



## Chinese Poetry

### The Book of Songs (c. sixth century B.C.)

*The Book of Songs*, also known as *The Book of Odes*, is an anthology of 305 ancient Chinese poems. According to tradition, Confucius (see p. 264) chose the poems to be included. It is doubtful that Confucius actually selected the poems, but he did know them well and recommended their study.

Because of the book's honored status and its association with Confucius, traditional Chinese interpreters of the poems have stressed their political and social importance. These interpreters have sometimes gone to great lengths to find hidden meanings in what appear to be simple love songs. In recent years, however, scholars have begun to interpret the ancient songs more literally, appreciating them for their simplicity and directness and using them as a window into the lives of the early Chinese people.



### T'ao Ch'ien (A.D. 365–427)

T'ao Ch'ien (dōu' ch'ē' en') was born into a family of prominent but impoverished government officials. As an adult, T'ao Ch'ien himself began a career in government service, but he found it difficult to behave in the subservient manner required of lower-ranking officials. When he was about thirty-five, he resigned from office and retired to a farm on the outskirts of a rural village.

In his later years, T'ao Ch'ien devoted most of his energy to writing poetry. Inspired by the serenity of his life in the countryside, T'ao Ch'ien wrote many poems about the simple beauty of the landscapes surrounding farms and villages. In addition to showing his love for nature, T'ao Ch'ien's poetry reveals his passion for some of his favorite activities—farming, spending time with his family, and writing poetry.



### Li Po (701–762)

Along with Tu Fu, Li Po (lǐ bō) is considered one of the supreme masters of Chinese poetry. The details of Li Po's early life are not clear, but he probably grew up in southwestern China, in the region

that is now Szechuan province. During his mid-twenties, he moved to eastern China, and throughout the remainder of his life he moved from place to place.

Li Po is known for his free-spirited, graceful, and lyrical style. His poetry frequently conveys a love of freedom and a sense of harmony with nature. These qualities, along with Li Po's vivid imagery and timeless insights, have earned his poems a secure place among China's finest works of literature.



### Tu Fu (712–770)

Tu Fu (dōo' fōo') is regarded as the supreme craftsman of Chinese *shih* (shi) poetry. In all of his poetry—poems dealing with social issues and those that focus on his personal experiences—Tu Fu shows a command of language

and a mastery of the *shih* form. As a result, his poems are admired as much for their form as for their content.

Early in Tu Fu's career, China was relatively peaceful and prosperous, but later the poet witnessed a major rebellion, the destruction of the capital city, and an invasion by tribes from the northwest. In his poems, Tu Fu gives some of the most vivid accounts of war and destruction in all of Chinese literature. He also harshly criticizes the nobility's extravagance in the face of extreme poverty among the common people.

## Preview

### Connecting to the Literature

If you have ever reflected on life, love, or nature, then you already have something in common with the poets whose work follows. Look for universal themes in these poems, and compare the poets' reflections with your own.

## Literary Analysis

### Chinese Poetic Forms

You may be familiar with certain European forms of poetry, such as the sonnet, but Chinese literature has its own poetic forms.

- **Shih poems** are poems that, in the original Chinese, have an even number of lines, each with the same number of words. Old-style *shih* poems, like those of T'ao Ch'ien, can be of any length. The new style, the one used by Tu Fu, has strict rules about length and form.
- **Songs** are poems that were originally set to music and have strong, regular rhythms. Songs may also include **refrains**—words or phrases repeated at regular intervals. "Indeed I am afraid" is a refrain in "I Beg of You, Chung Tzu." If one or two words within a refrain are varied in successive stanzas, this technique is called **incremental variation**.
- **Ballads** are songs that tell stories. "The River-Merchant's Wife: A Letter" is an example of a ballad.

As you read these poems, notice the ways in which their forms are both similar to and different from poems that you have read from other cultures.

### Comparing Literary Works

Each speaker in these poems has a unique **tone**, or attitude, toward his or her subject or audience. Tone is revealed by the speaker's **diction**, or word choice. It can be described using words like *friendly*, *distant*, *serious*, or *playful*. Use a chart like the one shown to identify key words and phrases from each poem and to compare the tones of the varied speakers in these poems.

## Reading Strategy

### Responding

When you **respond** to a poem, you reflect on the poet's message and how that message relates to your own life. As you read these selections, take time to respond to them. Note the emotions you feel and the images each work prompts in your imagination.

### Vocabulary Builder

**bashful** (bash' fəl) *adj.* shy (p. 286)

**eddies** (ed' ēz) *n.* waters moving in circles against the main current (p. 286)

**scurry** (skər' ē) *v.* to run hastily; to scamper (p. 289)

**pathos** (pā' thās') *n.* quality in something that evokes sorrow or compassion (p. 289)

**imperceptibly** (im' pər sep' tē blē) *adv.* without being noticed (p. 289)

Poem
"Addressed Humorously to Tu Fu"
Representative Diction
"You must have been suffering from poetry again."
Speaker's Tone
playful, ironic

from

# The Book of Songs

translated by  
Arthur Waley

**Background** The poems in *The Book of Songs* come from many different regions of China. Most of them were originally folk songs describing people's daily activities, such as farming, fishing, or gathering herbs. Others focus on love or courtship. The book also contains a group of poems written by courtiers in praise of kings, describing banquets and court ceremonies.

All of the songs were originally set to music. Some, especially the songs of the court, may have been accompanied by dancing and by musical instruments, such as bells and drums. The tunes are long lost, but the songs' powerful rhythms are preserved in their four-beat lines.

## I Beg of You, Chung Tzu

I beg of you, Chung Tzu,  
Do not climb into our homestead,  
Do not break the willows we have planted.  
Not that I mind about the willows,  
5 But I am afraid of my father and mother.  
Chung Tzu I dearly love;  
But of what my father and mother say  
Indeed I am afraid.

I beg of you, Chung Tzu,  
10 Do not climb over our wall,  
Do not break the mulberry trees we have planted.  
Not that I mind about the mulberry trees,  
But I am afraid of my brothers.  
Chung Tzu I dearly love;  
15 But of what my brothers say  
Indeed I am afraid.

I beg of you, Chung Tzu,  
Do not climb into our garden,  
Do not break the hardwood we have planted.  
20 Not that I mind about the hardwood,  
But I am afraid of what people will say.  
Chung Tzu I dearly love;  
But of all that people will say  
Indeed I am afraid.

### Literary Analysis

**Chinese Poetic Forms**  
Find two refrains in this stanza that identify the poem as a song.

### Reading Strategy

**Responding** What is your response to the speaker's fears? Explain.

## Thick Grow the Rush Leaves

Thick grow the rush leaves;  
Their white dew turns to frost.  
He whom I love  
Must be somewhere along this stream.  
5 I went up the river to look for him,  
But the way was difficult and long.  
I went down the stream to look for him,  
And there in mid-water  
Sure enough, it's he!

10 Close grow the rush leaves,  
Their white dew not yet dry.  
He whom I love  
Is at the water's side.  
Up stream I sought him;  
15 But the way was difficult and steep.  
Down stream I sought him,  
And away in mid-water  
There on a ledge, that's he!

Very fresh are the rush leaves;  
20 The white dew still falls.  
He whom I love  
Is at the water's edge.  
Up stream I followed him;  
But the way was hard and long.  
25 Down stream I followed him,  
And away in mid-water  
There on the shoals is he!

### Critical Reading

1. (a) **Recall:** In "I Beg of You, Chung Tzu," what are the speaker's fears? (b) **Analyze:** What conflicting feelings does she have?
2. (a) **Recall:** In "Thick Grow the Rush Leaves," what words describe the rush leaves and their growth? (b) **Interpret:** In what way might the rush leaves be symbolic of the speaker's feelings?
3. (a) **Compare:** In terms of their subjects, how are these two poems similar? (b) **Contrast:** What makes them different?



### ▲ Critical Viewing

Judging from this painting, why might it be difficult to search for someone on a river, as the speaker does in "Thick Grow the Rush Leaves"? Explain. [Apply]

# FORM, SHADOW, SPIRIT

T'ao Ch'ien translated by David Hinton

**Background** T'ao Ch'ien was among the finest "old style" *shih* poets. In classical Chinese, each line of a *shih* poem has the same number of syllables, words, and characters. Classical Chinese is not written with letters; instead, characters stand for words. For example, the character 木 means "tree" or "wood." T'ao Ch'ien's simple, direct style is easy to enjoy in translation, but his carefully formed structure, unfortunately, is not preserved.

Rich or poor, wise or foolish, people are all busy clinging jealously to their lives. And it's such delusion. So, I've presented as clearly as I could the sorrows of Form and Shadow. Then, to dispel those sorrows, Spirit explains occurrence coming naturally of itself. Anyone who's interested in such things will see what I mean.

## 1 Form Addresses Shadow

Heaven and earth last. They'll never end.  
Mountains and rivers know no seasons,

and there's a timeless law plants and trees  
follow: frost then dew, vigor then ruin.

5 They call us earth's most divine and wise  
things, but we alone are never as we are  
again. One moment we appear in this world,  
and the next, we vanish, never to return.

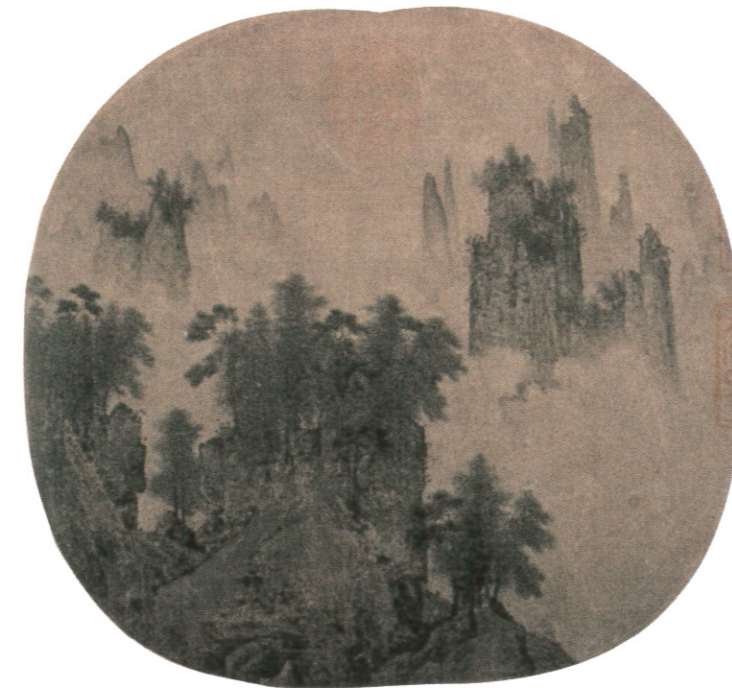
And who notices one person less? Family?  
10 Friends? They only remember when some

everyday little thing you've left behind  
pushes grief up to their eyes in tears.

I'm no immortal. I can't just soar away  
beyond change. There's no doubt about it,

15 death's death. Once you see that, you'll  
see that turning down drinks is for fools.

**Reading Strategy**  
**Responding** How does your response to the argument made in lines 7–15 compare with Form's conclusion in lines 15–16?



### ◀ Critical Viewing

In what way does this painting suggest the timelessness of nature that Form describes? [Connect]

## 2 Shadow Replies

Who can speak of immortality when simply  
staying alive makes such sad fools of us?

20 We long for those peaks of the immortals,  
but they're far-off, and roads trail away

early. Coming and going together, we've  
always shared the same joys and sorrows.

Resting in shade, we may seem unrelated,  
but living out in the sun, we never part.

25 This togetherness isn't forever, though.  
Soon, we'll smother in darkness. The body

can't last, and all memory of us also ends.  
It sears the five feelings. But in our

30 good works, we bequeath our love through  
generations. How can you spare any effort?

Though it may be true wine dispels sorrow,  
how can such trifles ever compare to this?

### Reading Strategy

**Responding** Do you think Shadow's argument is more valid than Form's? Why or why not?

### ✓ Reading Check

To whom or to what does Shadow reply?

### 3 Spirit Answers

The Great Potter<sup>1</sup> never hands out favors.  
These ten thousand things thrive each

35 of themselves alone. If humans rank with  
heaven and earth, isn't it because of me?

And though we're different sorts of things  
entirely, we've been inseparable since

40 birth, together through better and worse,  
and I've always told you what I thought.

The Three Emperors<sup>2</sup> were the wisest of  
men,  
but where are they now? And loving his

eight-hundred-year life, old P'eng-tsu<sup>3</sup>  
wanted to stay on here, but he too set out.

45 Young and old die the same death. When it  
comes, the difference between sage and fool

vanishes. Drinking every day may help you  
forget, but won't it bring an early grave?

50 And though good works may bring lasting  
joy, who will sing your praise? Listen—

it's never-ending analysis that wounds us.  
Why not circle away in the seasons, adrift

on the Great Transformation, riding its vast  
swells without fear or delight? Once your

55 time comes to an end, you end: not another  
moment lost to all those lonely worries.

1. **The Great Potter** the force that gives things their form, sometimes translated as *God*.
2. **The Three Emperors** three mythical rulers of ancient times.
3. **P'eng-tsu** the archetypal Chinese aged man.

#### Literary Analysis

**Chinese Poetic Forms** In what way does this poem, even in translation, follow the *shih* form?

## I BUILT MY HOUSE NEAR WHERE OTHERS DWELL

T'ao Ch'ien

translated by William Acker

I built my house near where others dwell,  
And yet there is no clamor of carriages and  
horses.

You ask of me "How can this be so?"

"When the heart is far the place of itself is distant."

5 I pluck chrysanthemums under the eastern hedge,  
And gaze afar towards the southern mountains.

The mountain air is fine at evening of the day

And flying birds return together homewards.

Within these things there is a hint of Truth,

10 But when I start to tell it, I cannot find the words.

### Critical Reading

1. **Respond:** Do you agree that "When the heart is far the place of itself is distant"? Why or why not?
2. **(a) Recall:** In lines 1–8 of "Form, Shadow, Spirit," what key difference does Form identify between humans and mountains, rivers, plants, and trees? **(b) Connect:** In what way does this contrast support Form's conclusion in lines 15–16?
3. **(a) Infer:** What attitude toward nature does the speaker reveal in lines 5–8 of "I Built My House Near Where Others Dwell"? **(b) Connect:** What lines in "Form, Shadow, Spirit" reflect a similar attitude toward nature?
4. **Take a Position:** Considering the ideas he expresses in these poems, how do you think T'ao Ch'ien would respond to living in a modern industrial city? Explain.



The River and Mountains in Autumn Color, 1120–1182, Zhao Boju, Imperial Palace Museum, Beijing, China

#### ▲ Critical Viewing

What qualities does the setting of this painting share with the setting of this poem? [**Connect**]

**Go Online**  
Author Link

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