

**ON SOCIAL CONSCIOUSNESS AND THE POET'S RESPONSIBILITY
IN THE T'ANG POET PO CHU-I (LO-TIEN 772-846)**

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My introduction to Chinese poetry came late because of my Western-oriented education, where Anglo-Saxon poets were studied more closely than Asian poets. This lopsided kind of education is due to the course I chose to pursue at the university. Sometimes my study of Chinese poetry and Japanese *haiku* make me apply Western standards in approaching these works. However, constant reading of Chinese poets is making me reorient my attitude toward the study of Chinese poetry, since Asian literature has shown itself to be far richer and older in traditions than Western poetry.

Chinese poetry is very interesting to study because one can compare the all-encompassing use of multi-faceted materials for poetry and the high regard the Chinese have for poets, poetry being the best literary medium for hundreds of centuries in China. In China, government officials are also scholars enjoying a higher social status than even the richest merchants of the land. The Chinese emperors themselves were mostly scholars who wrote poetry, painted pictures and wrote poems on the silk cloth or paper accompanying their illustrations.

Before the turn of the 19th century, China was little aware of other cultures other than its own cultural orbit¹ and so one reads of the insular life of the Chinese at a time of opulence or exotica in well-appointed palaces, among perfumed ladies at court, ladies in love pining for their lovers at the sight of the moon, or dramatic scenes of unrequited love, etc. But before one makes the hasty conclusion that these poems represent life in China, one must also see in other poems poverty, changes in fortunes, deterioration of morals, the sufferings of persons, particularly women left by their husbands who go to war, and, the injustices or abuses committed by persons in authority.

I am particularly charmed by the T'ang poets because it was during the T'ang dynasty (618-906 A.D.) that "great intellectual and literary activity" flourished and "poets enjoyed considerable status. T'ang poets were usually government officials and scholars, as this was the class that could afford to devote itself to literary pursuits. Furthermore, the Civil Service Examinations used in the selection of government bureaucracy and based on the Confucian classics measured literary aptitude more than anything else."²

The T'ang dynasty was made famous by poets of the highest caliber and a study of the T'ang poets may not be complete without the mention of these three great poets, Wang Wei, Li Po and Tu Fu who have been contemporaries of Po Chu-i. In particular, Li Po was a strong influence on Tu Fu and Tu Fu wrote many poems about Li Po who was his friend.

The works I have read of all these three T'ang poets namely Wang Wei, Li Po and Tu Fu gave me great pleasure because all of them had the same spontaneous, sincere tone in their writings. Another eye-opener is the way these poets wrote of their present conditions, with a universal outlook. Any reader can feel empathy for their joys and sensitivity while at the same time feel grateful for these poets in their efforts to record the events and the social ills of their time.

Despite the threats and intrigues on his life, Po Chu-i verbalized his hatred for injustice minus the bombast or the fierce single-mindedness or the bitterness of tone one can expect from pseudo-poets and propagandists. In his poem "On Seeing a Red Cockatoo on the Road to Mount Shang" Po Chu-i exclaims³

A red cockatoo
 Came from Far Annam.
 Its color
 Is like peach blossoms,
 And it speaks
 With a human voice.
 They have done to it
 What men ever do
 To the wise and the learned
 And the clever of speech:
 They have imprisoned it
 Behind the bars of a cage
 When will it ever
 Be free?

The use of the image of a caged bird is universal and it is not new. The anguish of a man who has lost his freedom is very evident, yet instead of ranting and raving, the poet just raises a thoughtful rhetorical question that heightens the painful, sad situation described.

Po Chu-i was also a moderately successful government official. As magistrate of Hangchow, he caused the building of a causeway and a dam at West Lake. He ended up as governor of Honan but he continued to write about the plight of the people. When he was leaving, Hangchow in 824 and saying goodbye, he wrote:⁴

What is the reason your tears fall so fast?
 My taxes were heavy, though many of the
 people were poor;
 The farmers were hungry, for often their
 fields were dry.
 All I did was to dam the waters of the Lake
 And help a little when times were bad.

I would have expected Po Chu-i as a government official to change his ways and prefer the life of an official, a position eagerly sought for by other Chinese citizens at the time, but Po Chu-i remained true to his simple tastes, yearning for the rural life he left behind. The melancholy in his poetry is characteristic of Chinese verse where the poet, driven by economic necessity, has to become a bureaucrat though he prefers to be a recluse. He looks forward to his retirement so he can preserve the youthtime activities of poetry.⁵ In the poem "Leaving My Thatched Cottage III" Po Chu-i expresses his longing for his old home. Another poem, "Sighing for Myself" shows that Po Chu-i believes that too much of a good thing is not everything and being an official "profits only others" — "others" referring to his "guests... and servants."

This poet, while showing humility and some apprehension of being a man of great responsibility, is not exactly saintlike because he too, compared his lot to other persons' good fortunes and he lamented his loss of youth in "Grand Ode." But he quickly acknowledged that he ought to be thankful for what he had because "until death comes there is wine, so I raise my voice in song. Yen Hui's life was short; Po-I went hungry; what I have attained already is much."

Other qualities admirable in Po Chu-i are his poignant poems written with simplicity and clarity of style that everyone can understand. This ability to reach the masses made him a popular poet in China and Japan. His poetry was popularly sung by the people because most of his famous poems were written in the vernacular.⁶

Po Chu-i wrote during the reign of Hsuan-tsung which began in glory, and ended in tragedy. The revolt of the Turk, An Lu-shan, an adopted son of the emperor's concubine, the Imperial favorite Yang Ku-fei, sacked the palace and the city.⁷ The court fled the capital. When the revolt was quelled, Po Chu-i was one of those who witnessed the tyranny of war. The emperor Hsuan-tsung was restored to the throne but the people asked for the head of Yang Kui-fei, whose beauty was sung by the T'ang poets. Po Chu-i showed his versatility as a poet by publishing his famous poem, "Ch'anghen ko", or "Song of Everlasting Remorse", the culminating point of the T'ang civilization, and the beginning of its decline.⁸

I am quoting Po Chu-i's description of the emperor's grief after the death of Lady Yang Kui-fei to show the spontaneous expression of passion (grief) with restraint and briefness:

On his return the
 garden was
 unaltered
 With its Lotus and
 its willows;
 The Lotus recalled
 her face
 The willows her
 eyebrows,
 And at the sight of
 these
 these he could not
 hold back his tears.⁹

It is at this point I would like to say that the period in which Po Chu-i lived in was an ideal situation for poets. Po Chu-i delighted in the fact that he was popular among the people and he continued to write of their misery. He thought that by exposing or dwelling upon their misery the government would react with benevolence, for in China, public opinion invariably expressed itself through songs coming from the people. Confucianism provides the "Chinese with both a moral order and order for the universe; it makes the individual aware of his place in the world and the behavior appropriate to it."¹⁰ The Confucian ruler gains his authority by virtue of his goodness and his ability to do good for his subjects. Thus, if he is not a good ruler, he loses authority and is brought down by the people. The "people are the sea in which the ship of state sails, but the sea can sink the ship."¹¹

In other words, Po Chu-i was conscious of his responsibility as a poet. He wrote extensively about the manners of his time. He rose above favors or loyalties just to present the truth about his people. Po Chu-i presented pictures of misery and suffering of the people. His poem "The Old Man with the Broken Arm" tells the "story of a peasant who broke his own arm rather than be taken into the army, and who lived for sixty years in pain from the disjointed limb."¹² Thus, Po Chu-i pricked the conscience of the rulers of his time through his poems about injustices true to the perception of the Chinese of their poets, in that, the poets sing their songs. However, Po Chu-i, it must be emphasized, was not the kind of poet T.S. Hulme despised, i.e., a poet who is 'personal' in his poetry, in that, his conscious personality tends to "present rational accounts of feelings derived from experience, becoming sentimental, moralistic and prophetic."¹³ On the contrary, Po Chu-i refrained from being bombastic or singleminded of purpose in forcing issues to make authorities institute reforms. He merely narrated or commented about the people's sufferings with great empathy and a sympathetic tone. He never sounded like he had all the solutions to the social ills during the T'ang period that seemed to precipitate the decline of the empire. And, even if he wrote about the misery of the people, still he

did not write because he wanted the public to accept him by just giving the public what they wanted to hear. Po Chu-i wrote what he saw and not what others made him see. (W.B. Yeats in later years took this same stand as one function of the poet.) Po Chu-i risked arrest and social disgrace by criticizing the injustices committed by government officials. As a government official himself, he was never found guilty of excesses. In fact, he was the first among men of authority to set a good example for the people. Finally, Po Chu-i must have been aware that, since the Chinese put a high premium on what their poets write about, he will just present pictures, ask thought-provoking questions and let the subtle implications of the poem take hold on the reader. His poem "The Harp" is a fine example.¹⁴

I lay my harp on the curved table.
Sitting there idly, filled only with emotions.
Why should I trouble to play?
A breeze will come and sweep the strings.

Speaking of people power in China, A.R. Davis writes that in People's China, the important literary criteria are 'feeling for the people' and patriotism, and it is interesting to observe how many great writers of the past have gradually been discovered to possess these qualities. An interesting example is that of Li Yu. With maximum disadvantages of class origin (he was last ruler of the Southern T'ang dynasty in the tenth century and, on evidence, an ineffectual pleasure-loving ruler), he yet received a more or less favorable verdict in his 'trial' by critics in Peking in 1956: among other pleas made for him was the one that the people (of today) like his poems.¹⁵

In China today, the Chinese believe that "schools can train editors but writers have to live with the people."¹⁶ As to how free the writers are to express their feelings about their social or political environment, still leaves much to the imagination. Only time, more exposure to works by Chinese writers and proper information campaigns can really make us see the true state of Chinese letters today.

Other poets and critics will probably not like to read poems of protest or social commentaries if these poems become sentimental and didactic. They may even see the concerns of the poet toward suffering as due to the fact that "the conditions are ripe and they are often ripe for disaster."¹⁶ The poems of Po Chu-i that show hatred for injustices actually became more intense at the twilight of the T'ang dynasty. But such personal commentaries on injustice generated for Po Chu-i common sympathies for a common cause, applauding the good and censuring the bad. Po Chu-i was a most humane person and through his poems he knew that something can happen. Perhaps if W.H. Auden lived during Po Chu-i's time, he will not say that "poetry can make nothing happen."¹⁷ And even if Auden said this, Seymour Krim in an essay "Literature makes plenty happen" contradicts him by saying

Think about the Bible and go back or forward from that point in time and you cannot evade the fear and trembling that literature has not only changed men, it has created them.¹⁸

As a contemporary reader of Po Chu-i I would like to say that I have been greatly "infected", as Tolstoy might say, by Po Chu-i's works. He was an excellent artist, very sincere in his revelations of the miseries of his people, in social commentaries of his poetry. This transmitted sincerity is pristine and powerful. Although I.A. Richards thinks that sincerity of the artist is obscure,¹⁹ still Po Chu-i's sincerity, immediacy and the vitality of his poetry have drawn me to him.

It is in the light of these observations that I formulate my belief on what constitutes the poetry of social comment. Poetry presents or questions the morals of the present with close emphasis on man's goodness, or what the Chinese call *jen* — the human-heartedness, that form of behavior that set men above the rest of other life on earth.

Notes

- ¹A.R. Davis, ed., *The Penguin Book of Chinese Verse* (Middlesex, 1962), p. XI.
- ²Susan P. Evangelista, *Asian Literature for College: A Historical Anthology* (Quezon City, 1978), p. 95.
- ³Rocio Ramos Dumauual and Salud R. Enriquez, eds., *Asian and African Literature* (Manila, 1974), p. 120.
- ⁴Hilda Hookham, *A Short History of China* (New York, 1969), p. 176.
- ⁵Hookham, p. 176.
- ⁶Odile Kaltenmark, *Chinese Literature* (New York, 1964), p. 85.
- ⁷Hookham, p. 181.
- ⁸Kaltenmark, p. 82.
- ⁹Hookham, p. 181.
- ¹⁰C.K. Stead, *The New Poetic: Yeats to Eliot* (London, 1967), p. 110.
- ¹¹Kaltenmark, pp. 85-86.
- ¹²Hookham, pp. 176-177.
- ¹³Stead, p. 99.

- ¹⁴John D. Yohannan, ed., *A Treasury of Asian Literature* (New York, 1956), p. 241.
- ¹⁵Davis, p. XLI.
- ¹⁶Gemma Nemenzo Almendral, "The First Time Around," *China Reader* 10:1 (January-March, 1984), p. 23.
- ¹⁷Agnes Stein, *The Uses of Poetry* (New York, 1975), p. 100.
- ¹⁸Stein, p. 107.
- ¹⁹I.A. Richards, *Principles of Literary Criticism* (New York, 1925), p. 189.

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