in his poem "Ch'iang village", tells how after the An Lu-shan 安祿山 troubles he returned home, to find

| | |
|--|-------|
| <i>Wife and children amazed that I'm alive:</i> | 妻孥怪我在 |
| <i>The first shock over, still they wipe their eyes.</i> | 驚定還拭淚 |
| <i>Through the turmoil of the civil war</i> | 世亂遭飄蕩 |
| <i>Kind fate protected me.</i> | 生還偶然逢 |
| <i>Neighbours come crowding to the fence</i> | 鄰人滿牆頭 |

With sobs and sighs of disbelief.

感歎亦歎歎

.....

*When night falls, we light our candle,
Gazing at each other as in a dream.*

夜闌更秉燭
相對如夢寐

A deep feeling weightily expressed, striking the reader with the force of a rock plunging from a perilous height. Compare it with Yen Chi-tao 晏幾道's lyric to the tune *Che-ku t'ien* 鷓鴣天 (Partridge Skies), describing his reunion with his beloved after a long separation:

*Since we parted
I would recall our days together.
How often
My dreaming soul joined yours!
Tonight
By the silver taper's light
We'll gaze,
Afraid this meeting
Is just another dream.*

從別後
憶相逢
幾回魂夢與君同
今宵賸把銀釭照
猶恐相逢是夢中

The sentiment is very close to Tu Fu's, but cast in a lyric mould its substance becomes lighter and more ethereal, the lightness giving it a dappled grace, like that of a dragonfly skimming the water and whirling through the air, or of a still lake in which the wind stirs a slight ripple. This grace is the hallmark of the lyric. For weight and strength it cannot compare with regular verse. But it excels in lilt and charm, helped in this by its metrical irregularity.

III. Narrowness of Range

Prose can be philosophical, narrative, lyrical or descriptive. Regular verse is usually either lyrical or descriptive, but can also be philosophical or narrative. Lyric verse can *only* be lyrical or descriptive. It is totally unsuited to both philosophy and narration. This is partly because of its metrical intricacy, but is also caused by the essential nature of the lyric form.

Su Shi 蘇軾 (Tung-p'o) and Hsin Ch'i-chi 辛棄疾, both masters of the lyric form, tried using it for philosophical themes. Here are two examples, the first by Su, to the tune *Man t'ing fang* 滿庭芳 (A Courtyard Full of Fragrance):

*For Fame as insubstantial as the horn of a snail,
For Profit the size of the head of a fly—
Why make a fuss,
When gain and loss
Are fixed before we even try?
While I'm young and have the leisure
Let me have my bit of pleasure,
Even if a hundred years from now*

蝸角虛名
蠅頭微利
算來著甚乾忙
事前皆定
誰弱又誰強
且趁閒身未老
儘放我
些子疏狂

*I have nothing more to show
Than thirty-six thousand five hundred
Drunken fits!*

百年裏
渾教是醉
三萬六千場

The second, by Hsin, is to the tune *Shao pien* 哨遍 (A Slow Chant):

*Two snails-horn kingdoms fight:
Buffetland to the left,
Mauletania to the right.
The battlefield stretches
A thousand miles.
The little mind,
So circumscribed,
Though void,
Contains the Infinite.
In which light,
What need of parables to prove
Mount Tai no bigger than a strand
Of hair?
The universe has always been
A grain of sand.
Size is a relative idea.
Dove and eagle are quite content
Each to follow his own bent.
Robber Chi a saint
Makes Confucius a sinner;
Joy for a dead child
Means grief for Methuselah.
Have you ever heard
Fire Rats discussing the cold,
Or Ice Worms debating the heat?
Whose is the last word?*

蝸角鬪爭
左觸右蠻
一戰連千里
君試思
方寸此心微
總虛空
並無包際
喻此理
何言泰山毫末
從來天地一稊米
嗟大小相形
鳩鵬自樂
之二蟲又何知
記跖行仁義孔丘非
更殤樂長年老彭悲
火鼠論寒
冰蠶語熱
定誰同異

Both these poems fall flat, and the banal effect they create is sufficient proof that the philosophical experiment has failed.

Quotations too, from the Classics, the Histories, the Philosophers and even from Buddhist literature, while they may be introduced quite happily into regular verse, usually seem out of place in lyric verse; Hsin Ch'i-chi was adept at using other men's lines, and his lyrics are often a patchwork of quotations. His favourite sources are the *Analects*, *Mencius*, the *Tso Chuan* 左傳, *Chuang-tzu* 莊子, the *Songs of the South* 離騷, the *Historical Records* 史記, the *Han History* 漢書, *A New Account of Tales of the World* 世說新語, *Chao-ming Wen Hsüan* 昭明文選 and the poetry of Li Po and Tu Fu. Take lines such as

*Nothing can be better
Than to be able*

最好五十學易
三百篇詩

*To devote oneself to the Changes
And the Odes . . .
At the age of fifty*

P'o-lo-men yin 婆羅門引
(The Brahman Song)

and

*Success and failure,
Survival and destruction,
Promotion and rejection
Are all the same to me.
I'd like to ask Fan Chi
About farming.
A humble cottage can make a resting place,
Cattle and sheep
Coming home at sunset.*

進退存亡
行藏用舍
小人請學樊遲稼
衡門之下可棲遲
日之夕矣牛羊下

T'a so hsing 踏莎行⁵

Such writing is inappropriate in lyric verse.

Sung dynasty lyric poets often used lines from the regular verse of such poets as Li Ho 李賀, Li Shang-yin and Wen T'ing-yün. But then this was exquisite and sumptuous poetry to begin with, and lent itself to such adaptation. Even lines from Six Dynasties literature are sometimes too heavy for lyric verse. When Li Ch'ing-chao 李清照 quotes the lines

*The light dew falls in the morning,
The young wu-t'ung tree begins to sprout*

清露晨流
新桐初引

Nien-nu chiao 念奴嬌
(The Charms of Nian-nu)

from *A New Account of Tales of the World*, she succeeds because she has chosen two unusually appropriate lines. This gives us some idea of the discrimination required in the use of quotations, the need to exclude all but the light and fine.

The lyric is the most refined of all Chinese literary forms, and the only one capable of articulating a certain kind of restrained and elusive melancholy. But the converse is also true. There are some themes, and some sorts of language, that cannot find a place in it. Its refinement imposes a narrowness of range, which is what Wang Kuo-wei meant when he said that "the lyric can deal with themes beyond the range of regular verse, but cannot encompass that entire range".

⁵The whole of the last lyric cited is composed of quotations, four from the *Analecets*, two from the *Odes*, one from *Mencius*, one from the *Book of Changes*, and one from the *Book of Ritual*. Such writing is inappropriate in lyric verse.

IV. Elusiveness of the Lyric World

Chou Chi 周濟 likened the lyrics of Wu Wen-ying to

| | |
|--|------|
| <i>Shadows of passing clouds on a sunny day,</i> | 天光雲影 |
| <i>Shimmering green ripples that repay</i> | 搖蕩綠波 |
| <i>Endless contemplation;</i> | 撫翫無斁 |
| <i>But try to catch them,</i> | 追尋已遠 |
| <i>And they fly away.</i> | |

He was referring to their elusive and subtle melancholy. But what he says is true not only of Wu but of all fine lyric poets. For depth of inspiration and subtlety of expression, the lyric stands supreme in Chinese literature.

In regular verse, for all its metaphors and symbols, one can still trace the meaning behind the words. Of Juan Chi 阮籍's verse, for example, it has been said that while the words may be seen and heard, their meaning lies beyond the furthest horizon, their ultimate destination is hard to find. But they do at least have such a destination, even if after all these years it has become impossible to uncover all the relevant facts about the poet's life and times, and therefore "hard to establish the true circumstances" referred to.⁶

Lyric poets, on the other hand, were usually men of an extremely sensitive and sentimental disposition, who freely indulged their predilection for wine and women, and lived in a twilight, bitter-sweet world. They used the exquisite form of the lyric to embody their elusive private melancholy, their personal joys and griefs. Reading a lyric is like standing at the edge of an abyss and catching tantalizing glimpses of the fish darting in the depths; it is like riding the waves of the ocean and seeing a mountain approach and recede with the swell. If the poet himself had more than one person or thing in mind when he wrote his poem, how can the reader hope to pin him down to an unambiguous meaning? The depth of any interpretation will depend entirely on the perceptive powers of the individual reader.

Here, for example, is a lyric by Feng Yen-szu 馮延巳 (attributed by some to Ou-yang Hsiu 歐陽修), to the tune *Tieh lien hua* 蝶戀花 (The Butterfly Loves the Flowers):

| | |
|--|---------|
| <i>The cloud that drifted days ago</i> | 幾日行雲何處去 |
| <i>Forgot to come home,</i> | 忘了歸來 |
| <i>Doesn't know</i> | 不道春將暮 |
| <i>Spring's on the wane.</i> | 百草千花寒食路 |
| <i>Down in the holiday street</i> | 香車繫在誰家樹 |
| <i>Flowers and pretty faces,</i> | |
| <i>And that fancy carriage</i> | 淚眼倚樓頻獨語 |
| <i>Parked at someone else's door.</i> | 雙燕來時 |
| <i>Up at the window, tears</i> | 陌上相逢否 |

⁶These remarks on Juan Chi's poetry can be found in Chung Jung 鍾嶸's *Shih P'in* 詩品, and in Li Shan 李善's commentary to Juan Chi's *Poems of My Heart*, in the *Chao-ming Wen Hsüan*, *Chüan* 23.

and faltering soliloquy:
"Swallows, swallows,
On your way,
By the footpath,
Did you see . . . ?"
Tangled spring-sorrow
Like catkins
Won't let go;
But dreaming
Never finds.

撩亂春愁如柳絮
 依依夢裏無尋處

This poem has been variously interpreted as an allegory of the poet's "unwavering allegiance to his country" (Chang Hui-yen), and as a more generalized "social lament" (Wang Kuo-wei). Interpretations vary from reader to reader, and while the poet need not have had either of these two ideas in his mind, each reader is entitled to come to his own conclusions.

The lyric poet's perceptions and impression arise from the depth of his personal joy and sorrow, and although they may appear far-fetched or confused, they have an aesthetic unity and intricate balance of their own—rounded like a pearl, smooth as jade, and with the translucent clarity of a carved miniature. When approaching such poems, we should appreciate that the poet is echoing in his song his distant vision and innermost yearnings, and we should allow the music of the words to stir us to the heart. Surely it is enough to be transported to a rarefied world, where we may catch a glimpse of life's essence? Why bog ourselves down trying to work out exactly how the poet achieved his effect, and precisely what he meant, when by clinging to such details we may miss the point altogether? Like the man in the boat who, having dropped his sword overboard, marked the place on the side of the boat. . . . What we must strive for is a sense of intuitive wonder. The world of the lyric is like a mountain viewed through the mist, or a flower seen in the moonlight. Its beauty resides in its elusive ambiguity, and if we insist on bringing it out into the light we are acting contrary to the very nature of the form, and will only end up with something shallow and crude.

Under these four headings I have tried to give a broad characterization of the lyric, and of the ways in which it differs from regular verse.

Delicacy and Inner Strength

SOME MAY ARGUE THAT the late Ch'ing critics stressed weight, rugged spontaneity and grandeur in the lyric, qualities quite at variance with the picture I have drawn. But it should be remembered that their purpose (that of the Ch'ing critics) was to counteract the decadent tendencies of their time towards superficial and fussy writing. They were concerned with correcting stylistic habits. I am discussing the fundamental nature of the lyric. Our ideas are in fact complementary.

Take Hsin Ch'i-chi's lines quoted earlier:

*Do not gaze
From that high balcony:
The sunset
And misty willows
Are a sight to break the heart.*

The language is delicate, but the sentiment and overall effect are forceful and grand. Or take Yen Chi-tao's lines:

*Since we parted
I would recall our days together.
How often
My dreaming soul joined yours!
Tonight
By the silver taper's light
We'll gaze,
Afraid this meeting
Is just another dream.*

The substance is light, but the feeling is deep and sincere. . . . This complementary tension (between delicacy and strength, lightness and depth) is an acquired taste, and it takes a true connoisseur to appreciate its beauty.

Another objection that may be raised is that I have made the lyric appear to be a vehicle exclusively suited to the expression of love and sentiment in their subtler and sadder aspects, and have ruled out the more heroic and passionate themes such as patriotism and protest. But I am not being so dogmatic. I have tried to elucidate the special qualities of the lyric by tracing its origins as a form. Its transformations will reflect the artistry of the individual poet.

Take Yueh Fei 岳飛, for example. His determination to pursue the Jurchen invaders, his outspoken opposition to the appeasers, his indignation that a petty-minded clique was betraying China while his own counsels went unheeded—all these emotions found expression in lyrics such as this one, to the tune *Hsiao ch'ung shan* 小重山 (Little Chung-shan):

*I rise and pace the steps alone.
A silent night,
And through the curtain
Brilliant moonlight.
.....
I'd let my grief sing on the lute,
But why—
In a deaf world,
Where a broken string would pass unheard!*

起來獨自遶階行
人悄悄
簾外月朧明
.....
欲將心事付瑤琴
知音少
絃斷有誰聽

There is something heroic and dashing about the lyrics of Hsin Ch'i-chi. He succeeds in expressing his brilliant wit, his burning ambition to restore the North,

and his bitterness at the court for leaving his talents unused and denying him an opportunity to hunt down the Jurchen troops and strike a blow for his country.

*The Empress never won her assignation;
Feeling against her was too strong.
Even a eulogy that cost a thousand pounds
Could not buy ears
To hear her heartfelt yearnings.
But don't crow too soon!
Have you not seen
Beauties of old
Turned to dust?
O bitter and most futile grief!
Do not gaze
From that perilous balcony:
The sunset
And misty willows
Are a sight to break the heart.*

長門事
準擬佳期又誤
蛾眉曾有人妒
千金縱買相如賦
脈脈此情誰訴
君莫舞
君不見
玉環飛燕皆塵土
閒愁最苦
休去倚危闌
斜陽正在
煙柳斷腸處

Mo yü erh 摸魚兒
(Catching Fish)

Wen T'ien-hsiang 文天祥 was a man of unswerving loyalty who refused to compromise with the Mongols, a man of indomitable courage who faced many hardships and dangers, preferring death to dishonour.

*The world veers from side to side
like rain.
I have always been pure
as the shining moon.*

世態便如翻覆雨
妾身元是分明月

Man chiang hung 滿江紅
(Red River)

The glory and grandeur of these three great men have lived on through the ages. They expressed their patriotic fervour and their single-minded dedication—indirectly, in that most elusive and exquisite of literary forms, the lyric, and as a result their poems are not marred by strident overstatement, but have a profound sincerity and beauty.

If this is still not enough, let me add that the lyric is also capable of expressing the most vehement sentiments. Take this lyric by Chang Yüan-kan 張元幹, to the tune *shih-chou man* 石州慢 (Shih-chou Adagio):

*Broken-hearted!
Mars glowers
At brigand hordes run amuck,
Rebel tartars on the rampage.
I'd pull down the Milky Way
To wipe this blood and scum*

心折
長庚光怒
羣盜縱橫
逆胡猖獗
欲挽天河
一洗中原膏血

*From our land!
Where have they taken
Our King and Prince?
Why are we pinned
To the Yangtze Line?
My heart is in the distant North,
While I must sit in the South—
Like a helpless old general
Beating a cracked spittoon—
To accompany my futile lament.*

兩宮何處
塞垣祇隔長江
唾壺空擊悲歌缺
萬里想龍沙
泣孤臣吳越

Or Chang Hsiao-hsiang 張孝祥's lyric to the tune *Shui tiao ko t'ou* 水調歌頭 (Water Song):

*Ghosts of monkeys
Wail in the bamboo grove.
In the bivouac at midnight
Distribution of bows.
Young heroes from Ching and Ch'u
In the red embroidered jackets
Of the Light Brigade.
For a thousand miles
Wind blows
And thunder crashes.
Troops sweep
Like meteors
And shooting stars.
Chopping shallots with an axe;
Talking and laughing under canvas;
Every day
New victory despatches are sent off.*

猩鬼嘯篁竹
玉帳夜分弓
少年荆楚劍客
突騎錦襜紅
千里風飛雷厲
四校星流彗掃
蕭斧挫春蔥
談笑青油幕
日奏捷書同

Or Lu Yu 陸游's lyric to the tune *Hsieh ch'ih ch'un* 謝池春 (Spring at the Hsieh Pool):

*As a young soldier
I had the courage to gobble up
The last of the tartars!
High serried clouds,
Beacons burning in the night.
Ruddy cheeks and flashing locks,
Bow and spear in hand
On the western frontier.
Laughing at how
The old fogeys
In their scholar's caps*

壯歲從戎
曾是氣吞殘虜
陣雲高
狼烽夜舉
朱顏青鬢
擁雕戈西戍
笑儒冠自來多誤

*Had been wrong
All along.*

These last three poems all have a loud, reverberant sonority and create a vivid effect. But in their mood and in the poetic world that they create, they fall short of the first three. Yueh, Hsin and Wen excelled in the qualities most prized by the lyric poet. Stirring, heroic sentiments are appropriate to oratory, where the purpose is to rouse a crowd to immediate action. In regular verse, which is written to be intoned and enjoyed at leisure, to be mulled over several times, and in lyric verse, where sophistication, refinement and restraint are prized above all, passion and vehemence must be tempered with tenderness and deep sincerity. Passion is aroused by momentary moral indignation, whereas deep sincerity is the product of daily cultivation. Passion resembles the bravery of the common soldier, whereas deep sincerity is the higher courage that stems from love towards humanity. Since the days of old, the great exemplars of loyalty and chivalry, who in their love for motherland and people braved danger and remained unflinching to the end, always drew on the strength of their deep self-cultivation. They never relied solely on their exuberance and animal spirits. It is the achievement of the greatest literary creations that they are able by the skilful use of subtly beautiful language to express this deep inner sincerity. Literature that is noisy, self-publicizing, superficial and propagandist cannot be held in high esteem.

Many of the finest lyrics are soft and yielding on the surface, but contain a hard inner core. Critics have always praised Wen T'ien-hsiang's *Song of an Upright Soul* 正氣歌, but I would single out those last two lines from his "Red River":

*The world veers from side to side
like rain.
I have always been pure
as the shining moon.*

They combine verbal beauty with spirited content, and suggest a whole world of single-minded loyalty and integrity. To lay emphasis on the excitement generated by a lyric to the exclusion of all else, and therefore to condemn some of the finest lyrics as effete, is to betray not only a shallowness of aesthetic judgement, but also a coarseness of feeling, a lack of cultivation and a spirit capable only of the outward manifestations of passion and incapable of inner sincerity.

The Lyric Spirit in Life

The lyric came into being and flourished because it corresponded to a part of the natural world and to a realm of human feeling. So long as this world and these feelings exist, there will always be people who appreciate lyric poetry and try to write it. Slanting wind, fine rain, pale moon and scattered stars characterize the lyric sky. Lonely valleys and crystal streams, unrippled lakes and meandering banks shape the lyric landscape. Sensitive feelings and transcendent thoughts, deep aspirations

and intimate yearnings are the pulse of the lyric soul. All true lyric poets, all men with a character cultivated in the lyric mould, manifest this lyric quality in their life and thought. They are gentle and sincere, pure of mind, idealistic and free from contrived or petty thoughts.

Such a man was Yen Chi-tao: "though repeatedly a failure in his career, he refused to pay court to the influential. He had his own literary style, and refused to ape the fashionable scholars' language. Though he was wildly extravagant and though his family went cold and hungry, his complexion remained like that of a child. When men betrayed him a hundred times he took no offence, and always had faith in others, never suspecting that they might be trying to take advantage of him." (From Huang T'ing-chien 黃庭堅's "Preface to The Lyrics of Little Hill 小山詞序")

Another was Chiang K'uei "of pure and shining countenance, like an immortal. Even if he was down to his last bean, he would still manage somehow to feed several guests at every meal. His was an eccentric nature. Sometimes, on finding some beautiful spot in the countryside, he would be so enchanted by it that he would disappear, and no one could find him. Or late at night, he would stroll out by the light of moon and stars, reciting his poems in a loud voice. He was in his element even in a cruel northerly wind, when lesser mortals huddled inside to keep warm." (from Chang Yü 張翮's *Biographical Account of White Stone the Taoist* 白石道人傳)

From these two men we can form an idea of the lyric spirit in action. In the realm of ideas and scholarship, the signs of the lyric spirit are wit, perspicacity and profundity of interpretation, and an intuitive understanding of inner truth as opposed to an obsession with literal meaning. A fine example is to be found in Wang Kuo-wei's widely respected work in the field of literary and historical research. His interpretations, while they may seem novel, are in fact quite natural. He unravels age-old mysteries in the most logical and plausible way, and by the liveliness and precision of his argument and the freshness and clarity of his style succeeds in bringing his subjects to life. Learned dissertations are as a rule tedious to read. But Kuo-wei's scholarly works (*Kuan-t'ang ji-lin* 觀堂集林) are like a work of fiction. To read them is a pleasure and a refreshing experience.

Wang was himself originally a lyric poet, and a very good one. Here is one of his lyrics, to the tune *T'ieh lien hua* (The Butterfly Loves the Flowers):

By the road stands a mansion
a hundred feet high;
Light thunder in the sky
in the half-light of dusk
or dawn.
At a balcony,
alone,
a maiden idly counts
the tiny passers-by.
A momentary shower reveals
tree-tops
above the dust
of carriage-wheels.

百尺朱樓臨大道
樓外輕雷
不聞昏和曉
獨攔千人窈窕
閒中數盡行人小
一霎車塵生樹杪
陌上樓頭
都向塵中老
薄晚西風吹雨到
明朝又是傷流潦

*In mansion and lane
age turns to dust again.
Toward evening,
west wind blows in the rain.
Tomorrow will bring
more puddles, more pain.*

It was because Wang approached scholarly criticism in a lyric spirit that he was able to write with such profound understanding and clarity. He was indeed one of the greatest writers of his age. Nowadays, while there is considerable admiration for his *Lyric Remarks for the Human World*, there are few that appreciate his *Lyrics for the Human World*. And yet the intensely alive quality of his scholarship, its almost magical brilliance, are precisely manifestations of his fundamentally lyric talent. This is basic to an understanding of the man. (There are men whose genius is creative and not scholarly, and I am not claiming that all lyric poets make good scholars. But in Wang Kuo-wei we have a particular case of lyric genius employed to brilliant effect in scholarly research.)

The Chinese Lyric and Western Poetry

A comparison with Western literature may help to bring out the nature of Chinese lyric verse, and shed some light on its position within literature as a whole. The origins and course of development of Western poetry are quite different from those of Chinese poetry. Western poetry traces its origins back to Classical Greece, where the most important genres were epic poetry and drama (especially tragedy). Indeed Aristotle in his *Poetics* only discusses epic poetry and tragedy, and makes no mention of lyric poetry. There was lyric poetry in Greece, but its development was negligible. It was not until the Italian poet Petrarch in the fourteenth century that lyric poetry began to flourish, reaching its heyday with the rise of the Romantic Movement in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Chinese poetry, on the other hand, had been lyric, or rather lyrical, from its earliest days. Many of the finest poems in *The Book of Odes* are lyrical in this broader sense. The works of Ch'ü Yüan 屈原 and Sung Yü 宋玉, though cast in a different form, were also lyrical in essence. The Han *fu* was a departure in the direction of purely descriptive verse. It proved shortlived, however, and from Wei 魏 and Chin 晉 times the *fu* reverted to being a lyrical form. The five-syllable verse of the Six Dynasties, the old-style and new-style verse of the T'ang dynasty, the lyrics proper of the Five Dynasties and Sung, the extended lyric forms of the Yüan and Ming—all these forms were lyrical in character. Even the early *tsa-chü* drama of the Yüan and Ming, and the later *ch'uan-ch'i* 傳奇 drama of the Ming and Ch'ing were essentially lyric dramas. While China lacks an epic or tragic tradition, the unique development of "lyrical" poetry has led to a great diversity of forms to suit many varieties of feeling.

The same variety of mood is to be found in Western poetry, although it never underwent such a detailed formal division. In English poetry, for instance, Milton's "L'Allegro" and "Il Penseroso" can be compared to some of the shorter *fu* 賦 of the

Six Dynasties. Shelley's "Ode to the West Wind" can be compared to seven-syllable old-style verse. Wordsworth's Sonnets to Regulated Octets; Browning's verse dramas to the verse passages in our own dramas of the Yüan, Ming and Ch'ing dynasties; and when we come to Keats and the Rossetts, we find a true counterpart to our own lyric verse. The hundred and one poems in Dante Gabriel Rossetti's *The House of Life*, with their subtle melancholy and fragrance, their plaintive and slender charm, all read like short lyrics by Ch'in Kuan or Yen Chi-tao. After all, impressions and emotions are alike the world over. That realm of veiled tenderness and dreamy melancholy exists everywhere. In China it led to the creation of the lyric, in the West to the verse of poets such as Keats and the Rossetts. The only difference is that in China it became a separate form, with its own ramifications and its own golden age. If Keats and the Rossetts had been born in China, they would surely have been lyric poets to rank with Ch'in Kuan, Yen Chi-tao and Li Ch'ing-chao.

Conclusion

I am not trying to publicize or make a case for the lyric; only to point out some of its distinctive qualities, and its relation to other literary forms. I am not claiming all the world's beauty for the lyric, nor am I urging everyone to read or write lyrics. I only wish to say that lyric verse has its value in Chinese literature. Men's natures differ just as their appearances do. To those born with a sensitive spirit and an appreciation of subtle beauty, lyric verse can bring delight and release, it can be a source of peace and strength. And this aesthetic sensitivity, if coupled with a sincere cultivation of character, can greatly enhance the quality of a man's everyday life and of his literary and scholarly pursuits. Many human activities co-exist, many paths lead to the same goal. The lyric, an expression of the human heart and mind, and of human perceptions of the world, is one path leading to an understanding of beauty and goodness.
