

An Anthology of Chinese Literature



Beginnings to 1911

Edited and translated by Stephen Owen

Introduction

The Chinese literary tradition extends continuously from early in the first millennium B.C. to the present. It was until very recently the basis of all Chinese reading, and a literate adolescent could read all but the earliest works in this tradition with little difficulty, if not always with perfect accuracy. The tradition's growing body of works—the classics, philosophy, history, and literature—unified Chinese civilization through its long history and across regional divisions of language.

As was true of ancient civilizations in general, what we now call literature was initially inseparable from history and thought. The stories of legendary heroes were neither history nor fiction in the modern sense, but the beginning of both: the "philosopher's" fantastic speculations admitted no clear differentiation between verbal invention and thought; and the lyric poem was considered the embodiment of moral and historical truths.

A sense of "literature" as a category of writing distinct from thought did eventually begin to take shape, although it was not always "literature" in the same way we use the term in the twentieth century. Like our own concept, the scope and definition of Chinese literature changed over the centuries. Poetry and non-fiction (including essays, letters, and even political documents) were considered serious literature; novels and prose fiction were not fully accepted as true literature until the last century in China—nor in England and Europe, for that matter. Drama, though immensely popular and sophisticated, acquired only marginal legitimacy in China. Yet these works, both "high literature" and the popular genres of fiction and drama, were perhaps the most beloved component of the textual unity of Chinese civilization. A nineteenth-century merchant, a Buddhist monk, and a Confucian official may have held profoundly different values; the nature and depth of their educations may have differed greatly; but all three would probably have known, loved, and memorized a few of the same poems by Li Bo. They would have memorized the poems as children and recited them throughout their lives when the occasion seemed appropriate.

Although the literary tradition was a unifying force, it was far from monolithic. Broadly defined, Chinese literature offered its people a wide range of human possibilities and responses. Literature could confirm social values, twist them, or subvert them altogether. The eighth-century poet Du Fu provided a Confucian voice of principled response to dynastic upheaval and social suffering. When Wen Tian-xiang, the captured hero of the Song resistance to the Mongol invasion, awaited his execution in Da-du, modern Beijing, he passed his time in prison composing poems made up of memorized lines of Du Fu rearranged. Later, when the Manchus conquered China in the mid-seventeenth century, Du Fu's poetry provided a model for how to give an account of the human suffering that was caused. Likewise, if a per-

son felt expansive, there were the poems of Li Bo; if a person hungered for the simple life, there was the poetry of Tao Qian and Wang Wei; if a person was in love, there was the poetry of Li Shang-yin or Tang Xian-zu's play, *Peony Pavilion*. Popular literature in vernacular Chinese, especially prose fiction, also could represent the impulses that the civilization repressed. A person might believe that a son owed absolute obedience to his father, but that same person as a reader could enjoy reading in *The Romance of the Gods* how the divine child Ne-zha chased down his father with murderous intent.

Readers of another age and culture often have the impulse to identify some unitary "Chineseness" in this literature—perhaps isolating the image of an old fisherman in the misty mountains uttering words of Daoist wisdom. This imaginary China is constructed out of the motives and history of outside cultures; it is important to see this simplified image as such, and to recognize the immense diversity of traditional China throughout its long history.

One of the most distorting elements of the conventional Western image of traditional China is the belief in its changelessness. There were indeed continuities in the culture and no sense of profound alienation from the past until the twentieth century, but in both fact and self-image, traditional China was intensely "historical," each historical period characterized by its distinctive personality. Indeed, the reader's awareness of the period of which he or she was reading was an important part of the reading experience. Viewed from a large perspective, these works were part of an ongoing creation of a myth of Chinese cultural history.

There is a vast body of premodern Chinese literature, as befits a very large and old country that also had extensive commercial printing many centuries before Europe. Even an anthology such as the present one cannot hope to encompass its impressive size; but it can accomplish the critically important task of recreating the family of texts and voices that make up a "tradition" rather than simply collecting some of the more famous texts and arranging them in chronological order.

Vernacular and Classical

Written vernacular Chinese first appeared in Buddhist stories for performance before illiterate audiences who could not have understood classical Chinese. The real birth of vernacular literature, however, occurred in the thirteenth century, when commercial publishers sought to capitalize on the popularity of storytelling and theater in the great cities. Publications of drama and fiction tried to catch the lively cadences of the spoken language with linguistic usages that were strictly excluded from classical Chinese. Thereafter classical Chinese was used for poetry, essays, and some prose fiction, while vernacular was used for fiction, drama, and popular song.

The inevitable changes in language that occurred across millennia tended to enter Chinese written literature by accretion. The literary form of Chinese known as "classical" Chinese took its basic shape in the last three centuries B.C., and continued to evolve until the present century through new usages, syntax, and forms of argument. Although the influence of the evolving spoken language made itself felt in subtle ways, "classical" Chinese grew increasingly distant from it. As early as the

eight century A.D. there appeared a written "vernacular" literature, incorporating many elements of the spoken language.

The relation between "classical" and "vernacular" literature was roughly analogous to the way in which Americans use written English for essays and American for novels and plays. On the one hand, if an American, in writing an essay, uses "gotta" to express necessity, readers will unconsciously wince. If, on the other hand, a character says "must" in a play or a movie, the character is probably well educated and English. Americans subconsciously think of an immense linguistic range of literary and vernacular usage as one language, with different levels or "registers" appropriate to different genres and situations. This was roughly the sense of the Chinese language before the twentieth century.

The Present Selection

This anthology is organized to represent the literary tradition, not as a static arrangement of "monuments" in chronological order but as a family of texts that achieve their identity and distinctness in relation to one another. As in any interesting family, not all the voices sing in harmony. The anthology is neither a conservative notion of "canon" (though it contains a fairly comprehensive representation of that canon), nor an attempt to construct a counter-canon of texts suppressed and overlooked (though they are present as well). Texts have been chosen because they respond to one another, either addressing similar issues or responding to other particular texts. The tradition is a whole, and no anthology can be that whole; but an anthology can show how the tradition works. Commentary is included both to provide background information and to help non-Chinese readers notice what a premodern Chinese reader might have noticed instinctively.

The arrangement of the sections is primarily chronological, though these are interspersed with sections that cut across history to show differences and continuities from a larger perspective. Within the chronological sections I will sometimes offer a text from a thousand years in the future or from a thousand years in the past. Chronological history is the basis of a tradition; but literature, where there are no linguistic barriers, cuts across chronological history with ease. This is sometimes hard to recognize for the reader of English, in whose tradition texts quickly show their age. But in classical Chinese, a poem from a thousand years in the past might not be essentially different from a poem written yesterday; this is not to deny historical change, but, to return to the metaphor of a family, it is like having many generations living in the same house.

The anthologist who would create a version of a tradition faces one insurmountable limitation: long works. Chinese vernacular works are often very long indeed. Traditional novels frequently run to a hundred chapters, taking up four to five volumes in English translation. Forty or fifty acts are common in the huge plays called "dramatic romances," and they can fill a substantial volume in English. With numerous characters and intricate plots, these works do not easily lend themselves to excerpts. I have included a few acts from two of the most famous dramatic romances and a more extensive selection (about two fifths of the whole) from a third. To give

the reader a sense of the vernacular novel, I have included three chapters which form a coherent episode in *The Romance of the Gods*. The major premodern novels have been translated, and they should be read outside of this anthology.

During the last fifty years there has been an immense amount of translation from the Chinese, with the inevitable result that any anthology which seeks to present many of the most famous works will inevitably repeat material translated elsewhere. I have tried to incorporate works that have long been considered important, together with some less well known ones. But my criterion of choice has been those texts which, working together, tell a story that embodies the concerns of the tradition and shows its coherence.

A Note on Translation

Translation is, for the scholar, a troubling art; it is literary history gone gambling. Knowledge and skill are essential, but only a small part of an enterprise where luck rules. Great fortunes are parlayed into nothing and small wagers become great. Important texts come out flat, whereas minor pieces succeed splendidly. Everything hangs on the moment, the translator's disposition, and the circumstantial sources and resources of the language.

If there is a single principle behind these translations, it is translating texts against one another: trying to create a complex family of differences that does not correspond to, but attempts to reinvent some of the differences perceived by a good reader of Chinese. Translators of Chinese often create their own vision of "Chinese" literature as a whole, either articulated against English literature or as a possibility within it. This elusive "Chineseness" was the one quality that was utterly beyond the grasp of the traditional Chinese reader. In their own literature, they perceived only differences in period, genre, style, and above all in the personalities of writers. As a translator, I have the conviction that the "Chineseness" of these works will show itself: my task is to find idioms that will catch the families of differences.

In his famous essay on translation, Friedrich Schleiermacher articulated the basic antithesis between adapting the material to the conventions of the host language and preserving the difference of the original, the antithesis that James J. Y. Liu was later to call "naturalization" and "barbarization." Both extremes are, of course, bad translation; and most translators work between them, choosing to "naturalize" some elements while respecting the difference of others. This translator is convinced that the differences of the Chinese literary tradition are profound enough that we do not need to exaggerate them. If I tend moderately to the "naturalization" camp, it is to offer an occasional insight into why these works were compelling in their own world, not why they have an exotic appeal to outsiders.

I have tried to avoid archaizing, but have at the same time endeavored to use the levels of English style to mark the strong differences in period and register in the Chinese. I translate classical Chinese into English and vernacular into American. The latter is a dangerous enterprise, and the discomfort that some American readers may feel on encountering Americanisms may echo in some small way the discomfort that some classically educated readers in the Ming and Qing felt on encountering the vernacular. As in the Ming and Qing, Americans permit their contemporary language in fiction and drama, but object when vernacular usage slips into our own formal genres.

Readers who are already familiar with the conventions used in translating classical Chinese literature may be surprised or puzzled, perhaps even annoyed, by some of the conventions adopted here. Rather than rejecting such unfamiliarity, the reader should reflect on the number of peculiar translation terms that the habit of recent

translators has made seem natural. To solve the numerous problems of translation from the Chinese, Western scholars and translators have created their own special dialect of English. While some of the strangeness of this language is unavoidable, much of it is the deadwood of habit that contributes unnecessarily to the sense of the categorical strangeness of traditional Chinese literature.

I have tried, as they used to say, to “English” these texts; that is, to say something as one would say it in English. When precision is implicit in the Chinese, I have tried to be precise. For example, the Chinese *wan*, “ten thousand,” is often used when the English speaker would say “thousands” or “millions,” and that is the exact translation. In other cases, *wan* is used as a precise counter, and in those cases, “ten thousand” is the exact translation.

What follows are some of the conventions adopted in this volume, both in large matters of form and small matters of word choice.

Form

In translating poetry, I have generally tried to find very flexible English forms that do not seem too artificial: forms that can recreate a set of *differences* to echo the basic formal differences of Chinese poetry. I have been usually, but not universally, consistent in the following policies. Chinese lines of four and five syllables are translated as single English lines. Lines of *Chu-ci* and *fu*, in the original Chinese often broken into hemistiches by lightly accented syllables, are left as single lines in English with additional blank spaces in between the hemistiches. Lines of seven syllables are translated as a pair of lines with the second line indented, since the seven-syllable line began as a song line and was generally freer and looser than the five-syllable line.

In stanzaic poems, I have left an additional space between stanzas. In poems based on couplets, I have left additional space between couplets to set off the couplet as a unit. In poems before the fifth century, in quatrains, and in stanzaic poems, I have not left the additional space between couplets. In general, if the couplets in themselves seem to bear little formal weight, I have sometimes taken the liberty not to represent them with the extra space.

I have generally capitalized the first word in a rhyming unit and left the subsequent lines uncapitalized (however, in opening couplets where both lines rhyme, I have left the second line uncapitalized). This further sets off the couplet as the basic semantic unit in poetry, the equivalent of the sentence; and in song lyric this practice also sets off the semantic units articulated by rhyme, which serves as a punctuation. Here again, in poems that seem to overflow the couplet, I have sometimes taken the liberty to suggest this by punctuation and lower-case letters at the beginnings of couplets.

There is no way to be perfectly consistent without making the chosen English forms appear artificial. I have preferred inconsistency to obtrusiveness of form. There is also no way to echo the forms of Chinese poetry and still produce translations that are accurate and readable. Our purpose is rather to call attention to groupings such as stanzas, couplets, and the rhyme units of song lyric, and to create a recognizable structure of differences.

I have tried to keep footnotes to a minimum, though in some cases they were unavoidable. I have attempted to give as much of the essential background as possible in my own comments before and after the poems.

The calendar

Traditional China used a lunar calendar in which the months of thirty days were numbered from one to twelve, with discrepancies remedied by the addition of “intercalary months.” The full moon was always to come mid-month, on the fifteenth. The first three months were spring, the second three were summer, and so on. The beginning of the year came at different times on the Western calendar, but it was generally some time in late January or in February. In the translations it is sometimes necessary to use the Chinese numbered months, but where possible I have followed the convention of translating the First Month as March, the Second Month as April, and so on. Although this is inexact, it corresponds roughly to our sense of the seasons. The reader who, for some reason, wants to know the exact Chinese date can convert immediately based on this system. I have not attempted to convert dates to their exact counterparts in European dating; thus December 22, 1076, is the twenty-second of the tenth month. The eleventh month, “January,” would be given as 1077. I have converted reign dates and cyclical dates into their corresponding Western years.

Measures

I have kept a *cun* (varying through history from 2.25 to 3.2 centimeters) as an “inch”; a *chi* (10 *cun*) as a “foot”; and a *zhang* (10 *chi*) as a “yard.” The *zhang*, from 2.25 to 3.3 meters, is the measure most seriously at odds with the English translation, and in cases where the measure jars with common sense (and with the poetic measure *ren*), I have sometimes converted into true English feet and yards.

Through history the Chinese *li* varied from 405 to 576 meters, or very roughly a third of a mile. I have used the translation “mile” and sometimes “league.” In travel accounts this can sometimes give the impression that the travelers are making extraordinarily good time.

The standard large number is *wan*, “ten thousand.” When some exactitude is called for, I translate it as “ten thousand” or “myriad”; however, when it is used loosely, as it often is, I use the natural English counterpart of “thousands” or “millions,” depending on context.

Musical instruments

The *qin*: very few modern readers have heard a zither played; somewhat more may have seen one (but probably still more have seen a *qin* or *koto*). The *qin* is nothing like a lute, which has become the conventional translation. I have chosen to translate the *qin* as “harp” and the *se* as “great harp.” The *kong-hou*, which in its vertical version is indeed a harp, will also have to be a harp. The choice of “harp” is an imperfect translation (especially if one thinks of a modern concert harp played by a

woman in long white robes), but its antiquity and range of associations seem preferable. The problem with translating a *qin* as “harp” is that the *qin* has bridges.

The *pi-pa* in some ways more resembles a lute, but it was a popular instrument rather than one with the cachet of elegance that the lute possesses. The playing technique and timbre most closely approximate the Western mandolin, so I have translated it thus.

Hu

The word *Hu* was used as a general term for the peoples of Central Asia, including Indo-Iranian peoples as well as Turks, and the people of the city states as well as nomads. *Hu* refers to ethnicity, however imperfectly, rather than to a level of civilization, and “barbarian” is both inaccurate and often metrically offensive. Since in many periods the *Hu* were Turkic peoples, *Hu* will usually be translated as “Turks.” I have great affection for the Turks; when they come out badly in a Chinese poem, it represents Chinese prejudices rather than my own.

Alcoholic beverages

Jiu is conventionally translated as “wine.” Although true wine, once it was imported through Central Asia, was classified as *jiu*, most Chinese *jiu* was actually beer, made from grain rather than fruit. Sometimes I use “wine,” but often I translate *jiu* as “beer.” The choice of wine as the translation of *jiu* is pure snobbery, to project the image of the Mandarin as “cultivated.” The process of making *jiu*—as well as Western wine and beer, though we do not see this in commercial production—involves lees and dregs. Thus the clarity or “thickness” of *jiu* is often referred to.

Buildings

There are several aspects of a traditional Chinese dwelling place that a reader needs to keep in mind. Upper-class dwellings were generally compounds surrounded by walls. The grander the family, the larger the compound and the more internal divisions it had. One entered a section of the compound through gates. Thus “layers” or “tiers” of gates suggested a wealthy household. The emperor’s palace was spoken of as having a “thousand gates” and “nine tiers.” Inside a gate was a “courtyard” or “yard.” There were verandahs around the house and balconies on the upper stories. The term for a door to a chamber is different from the word for gate, but “to go out” is usually to go out the gate rather than to go out the door. Windows were covered with gauze or paper in the winter and often had elaborate grillwork. Since buildings were open, swallows would often fly in and make their nests in the rafters.

A “terrace,” in the language of conventional translation from the Chinese, is not a patio. Chinese buildings were sometimes constructed on raised platforms of earth, faced with brick or stone. These are “terraces.”

A *lou* is, roughly, a building of more than one story that is usually wider than it is tall. *Lou* were also built on top of city walls and over gates for defensive purposes. When positioned there, a *lou* is a “tower”; when on the ground, a *lou* is sometimes

a “mansion,” sometimes a “building,” sometimes a “[room] upstairs,” depending on context.

A *ge* gets translated as “tower,” though it is generally (but not always) a building of more than one story that is more narrow than it is high.

Houses were supposed to face south, with the women’s quarters in the back of the house on the north side.

Hair

Chinese women generally wore their hair in elaborate coiffures piled on the head. Such coiffures used long pins decorated with the shapes of insects or flowers, although sometimes the hair was decorated with real sprays of flowers. Brows were often shaved, then painted on high on the forehead.

Men also wore their hair long (the late imperial queue was a Manchu fashion imposed on Chinese by the Qing conquest). Informally, one might wear a headband or a turban, but officials wore caps, with their hair held in place by hatpins; thus, to “pull out one’s hatpins” was to give up office. Letting one’s hair down had approximately the same associations in Chinese as it has in English.

Flora and fauna

As the natural history of North America differs from that of Europe, so that of China differs from either. An American writing in English is in a rather bizarre situation. Much of our received *literary* language of flora and fauna is English and European—things and creatures with rich literary associations that the American has never or hardly ever seen. It is well known that nightingales, non-natives of North America, sing primarily in anthologies—“bird thou never wert.” To take this already European-specific language to translate Chinese flora and fauna is a double hardship for American readers. In addition, we have become, by and large, city dwellers, and we know brand names with more precision than plant names, not having the variations of species and their signifiers available to us. I suspect that the majority of American readers can more readily distinguish a Coke from a Pepsi than a duckweed from a waterlily. Chinese literature is, not surprisingly, filled with the flora and fauna and minerals that writers encountered every day. It is ironic that some of the most exotic features of translation from the Chinese are the most everyday growing things. The reader of translation will never reach the rich associations of the language of flowers in Chinese; but let me quote a passage from the English literary tradition (Shakespeare’s *The Winter’s Tale*) that might remind the English reader how effective the names of flowers can be:

O Proserpina

For the flowers now that, frightened, thou let’st fall
From Dis’s wagon; daffodils,
That come before the swallow dares, and take
The winds of March with beauty; violets dim,

But sweeter than the lids of Juno's eyes
Or Cytherea's breath; pale primroses
That die unmarried, ere they can behold
Bright Phoebus in his strength—a malady
Most incident to maids; bold oxlips and
The crown imperial; lilies of all kinds,
The flower-de-luce being one. O, these I lack
To make you garlands of, and my sweet friend,
To strew him o'er and o'er.

The translator cannot do that. I have, however, chosen the following synonyms to avoid some of the most painful moments of Chinese translation idiom—

Wu-tong: The *wu-tong* is a relatively common tree in China, but is not native to North America. It is slowly becoming naturalized as the “tung” tree. Perhaps I should have left it as such in the translations. The beech does not, so far as I know, grow in China. The two trees are rather different, but both are wide-spreading and beautiful. Admittedly, the *wu-tong* does its wide-spreading considerably higher up than the beech; but when you see a beech in these translations, it is a *wu-tong*.

Let:

du-ruo be mint
jie-ju be wintergreen
hui be lavender or sage
du-heng be asarum
zhi trees be hawthorns
zhi be white angelica
quan be the iris
bi-li be ivy
lan be orchid

Early China

先秦西漢