

Chapter 2 Chinese Literature

Lesson 2 Chinese Poetry and Classic Novel

Part 1 Chinese Poetry

Poetry has been a favorite literary genre for thousands of years. Poetry isn't taken very seriously in the West, especially in the last two hundred years, but Chinese ancient poetry is still read and ancient Chinese poets are honored. The greatest poets are thought to have lived a thousand years ago or more during the Tang (618-907), Song (960-1279) and Han (206 BC – 220 AD) dynastic eras. Du Fu, Li Bai and Su Shi are considered among the best ancient poets, and there are five major kinds of major ancient poetic styles called Shi, Ci, Ge, Qu and Fu.

The very ancient poetry that was written a thousand or more years ago was simpler and about common things like love, romance and nature that people appreciate. Though much poetry was written in the eras following the Song Dynasty (960-1279), it is thought that the poets became increasingly erudite, academic and esoteric so that modern Chinese can't appreciate the style and meaning. Since the Chinese have a character-based writing system instead of an alphabetic system, though the languages have changed, modern Chinese can still read a lot of the ancient poetry. Since the pronunciation of words has changed a lot, often the rhymes or tonal rhythms are lost for poems that rhymed or had

tonal patterns. But the meanings of the characters haven't changed much, though modern readers may interpret the words to mean something other than the ancient author intended. Nuances and connotations may be lost. Since old poems remain and modern Chinese can understand them to some extent, they are still appreciated.

Five Kinds of Poems

Shi 诗 Shi poems are composed of couplets. They are poems of two more coupled lines. The two lines of a couplet usually rhyme and match rhythmically and complement each other tonally. Modern Mandarin only has five tones, but ancient languages usually had more, so the tonal rhythms are generally lost.

Ci 词 Ci poetry can be described as poems that have patterns of syllables and tonal patterns. In making a Ci poetry, a poet chooses words that fit a specific pattern. These patterns may have once been part of a song. But the music has been lost. There are various patterns that provided affective settings for various effects or moods.

Ge 歌 The word "ge" means song. Ge poems are the words to a song that can be sung. There were folk songs as well as songs composed by the literate and educated composers.

Qu 曲 When the Mongols conquered China and established the Yuan Dynasty (1279-1368), they brought with them their own style of music and forms of entertainment. They especially liked to watch shadow puppet theaters that were puppet plays of little manipulated figurines and puppets illuminated by a lamp so that the shadows fell against a screen. It is thought that the form of operatic drama of the Yuan Dynasty imitated their shadow play theaters. The style of music and song in the operas was called Yuan Qu or Mongol Music. The songs from the operas and popular songs were a poetic style called Qu that was also popular in later eras. The poetic style is freer of form.

Fu 赋 A fifth major style of poetry is called "Fu." These are descriptive poems that contain both prose and couplets. These were popular about 1,500 years to 2,000 years ago. Often poets included rare or unusual written characters from preceding eras in their poems.

Exemplary Poets

It is thought that the greatest ancient poets lived in the Tang, Song, and Han eras. If the greatest Chinese poets are named, Dufu and Li Bai of the Tang Dynasty who were contemporaries and who both traveled widely in China often come up on top. Both of them lived in Chang An that was the capital of the Tang Dynasty. Both of them also experienced the An Lu Shan Rebellion that started in 755. Tang Dynasty poets are usually considered the best. Tang Dynasty poetry was simpler and about common things like love, romance and nature that people appreciate. Along with Du Fu and Li Bai, another famous ancient poet is Su Shi of the Song Dynasty.

Du Fu 杜甫 (712-770)



Dufu liked to write in a structured form of poetry that was called Lu Shi 律詩 or regulated poetry. When he was a kid, he loved to read. "I read ten thousand volumes until they were worn out," he said. Perhaps one of the reasons people like his poems is because he wrote about the people and places he visited. After

the An Lu Shan Rebellion, he is thought to have lived in a thatched cottage near Chengdu in Sichuan.

He is thought of as one of the greatest realist poets of China. His poems reflect the hard realities of war, people dying next to rich rulers, and primitive rural life. He was an official in the Tang capital of Chang An, and he was captured when the capital was attacked. It is thought that he lived in a simple hut near the end of his life where he wrote many of his best realist poems. Perhaps more than 1,400 of his poems survive, and his poetry is still read and appreciated by modern Chinese people.

Here is a famous couplet:

Behind redden doors stink wine and meat;

But upon the road die frozen men.

Li Bai 李白 (701-762)

Li Bai liked to write in a free form poetry like that of more ancient times. This kind of poetry was called Gu Shi (古詩). Like Du Fu, he traveled widely and lived in both Chang An far to the north and Sichuan in the southwest. He also wrote about places he visited and things he saw. He is described as a romantic poet.

Su Tungpo 苏东坡 (1037-1101)



Su Tungpo is also called Su Shi. He is regarded as a great poet of the Northern Song era (960-1127). More than 2,000 of his poems survive. He was an official in the Song court, and he passed the bureaucratic qualifying exam with high honors. Because of political problems, he was banished and lived on a farm. It is thought that many of his best poems were written when he was banished.

Part 2 Classic Novel

Four long fictional novels are usually thought to be the best novels in Chinese literature. What all four have in common is that they were written in a spoken language of their times unlike most ancient literature that was written in the literary Classical Language. Also, all four have disputed authorship. The four works were seminal for the development of Chinese societies in past eras.

They were widely read by the literati and administrative rulers and contained philosophical ideas, history, and ideas about human society, family life, and politics that defined part of the world view of the literate and politically

influential. Two of these, *Water Margin* and *The Romance of the Three Kingdoms*, are semi-historical, long novels sort of like *War and Peace* by Tolstoy for impact.

The Dream of the Red Chamber was very highly regarded when it was published both in China and Japan and is reminiscent of a psychologically complex work like Dostoyevskiy's. *Journey to the West* is a mythology filled legendary account reminiscent of *Odysseus*. These four books are called the Four Great Classic Novels of China.

The first two of the four classic novels are traditionally and commonly thought to be written during the Yuan Dynasty (1279-1368). The Yuan Dynasty were Mongol tribesmen, and they headed the first large non-Chinese dynasty. Perhaps for this reason, the great literature and operas from that period were written in a vernacular language instead of the complex literary language. *Water Margin* and *The Romance of the Three Kingdoms* influenced the development of the genre and are still widely read now. The two novels set a standard for classical literary works.

1. The Romance of the Three Kingdoms



The Romance of the Three Kingdoms is a semi-historical work said to be written by Luo Guan Zhong. It is historical fiction about the lives and struggles of rulers and the wars at the end of the Han Dynasty and in the Three Kingdoms Period. The Han Dynasty had broken up into three big rival kingdoms. These kingdoms fought viciously.

The big battles described are famous historical events. The novel describes the machinations, court intrigues, and the shifting alliances of the three kingdoms that emerged from the Han Empire. At first, *the three kingdoms* were led by Cao Cao, Liu Bei and Sun Quan. Special emphasis is laid on the two famous historical rulers Liu Bei and Cao Cao who were antagonists.

Historically, three kingdoms actually did divide up the Han Empire. But how much of the account is true and how much is fiction or untrue legend is debatable. There are accounts of ghastly deaths and of rulers dying after meeting avenging ghosts.

Actually, the authorship and the date the novel was originally written are also debatable. Chinese traditionally say that the novel was written by Luo Guan Zhong at the end of the Yuan Dynasty period (1279-1368) that would be about 1368 or so. But some scholars say that the book contains material that indicates that the book was written in the mid or late Ming Dynasty (1368-1644) or about two hundred years later.

It could be that the earlier date is valid and that material or information was added by revisers. It is known that a major revision was published by Mao Lun and Mao Zonggang in 1522 during the Qing Dynasty era. They revised the structure and deleted a lot of material. So now there are two major versions: an older version that has about 900,000 words and the more popular 1522 version that has about 770,000 words.

In the book and in history, Cao Cao, Liu Bei, and Sun Quan were contemporaries who fought or were sometimes allies. They and their successors battled until the Cao Wei defeated the Shu Han. Cao Wei becomes the comparatively small empire of the Jin Dynasty.

2. Water Margin



Water Margin is about the lives and ideals of a group of characters who fought against the corrupt Song Dynasty that the Mongols conquered. It is said it was written in vernacular language by Shi Nai An, but scholars debate about the authorship of this book also. Many scholars think that the first 70 chapters were written by Shi Nai An and that the last 30 chapters were written by Luo Guan Zhong who they say was also the author of *The Romance of the Three Kingdoms*. It is considered to be of the top two best historical novels.

The Yuan Dynasty was founded by Mongols. They conquered the Song Dynasty and much of Eurasia, and the large eastern part of Mongol territory was ruled by a family known as the Yuan Dynasty. The setting of the novel is during the Northern Song Dynasty era before the northern part of the Song Empire was overrun by a northern tribe and before the Mongols conquered the whole area.

According to evidence from other accounts, there may have actually been a group of about forty outlaws who lived in a mountain and who fought troops. Legends

and tales developed about this group of people and became very popular during the Yuan Dynasty. During the Yuan Dynasty era, there was an earlier story written a group of about 100 men who successfully fought Song troops.

Water Margin is reminiscent of the story of *Robin Hood*. Likewise, there may have been actual outlaws, and popular legends and stories later grew. But *Water Margin* is probably more fictional and less historically accurate than *The Romance of the Three Kingdoms*.

In the early tales or accounts, there were only about 40 outlaws, but the number in the band grew to more than 100. In the novel, the band fights the corrupt Song rulers. There are several versions of the novel. One version that has many more chapters than the others describes how the band gets amnesty from the Song rulers and battles their common foes for the rulers.

3. Journey to the West



During the Tang Dynasty, a Buddhist named Xuanzang left Chang An (Today's Xi'an) that was the capital of the Tang Empire to travel to India in order to collect scriptures and information. Chang An was near the mouth of the Gansu Corridor that was a part of the Silk Road route in northwestern China.

He traveled through the Gansu Corridor and past the Flaming Mountains near Turpan. He was helped by Buddhists along the way, and spent about 13 years in India before he returned bearing Buddhist scriptures. This historic journey was retold in many legends and tales about an accompanying monkey. In the Ming Dynasty era (1368-1644), the fantastic tale was written, and it is regarded as one of the four best novels.

The long tale about a fantastic journey to the west of a group that went to India was written at a time that the Silk Road land routes were blocked by Mongol and Muslim countries. Perhaps one of the reasons the novel was popular was that people during the Ming era wanted to travel to the west, but they couldn't. The latter Ming Dynasty was isolationist.

In the novel, a great intelligent monkey and a small band of characters protect a defenseless monk during his journey. Buddha commissioned the monk to help India that had fallen into gross sin and immorality. The monkey and other characters have magical skills. Cartoons and movies about this group of characters are popular with children.

Journey to the West is thought to have been published anonymously by Wu Cheng'en in the 16th century though scholars have doubt about the authorship. The trend during his era was for people to write in Classical Chinese and imitate the literature of the Tang Dynasty and Han Dynasty, but this book was written in a vernacular language of his era.

4. The Dream of the Red Chamber



The fourth major novel that made an impact on Chinese history and literature is *The Dream of the Red Chamber*. It was the last of the Four Classic Novels to be written. It is about the fortunes and lives of the people of two branches of a clan in the Qing Dynasty (1644-1911) era. The two families had adjacent compounds.

It is sort of like a soap opera novel like the TV series *Dallas*. However, it is said that much of it actually happened. It is appreciated because it gives a view into the lives of two ruling families of that time. One of the members of the clan was

made a concubine of an emperor. But then the imperial court turned against the two families.

The book was first printed in the late 1700s during the Qing Dynasty (1644-1911). It also has an uncertain authorship. Like the other three great classic novels, it was written in a vernacular language – the Mandarin language that was the language of the Qing capital. It is probably mostly composed by Cao Xueqin (about 1715-1763) in the middle 1700s.

It is thought that Cao did not live to see the first printing. It is thought that another person or other people contributed the ending of the story since the original ending of the story was lost. The book has a lot of textual problems, and there are different versions. In a preface to a printed version in 1792, two editors claimed to have put together an ending based on the author's working manuscripts that they had bought from a street vendor.

This book was very popular in both China and Japan. It still is. And the plots and characters are studied and analyzed. The textual problems of the novel are extremely complex and have been the subject of much critical scrutiny and conjecture.

Exercise after Reading

Part 1. Completion

- (1) Sun Wukong is the character of _____ (the name of the novel)
- (2) There are many poets in Tang dynasty and people think highly of them. _____ be named as "Shi Xian".

Part 2. Questions to Discuss

- (1) Briefly introduce the main content of *The Dream of the Red Chamber*.
- (2) Try to translate a Chinese poetry of Su Dongpo.
- (3) Briefly introduce the features of the character of Guan Yu.