An experiment in translation

By Gerald Bullett

梅子金黄杏子肥

Heavy the trees with load of golden plum,
To mellow age the almond fruit is come . . .

IT WAS EARLY in June, a few weeks after victory had been won in Europe, that my Chinese friend Ts'ui Chi came for a three days' stay with me in Sussex. We had become acquainted two or three years earlier, so that I had had plenty of time to discover that he was really and truly Chinese: by which I mean not merely a member of the Chinese race but one who, with all his knowledge of English and his mastery of western ideas, embodied in his person and philosophy the spirit of all that is most vital in the ancient Chinese culture. Though he had spent some years in England, and had written in English a short history of Chinese civilization, he still looked out upon the world through Chinese eyes.

An Anglo-Chinese friendship is in itself no matter for wonder. The two peoples, with all their obvious differences of tradition and outlook, have (or had, in 1945) at least two or three very important things in common. They enjoy the same kind of humour; they both have a native sense of irony; they value highly the simple pleasures and affections of every-day life; and they are keenly alive to the beauties and enchantment of the natural scene. In Chinese poetry some of the most delightful effects are achieved by a simple (but subtle) matter-of-factness or by delicate understatement, both qualities highly congenial to a cultivated—and often to an un-cultivated—English taste. Our friendship, therefore, was in no way surprising: what was surprising, and for me extraordinarily lucky, was that Ts'ui Chi brought with him, in his pocket, my passport not merely into a remote time and place but into another and a serenely luminous mind.

HE SPOKE of it, shyly, tentatively, within an hour of his arrival, while we were walking together at the foot of the downs. "I've brought a few poems," he said. "I thought you might like to try turning them into English." And, when we got back to the house, after a little encouragement he fished out a note-book into which he had copied, in the Chinese character, a sequence of no fewer than sixty small poems celebrating the rural year, twelve for each of five seasons. Their author, Fan Ch'eng-ta, had lived and died in our twelfth century: that is, during the middle years of the Sung dynasty. Like so many other Chinese poets, he spent much of his life in the State service, having in A.D. 1154 passed the highest literary examination and become thereby an "advanced scholar." He was born in 1126 and died in 1193, and he is believed to have written these particular poems during his sixtieth year, a year of rural retirement from official life because of failing health. He is not, apparently, among the best-known of Chinese poets. Nothing of his had ever been translated into English before; Mr. Arthur Waley, to whom most of us owe what little acquaintance we have with Chinese poetry, has never had occasion to mention him in print; and one might reasonably have supposed that the gentlemen of the Press who were to review my English version

This article originally appeared in the August 1954 issue of *Literary Guide*, a London publication. Gerald William Bullett, English poet and critic, was editor of *The English Galaxy of Shorter Poems* (1939) and *Silver Poets of the Sixteenth Century* (1947), both published in the Everyman's Library. His collaborator in the translation of the poems of Fan Ch'eng-ta, Ts'ui Chi (崔驥), was the author of *A Short History of Chinese Civilization* (1943), New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons. Mr. Ts'ui's calligraphy which decorates this article is taken from the book, *The Golden Year of Fan Ch'eng-ta.* —ED.

had never heard of him—any more than I myself had, until Ts'ui Chi instructed me. How surprising therefore, and how gratifying, to find one or two among them retailing to their readers, with a most convincing air of lifelong familiarity with the subject, the facts supplied in my preface! One reviewer went further. We had been rash enough to have the first line of each section printed in Chinese as a decorative headline; and, pouncing upon the first of these, our critic complained that the first couplet of the first poem:

柳花深巷午雞聲

But for the cockerel calling the noon hour,
No voice is heard in the lane of willow-flower

was an inaccurate rendering of the original. The word *shen*, he asserted, meant *deep*; the proper translation would have been *deep lane*; and he implied that there was nothing in the Chinese text corresponding to "No voice is heard."

I quote this Cambridge reviewer, not to invite admiration of his sublime persuasion that he understands the subtleties of Chinese poetry better than a Chinese specialist in the subject (who had of course carefully vetted my version), but because Ts'ui Chi's answer does incidentally throw some light on the nature of that most remote (from ours) of all civilized languages. The word *shen* does not necessarily mean *deep*. It can just as well be interpreted as *deadly quiet*. As objects sink deep under water, so may voices sink and vanish from the air. The noon-time, the cockerel's call, the drifting of willow catkins, point not only in fact, but also (said Ts'ui Chi) in the traditional poetical language, to a quiet scene. Moreover, a country lane is not generally a "deep" one, nor a long lane necessarily a quiet place. Finally, the expression *lu hsiang*, which occurs in the line in question, often suggests voices: therefore "No voice is heard in the lane of willow-flower" is a legitimate, and indeed a true, rendering.

THIS PART of Ts'ui's answer to our critic did not reach print: it was omitted for lack of space. The part that *was* printed, however, contains so illuminating an exposition of the method used by Fan Ch'eng-ta that it must not be allowed to remain buried alive in the files of a university journal. The reviewer, writes Ts'ui Chi,

> seems to have fallen into the popular error of supposing that all Chinese poems are as much "condensed" in spirit and meaning as in form, and that such a line as *almond golden yellow plum plump* would therefore be an "accurate" rendering. But that is not so. The various forms of poetry, under the general category *Ku Feng* (the Ancient Air), are longer and freer poems than the four-line and eight-line poetry developed later. These forms of poetry, called *chueh chu,* had been first developed in the fourth or the sixth century, and remain in use up till the present time. The great length of its history and the shortness of its form have led to the development of a poetical diction and a special technique of grammatical arrangement, by which more ideas may be expressed than the words actually represent. The Chinese poets adore an arrangement by which "the idea exists beyond words." The method is peculiarly Chinese; it cannot be imitated in another language and it is effective only for readers who understand the *chueh chu* tradition well. There are words, for instance, in a poem, called the "eyes," which by means of subtle arrangement are made to suggest more meanings and ideas, and to convey a richer picture to the mind's eye, than they would ordinarily do. Such an art the Chinese call "to forge" or "to refine." In translation it cannot be reproduced, because the key-word, which in the original suggests more ideas than the one commonly associated with it, can have no exact counterpart in another language which has necessarily a different literary tradition. The Chinese poet writes, but does not think, in this "condensed" style. Therefore, to be fair to him, in translating him we must seem to amplify.

READ AS A continuing sequence, these sixty *chueh chu* poems of Fan Ch'eng-ta, of which I was to attempt to produce English verse-renderings, present a poet's picture of rural life in the district of Soochow eight centuries ago. Each in the original consists of four, end-stopped, seven-word lines, rhymed *a a b a* or *a b c b*; and it must be remembered that in Chinese every word is a fixed

monosyllable whose relation to its context is determined by position, by literary atmosphere and association, and by heaven knows what—never by inflexion. Chinese is an entirely uninflected language, and its poetry, though far from disdaining statement, consists not in the thing stated (though that is a contributory element) but in the scent and colour, the nimbus of suggestion and even of conjecture, arising out of the particular choice and arrangement of ideographs.

My attempt at the first poem of the series meeting with Ts'ui Chi's approval, we settled down to systematic work. I produced (appropriately enough) a school exercise-book; I divided my pages into seven columns, one for each word of each line; and off we went, I writing down the English literal equivalents (where they could be found) at Ts'ui Chi's dictation. "First line. First word: soil or earth. Second word: fertile, cream, fat, or grease. Third word: intend or wish. Fourth word: move or develop. Fifth word: rain. Sixth word: frequently. Seventh word: urge, press, or encourage. First word of second line: ten thousand. Second word: grasses or herb"—and so on. This was one of the easier ones. When we reached the last word of the last (fourth) line, my instructor, in a few words, would give me the general sense and feeling of the stanz (or poem) as a whole. I was thus put into possession not only of the twenty-eight nearest equivalents but of as many explanatory meanings as possible, particularly of the "eyes" or key-words; for, as has been said, in each poem there are ideas "off the poem" (in Ts'ui Chi's phrase) but suggested by it.

COVER DESIGN *of* The Golden Year of Fan Ch'en-ta, *Cambridge University Press, 1946. The painting is Two Scholars Under Plum-blossom, by Ma Yuan* (馬遠), *Sung dynasty.*

WITHOUT THESE final expositions my copious notes would clearly have been useless to me; but the expositions would themselves have been useless, and fruitless, had I not been enabled by them to enter imaginatively into the mind of the poet and enjoy for myself, at however distant a remove, the imaginative experience which had inspired the original. Whatever the shortcomings of the resulting English poems, the writing of them was a peculiarly rich experience precisely because it involved my immersion, for hours at a time, in the mind of that twelfth-century Chinese poet, when, after Ts'ui Chi had returned to London leaving me with my garnered store of literal and associated meanings, it was my task to re-live, re-create, and record in my own fashion but with the utmost possible fidelity to the original imagery (since that was of the essence of the matter), each one of sixty separate consecutive small poems. A celestial task, arduous but infinitely fascinating! The sense (the illusion if you like) of being in intimate touch with a remote yet still living past provided the perfect escape, not only from a world that is always too much with us, but from my very self. Self-oblivion, the sages have said, is the only path to paradise; and it seems improbable that I shall ever again, in this uneasy world, be granted three midsummer weeks at once as exciting and serene as those I enjoyed in 1945.