

CHINESE LITERATURE – POSTCLASSICAL PERIOD

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LITERATURE OF THE SUI, TANG, SUNG AND YUAN DYNASTIES

The eight hundred years between the end of the sixth century when Emperor Wen Ti of Sui United all China to the middle of the fourteenth century when the Yuan dynasty fell form the fourth stage in the history of our classical literature.

The landlord class which had seized political power during the Chin and Han dynasties had now become hereditary landowners; but during the Sui and Tang dynasties fresh economic changes caused their decline, yet another landlord class arose, and there was increased political centralism. The sharp conflict between the landowners and the exploited peasantry remained, while the growing prosperity of handicraft industries and commerce gave birth to an urban class with its own distinctive outlook. Another important feature of this period was the frequent invasion of China by northern tribes, which aroused popular resistance, so that class antagonisms were often interwoven with the struggle for national independence. All these factors had a deep influence on literature.

This whole period can be divided into five shorter ones: the Sui and early Tang dynasties, the later Tang and Five Dynasties, the Northern Sung dynasty, the Southern Sung and Golden Tartar period, and the Yuan dynasty.

1. Sui and Early Tang Dynasties

We have seen that some literati of the Southern and Northern Dynasties had false values which resulted in a decadent trend in poetry as well as prose. During the Sui dynasty these unhealthy tendencies were overcome, and the works of Yang Su, Hsueh Tao-heng, Li O and others display a new spirit. Early Tang writers, including Wang Chi, Chen Tzu-ang and Li Hua, also opposed what was artificial in the literature of preceding dynasties and laid the foundation for a new age in writing.

At the same time some good work was done by those writers still under the old influence, such as Wang Po, Yang Chiung, Lu Chao-lin and Lo Pin-wang, commonly known as the "Four Great Poets of Early Tang." They broadened the subject matter of poetry and contributed to the creation of new forms. Thus the ku shih or "old style," lu shih or "new style" and chueh chu or "fourlined verse," generally adopted in later classical poetry, originated in this period. The ku shih is rather free: the number of lines and words in each line are not fixed, and the rhyming schemes are relatively flexible. Verses of this kind had appeared previously, but this now became a generally accepted form. Lu shih consists of eight lines, chueh chu of four. These two forms were not new either, but now strict metrical rules were defined for them. By the early Tang dynasty it was established that the second and third couplet in each eight-line verse must be parallelisms. It is generally recognized that the Tang dynasty was the most glorious period in the history of Chinese poetry. By the first half of the eighth century, thanks to the achievements of the early Tang songsters, poetry had reached its full splendour. Among the many outstanding poets of this period the greatest are Tu Fu, Li Po and Wang Wei.

Wang Wei (701-761) was a native of present-day Shansi. A poet of genius, he was also a brilliant painter and musician. His poems and paintings give such superb expression to the

beauty of nature that a later poet, Su Tung-po, said of him: "His poetry is painting, his painting poetry." Here are some examples of his word pictures:

*Leaning on my stick by the gate
To enjoy the breeze, I hear cicadas at dusk.
The sun sets beyond the ford,
From the desolate village rises one plume of smoke. . . .
The river flows as if it knew men's hearts,
The birds, as my companions, fly home at dusk;
A crumbling wall before the ancient ford,
And autumn hills bathed in the setting sun.*

His poems on the countryside round Wangchuan are famous.

*Alone I sit in the quiet bamboo glade,
Strike my lyre and cry aloud;
None knows I am here in the forest,
But the bright moon shines on me. . . .
Not a soul on the lonely hillside,
Nothing but voices;
Shadows falling in deep forests
Are reflected on green moss.*

With his seemingly simple yet highly polished style he paints scenes which all can see but most men miss, and he is supremely skilful in communicating his mood. His poems give us the same satisfaction as a fine painting.

Li Po or Li Tai-po was also born in 701. When he was a child his family moved from the north-west to Szechuan, where he grew up. As a man he travelled widely, going to Changan in his forties to join the Imperial Academy. When An Lu-shan's revolt broke out, he became Prince Yung's adviser; but the emperor, fearing this prince might usurp the throne, had him killed and Li Po exiled to the south-west. Later he was pardoned and returned, to die in 762 in present-day Anhwei.

Li Po was perhaps the most versatile of his generation. He wrote in a variety of poetic forms and styles about many different subjects. Sometimes he imparts to his readers a sense of tranquillity and sheer delight in nature:

*Gently I stir a white feather fan,
With open shirt sitting in a green wood.
I take off my cap and hang it on a jutting stone;
A wind from the pine trees trickles on my bare head.*

Or:

*I sat drinking and did not notice the dusk,
Till falling petals filled the folds of my dress.
Drunken I rose and walked to the moonlit stream:
The birds were gone, and men also few.ⁱ*

He shows a contempt for the nobles and officials who had allowed the country to grow so weak that An Lu-shan's rebellion nearly overthrew the dynasty. "I was drunk for a whole month, ignoring princes and lords," he wrote once. Again, "How can I stoop to serve the rich and great?" But in spite of his wish to hold aloof from court schemers and place-seekers, he was so far from indifferent to the country's danger that he wrote:

*I look down at the plain of Loyang
Where the Huns have scattered in flight;
Blood stains the grass; jackals and wolves
Are wearing official caps.*

That he knew the sufferings of the people is evident from these lines:

*Changan under a new moon, and I in the evening
Listen to the sound of many women beating clothes
By the water.
An autumn wind blows and I know well
That many a woman feels its chill, and is anxious for
Her husband, fighting in the far north-west —
Then she thinks, "I wonder when the war
Will end, so that he will no longer need
To fight."ⁱⁱ*

His poems are often exuberantly romantic, but his love of life, generous spirit and closeness to the people make his romanticism healthy and positive.

Tu Fu was a native of present-day Honan. He was born in 712 and able to write poems at the age of seven, but failed in all the government examinations. Not till he was over forty did he obtain a low official post. By this time An Lu-shan's revolt had broken out, and the war and general confusion brought increased hardships to the people. Losing all faith in the government, Tu Fu left his post and went to live in Szechuan. He worked for a few years in Chengtu while his friend Yen Wu was governor there. Early in the winter of 770 he died on a boat near Yuehyang.

Most of his poems date from after An Lu-shan's revolt, when the full weakness of the Tang empire was apparent. Tu Fu, with his deep understanding of life and society, wrote poetry more profound than any by his contemporaries. Even before the rebellion he had composed those memorable lines:

*Sour wine and rotting meat
Behind the red gates of the rich,
And the road strewn with frozen corpses.
Great wealth and hunger a few feet apart!*

After the rebellion he wrote such immortal poems as "The Hsinan Official" and "The Officer at Tungkuan," as well as others dealing with families which had been broken up in those troubled times. A moving example is "The Shihhao Official."

*One sunset I came to the village of Shihhao,
And shortly after there followed
An official, seizing conscripts.
In the courtyard of the peasant's house where I stayed,*

*An old man climbed quickly over the wall, and vanished.
To the door came his old wife to greet the official.
How fiercely he swore at her,
And how bitterly she cried!
“I have had three sons taken
to be soldiers at Yehcheng.
Then came a letter, saying,
Two had been killed, and that the third
Never knew which day he might die.
Now in this hut is left
None but a baby grandson
Whose mother still suckles him. . . .
She cannot go out, as she has no clothes
To cover her nakedness.
All I can do is to go back unto you
To the battle at Hoyang.
There I can cook for you,
Even though I am weak and old. . . .”*

*Night wore on.
The sound of voices died away
Until there was left, coming from the hut,
Only the sobbing of the daughter-in-law.
At dawn I rose and left,
With only the old man
To bid me good-bye.ⁱⁱⁱ*

Tu Fu not only denounced existing evils, but voiced the wish for a better life for all. The following song expresses his profound humanity:

*Would I had thousands on thousands
Of spacious mansions,
To shelter and gladden all the poor in the world
And protect them from wind and rain.
Ah, if such a building were to appear before me,
Though my own hut fail and I freeze
I should die content!*

His range as a poet is immense. Many of his poems express faith in mankind's future and ardent patriotism. Others are about his family or friends, some work of art that delights him, or natural beauty. His imagery is strikingly concise:

*Now for these three months
The beacon fires have flared
Unceasingly
While a letter from home
Is as precious as gold.
And, when I scratch my head,
I find my grey hair grown so sparse*

The pin will hold it no more.^{iv}

In his later days Tu Fu often recalled past incidents and great figures from history to contrast China's former splendour with the decadence of his time, in order to spur his contemporaries on to greater efforts.

*The Changan of ours today
Becomes like a great
Chessboard, for men
To play with empire; too late
Do we regret the havoc
The ill-spent years have
Wrought; now palaces
And mansions have new lords,
Even the styles of clothing
Change; war drums call
To the northern borders,
Armies are dispatched
To the western regions,
Enemies are everywhere; the
Autumn of decadence has
Truly set in, and I feel the chill
Harking back to other times
When things were different.^v*

Tu Fu enlarged the scope of classical poetry, giving it new content and forms. He is generally regarded as the greatest poet of China, with whom none but Chu Yuan can compare.

2. Later Tang and Five Dynasties

From the middle of the eighth century onwards further changes took place in Chinese literature. In prose there was the classical revival, while in poetry there appeared a body of satirical writing of which Po Chu-yi was the chief exponent. During this period the development of *tzü*, songs with lines of irregular length, and of the short stories known as *chuan chi* also contributed to the splendour of later Tang literature.

As already indicated, some of the essayists of the Sui and early Tang dynasties modelled their style on the artificial, precious writing of the preceding period, which was condemned by Li O, Li Hua and others. By the time of Han Yu and Liu Tsung-yuan the tide had turned, and a movement was launched for a "classical revival" in literature.

Han Yu (768-824) was a native of Nanyang in present-day Honan. Liu Tsung-yuan (773-819) was a native of Hotung in present-day Shansi. They held virtually identical views on the reform of prose, and their main aims were: to win greater respect for the Confucian classics, to develop Confucianism, to stress the cultivation of moral qualities, and to learn from the writers of the Warring States Period, Chin and Western Han dynasties. These principles exercised a great influence on Tang essayists and later writers.

Han Yu and Liu Tsung-yuan put their theories into practice in their own work. Han Yu regarded himself as the exponent of orthodox Confucianism, although he was careful to avoid

all archaic figures of speech and expressions dating from the time of Confucius and Mencius. His style is fresh and virile. He once wrote:

At the start I dared read nothing but works of the Hsia, Shang and Chou dynasties or the Western and Eastern Han dynasties, and dared retain nothing but the precepts of the sages. At rest I seem forgetful and in my actions abstracted, as though lost in thought or bewildered. When I want to express any views, I make a point of dispensing with all outmoded expressions, which is no easy matter.

(From "A Reply to Li Yu.")

Liu Tsung-yuan had the courage to oppose irrational aspects of feudalism, as we can see by his challenge of the succession from father to son which for centuries had determined the system of political control in China.

The feudal lords today rule by right of primogeniture. But under this system is it true that all those belonging to the hereditary ruling class govern well, while none of those from lower classes do so? If this is not true, who knows what will become of the people!

(From "On Feudalism.")

Though Liu Tsung-yuan had perhaps a less bold style than Han Yu, he had greater firmness and integrity. Sometimes he used parables to criticize abuses, in such stories as *The Donkey of Kweichow* or *The Rats of Yungchow*.

In addition to these two great writers, Li Yi, Huang-fu Chih, Shen Ya-chih and other essayists helped to promote the classical revival, until gradually a new style of prose was created.

In the realm of poetry, the influence of Tu Fu made poets adopt a more serious attitude to their work and hold less aloof from politics. The representative poet of this period was Po Chu-yi.

Po Chu-yi (772-846) was a native of Hsiakuei in present-day Shensi, who started writing poems as a boy and became an official in his twenties. He was banished from the capital several times on account of slander, and served in Kiukiang, Hangchow, Soochow and elsewhere, holding fairly important posts towards the end of his life.

A true disciple of Tu Fu, Po Chu-yi was convinced that literature should combat social evils; and he himself acted on this assumption, for many of his poems are satires. His most famous works are his ten *Shensi Songs* and fifty *New Yueh Fu*. One of these, "The Old Man with the Broken Arm," denounces the horrors of war:

*To the north of my village, to the south of my village the sound of weeping and wailing,
Children parting from fathers and mothers, husbands parting from wives.
Everyone says that in expeditions against the Man tribes
Of a million men who are sent out, not one returns!*^{vi}

Profound meaning and verbal simplicity characterize these sixty poems, and indeed all Po Chu-yi's work. Other poems, simple and spontaneous, reveal his concern for the common people, as in these lines from "The New Silk Jacket":

*So many go cold and I am unable to help them –
Why should I alone be warm?*

*My heart knows the peasants' hardships
On farms and in mulberry groves;
My ears ring with the cries
Of the starving and cold.*

Po Chu-yi wrote many other fine poems which were not didactic. One of these is his long narrative poem, *Everlasting Remorse*. The love of Emperor Ming Huang for Lady Yang was a theme which appealed to feudal writers, and Po Chu-yi's treatment of it in this celebrated poem is superb. He gives a powerful description of the emperor's grief after his favourite's death:

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

At the same time the poet criticized the emperor's former life of sensual pleasure and luxury:

*At leisure she danced and sang
To the music of lyres and flutes,
And not for one day would the emperor
Forgo the pleasure of her company
Till battle drums from Yuyang
Caused the earth to quake
And put an end
To the Dance of Feathered Garments.*

The revolt of An Lu-shan in 755 was one of the gravest events in the three hundred years of Tang history and brought untold suffering to the people. In fact, owing to irresponsible government, the dynasty was nearly overthrown.

Although Po Chu-yi's sympathies and vision were limited, on the whole he succeeded to a notable degree in expressing his countrymen's inmost thoughts and deepest convictions. He was in the best sense a popular poet.

This was also an age of many lesser poets. Yuan Chen, Li Shang-yin, Tu Mu and others, all made their distinctive contribution to Chinese poetry.

In the second half of the Tang dynasty there appeared a new poetic form, the *tzü*. *Tzü* are lyrics with lines of irregular length set to music. The number of sentences and the number of words in each sentence are governed by definite rules. This form of verse, which had a folk origin, was adopted by poets such as Wen Ting-yun of the later Tang dynasty, and Wei Chuang, Feng Yen-chi and Li Yu of the Five Dynasties. Of these, Li Yu was the most remarkable. The last prince of the Southern Tang kingdom and a native of Hsueh in Kiangsu, he lived from 937 to 978. His *tzü* deal with days gone by, his old kingdom, his grief and the transience of human life. Though he was far from sharing the feelings of common folk, his keen mind, brilliant imagination, and the beauty and freshness of his language have won him many admirers.

Fiction made rapid strides during the Sui and Tang dynasties, as we can see from a brief survey of the *chuan chi* or short stories of the Tang dynasty.

The development of the *chuan chi* can be divided into three periods. The first is from the seventh century and early years of the eighth, when such tales began to be written. Towards the end of the dynasty this genre became popular, and the middle of the eighth century to the early part of the ninth is the second period, when many *chuan chi* of a high quality were produced. To this time belong the famous *Tale of a Pillow*, *Everlasting Remorse*, *The Story of Ying-ying*, *The Governor of the Southern Tributary State* and *Prince Huo's Daughter*, as well as collections of tales by one writer. The third period started after the beginning of the ninth century and produced fewer outstanding stories but many collected works. Moreover, as so many such tales were appearing, anthologies were now compiled.

Taken as a whole, these Tang stories, especially those of the second period, give us a vivid and accurate picture of society. *Everlasting Remorse* and *Tale of a Pillow* show the decadent ways and vicious struggle for power of the ruling class. *The Old Man of the East City* and *Red Thread* reflect the horrors of war and the clashes between the different satrapies of that time. *Prince Huo's Daughter*, *The Story of Ying-ying* and *Fei Yen* describe the unhappy lot of women and their tragic love stories. The characterization and language are magnificent. Most of the writers have a warm, natural style, and by means of significant details bring out the salient features of their characters. We see this in *Prince Huo's Daughter*, the tragedy of a girl whose lover deserts her, when the young man is dragged to her as she lies on her death-bed.

Jade had been ill so long that she could not even turn in bed without help. But on hearing of his coming, she rose swiftly up, threw on her clothes, and swept out like one possessed.

Similarly in the *Tale of a Pillow*, where Lu dreams that he has been made a high official and then thrown into prison on account of slander, the writer uses intimate touches to convey his hero's bitterness:

In my old home east of the mountain I had enough good land to keep me from cold and hunger. What possessed me to become an official? See where it has brought me! If only I could put on my fur jacket again, and canter on my black colt down the road to Han tan!

By this method these characters are presented to the life — Jade torn between love and hate, and Lu uncertain of his best course of action.

Scholars after the Tang dynasty continued to write *chuan chi*,^{vii} but most of these later productions are undistinguished.

The drama showed less advance during this period than fiction, though certain improvements were made on the entertainments popular in the Southern and Northern Dynasties which included acrobatic displays, singing and dancing, puppet shows and burlesques.

3. Northern Sung Dynasty

The writers of the Northern Sung dynasty carried Chinese literature another step forward. At the beginning of the Sung dynasty, the writers known as the Hsikun school sought after formal perfection and took a wrong turning again in their poetry. For a time the *tzu* remained fettered by the old conventions of the Five Dynasties, but during the eleventh century writers recovered a more genuine set of values and wrote another glorious chapter in the history of Chinese literature.

The three most prominent men of letters of the eleventh century were Ouyang Hsiu, Wang An-shih and Su Shih or Su Tung-po, the last ranking highest.

Ouyang Hsiu (1007-1072) was a native of Luling in present-day Kiangsi. Statesman, historian, poet and essayist, he advanced the classical revival initiated during the Tang dynasty. His works are lucid and fluent, his style easy and unaffected. One of his essays contains reminiscences of his father told by his mother:

When your father was an official he sat up by candlelight once over a verdict and kept stopping work to sigh. I asked what the matter was, and he said: "This man is for the condemned cell. I cannot save him." I asked: "Is it right to try?" He answered: "If I try and fail, neither the condemned man nor I need have any regret. And what if there is a chance of succeeding?"

Here in plain, unvarnished language is a graphic picture of a kind-hearted official of those long-past days. Ouyang Hsiu also wrote numerous poems in the language of everyday speech and was anxious to act as a spokesman for humble folk, as we see in his "Poem to Tu Mo":

*East of the capital bandits gather;
North of the river new troops are trained;
Each day more hunger and wretchedness
Stalk the roads.
I beg you to raise your voice
On behalf of the people!*

"A Heavy Snowfall" and "Welcome Rain" are among Ouyang Hsiu's best works. In prose as well as poetry he served as a model for later generations.

Wang An-shih (1021-1086), famous for his political reforms, was a native of Linchuan in present-day Kiangsi. A minister of state, his literary achievements are inseparable from his radical political proposals. His prose works criticizing social abuses and suggesting reforms go to the heart of the matter and are supremely logical. His language is succinct, his sentences well constructed, his style incisive and lucid. As an example we may quote a passage from his *Reply to Ssuma Kuang*:

You accuse me, sir, of infringing upon the authority of other officials, creating trouble, seeking personal profit and refusing advice, thereby causing discontent throughout the empire. To my mind, however, when I receive orders from our sovereign, draw up government statutes and issue them to the authorities, I am not infringing upon the authority of other officials. When I follow the policy of former kings to benefit the people and root out evil, this is not creating trouble. When I regulate the economy of the empire, this is not seeking personal profit. When I combat wrong ideas and refute the sophists, this is not refusing advice. As for the fact that there is much discontent, I knew in advance that this would be the case.

Some of his poetry also is impressive evidence of his concern for the people. Thus "On Contemporary Affairs" is a tragic confirmation of the saying: "Tyranny is worse than a tiger."

*Heart-stricken in the country,
I grieve for the common people:
Good years cannot fill their bellies;
In flood or drought they must starve;
And if brigands come
How many will lose their lives!
But most I am aghast at the officials
Who ruin nine homes out of ten.
The grain rots in the fields,
But the people have no money to go to court;
If they succeed in approaching an official,
They are beaten for their pains.*

Wang An-shih is also justly celebrated for such nature poems as "Plum Blossom" and "Written on Mr. Hu-ying's Wall," for he was an original thinker with a distinctive style.

Su Shih (1036-1101) was a native of Meishan in present-day Szechuan. He held high office for many years and proved a good, public-spirited official. He was disgraced and demoted several times, being sent on one occasion as far as Hainan Island. His genius was many-sided, for not only was he an immortal poet and prose-writer, but a fine calligrapher and artist.

Su Shih was a careful observer and shrewd judge, who expressed the results of his observation and analysis in clear, flowing language, illumined by brilliant flashes of imagination. Since the end of the Tang dynasty the themes of *tzu* had virtually been confined to love or individual joys or sorrows, but at the beginning of the Sung dynasty a gradual change came about, most evident in the poems of Liu Yung, whose *tzu* are comparatively long and cover a greater range of subjects: the luxury of the capital, the views of townfolk, the misery and longings of unhappy women, and the experiences of a vagabond life. Su Shih's poetry marks a further change in style, as can be seen from "Thoughts of the Past at Red Cliff":

*The mighty river flows east,
Sweeping away countless heroes down the ages;
An old fortress on the west
May be Red Cliff where valiant Chou Yu^{viii} fought.
Jagged rocks scatter foam,
Fierce billows crash on the shore,
Hurling up drifts of snow:
A scene lovely as a painting,
But how many heroes fell here!
I think of Chou Yu that year
Newly wed to Lord Chao's daughter,
Handsome and bold
With plumed fan and scholar's cap,
Laughing and joking as his mighty foe
Was turned to dust and ashes.*

*Do you smile at me for a sentimental fool,
Roaming in spirit through that ancient kingdom
Though my hair is white before its time?
Life is but a dream –
Let me drink a cup to the moon above the river!*

This poem pays tribute to an ancient hero and laments the poet's own fate, linking past and present and giving moving expression to the author's sense of affinity with Nature. Su Shih's genius and vast erudition made him deal with a wider range of topics than any other poet, both in his *tzu* and other forms of poetry. He took the hardships of the people to heart, writing for instance in the "Lament of a Peasant Woman":

*One month she sleeps on a straw mat in the fields;
In fine weather she reaps the paddy and carts it home;
Bathed in sweat, her shoulders aching,
She carries it to market –
To get only the price of bran!
She sells her buffalo to pay her taxes,
Pulls down her house for fuel,
But what can she do next year
To keep from starving?*

The poet voices his sympathy for the poor in many of the verses written to friends; elsewhere he expresses his longing to become one with Nature. He has left many short nature poems, much admired for their apt imagery, economy of language and haunting, evocative quality. "The West Lake After Rain," only twentyeight characters in the original, may be taken as an example of these short lyrics, although it loses its magic in translation:

*The brimming lake is a brave sight in the sunlight;
The misty hills have a special charm in the rain:
I would compare the West Lake to Hsi Shih^x –
Unpainted or made up she was equally lovely.*

Su Shih believed that writing should resemble "floating clouds and flowing water." Indeed his prose is swift-moving and spontaneous, showing infinite variety. Sometimes he uses ingenious parables to attack incorrect trends of the time, as in *The Sun*:

One blind from birth has no conception of the sun. If one day he questions someone about the sun, he is told, "The sun is like a brass basin." Then he knocks against a basin and hears it clang, and later takes a bell for the sun. Another man tells him, "The sunlight is like a candle." Then he feels a candle to discover its shape, and later takes a flute for the sun. The sim is in fact very different from bells and flutes, but a blind man does not know this because he has never seen it — he goes by hearsay.

Now the Way is more difficult to discern than the sun, and those who do not study are like blind men. So when one who knows the Way speaks of it, even though he is skilled in making apt comparisons he can think of nothing better than a basin or candle; but a basin may make his hearers think of a bell, a candle of a flute, until they get further and further from the truth. Thus when men talk of the Way, they attempt to describe it in terms of what they have seen or to imagine it without having seen it, and in both cases they deviate from the Way.

Su Shih also wrote brilliant essays on historical happenings and current events, as well as on his own feelings and on Nature. He was probably the greatest writer of the Sung dynasty, whose works had a lasting influence on later generations.

Li Ching-chao, a poetess who lived towards the end of the Northern Sung dynasty, has a special place in Chinese literature.

Li Ching-chao (1081-1145) was a native of Tsinan in present-day Shantung. An extremely well-read woman who wrote on many subjects, she is best known for her superb *tz'u*. She enjoyed several years of happiness after her marriage, and produced fresh, beautiful work. But after fighting broke out towards the end of the dynasty and her husband died, she wrote poignant lines like these to express her loneliness:

*Faded and withered,
With thinning hair, greying temples,
I have lost the courage to take an evening stroll;
I had best sit by the window
And listen to the laughter and talk
Of others.*

Her sympathies were wide and she was capable of deep feeling, as is evident from her poems describing conditions in the north after the fall of the dynasty. She is one of China's greatest women writers.

Minor poets of this period were Liu Yung, Tseng Kung, Huang Ting-chien and Chou Pang-yen.

4. Southern Sung and Golden Tartar Period

The fall of the Northern Sung dynasty shook all writers of the time out of their complacency and resulted in an increased variety of subject matter in Southern Sung literature. Few masterpieces were produced in this period, but important advances were made in fiction and drama, and the foundations were laid to a great extent for the best Yuan, Ming and even Ching writing. From this time onwards fiction and drama occupied increasingly important positions in Chinese literature while poetry and essays took second place.

The patriotic standard-bearers of Southern Sung literature were the great writers Lu Yu and Hsin Chi-chi.

Lu Yu (1125-1210) was a native of Shanying in present-day Chekiang. From his boyhood north China's defeat rankled in his heart, and all his life he longed for the recovery of the lost territory. After he became an official he spent ten years in Szechuan, where all the commanders were staunch patriots, and these men encouraged him and influenced his work.

His poems are filled with fervent patriotism. Sometimes he brooded bitterly over China's losses and lashed out at the government for surrendering. He greeted the rare victories with passionate enthusiasm, and even dreamed of the recovery of the north. Thus he wrote:

Towards midnight on the eleventh of the fifth month I dreamed that I accompanied His Majesty on an expedition to reconquer all the territory of the Han and Tang empires. I saw a rich, populous city, and was told this was Hsiliang. In raptures, I wrote a poem in the saddle, but woke before it was finished. Now I am completing it.

*A million warriors follow the Son of Heaven;
Before his command goes out our land is retaken.
New cities rise at distant frontier stations,
And travelling in state
The emperor proclaims a general amnesty.*

Many of his poems reflect his indomitable spirit, but unfortunately he died without seeing China restored to her former splendour. Thus he left his son the heartfelt injunction:

*Though I know when a man is dead that is the end,
My one grief is not to have seen this land united.
As soon as our kingly army recovers the north,
Be sure to tell your old man when you sacrifice!**

Lu Yu's tzu express the same passion. Thus he wrote:

*Now, my hair flecked with white,
I am shocked to find my ambitions come to nothing
And my life that of a wanderer.
A jaded thoroughbred,
Little by little I have lost my mettle;
Far, far away, behind folds of mist and water,
I dream of the mountains and streams of my native land.*

As an ardent patriot, Lu Yu loved the labourers whose toil supported the country. In his works he prays for good harvests, sighs over the devastation of so many cities, inveighs

against the disparity between the rich and the poor, attacks the decadence of the rulers, and shows remarkable respect for the common people's opinions. He was not only with them in spirit, but lived very much as they did, cultivating his land himself.

*In midspring a farmer tills his fields
And tends his mulberry trees.
I plant the Linan mulberry
To feed hundreds of sheets of silkworms. . . .
South of my lodge I sow sesame,
For three days, luckily, there is no rain,
And getting up the fourth morning
I find the earth already clothed with green.*

(From "A Country Cottage.")

In his poems we find detailed descriptions of husbandry and the great satisfaction of those who reap the fruits of their toil. In addition to working himself, Lu Yu brought up his grandchildren to understand the dignity of labour.

*My grandsons, late home from school,
With ruffled hair turn to the kitchen garden
I wish you no rank or riches,
But may you till the land!*

(From "Farming.")

Lu Yu's works combine profound wisdom with beauty of form. His language is fresh and natural, and sometimes he uses colloquialisms. Unhampered by the strict rules of *lu shih*, he wrote many fine poems in this metre about love, friendship and the beauties of Nature. He is undoubtedly one of the greatest Sung poets.

Hsin Chi-chi (1140-1207) was a native of Tsinan in present-day Shantung. As a young man he fought with the guerrillas against the Golden Tartars, and like Lu Yu he looked forward all his life to the recapture of China's lost territory. Most of his *tzu* breathe a fervent love for his country:

*When drunk, I trim the lamp to gaze at my sword;
In dreams, I hear bugles sounding from camp to camp.
Meat is sent eight hundred li – the whole length of the front –
Luting carries across the lines,
As in the field in autumn we train our troops.*

Occasionally in times of great difficulty he fell a prey to despair. He has written poems, too, when intoxicated with the beauty of Nature or the moonlight; but even these are filled with powerful feeling. Indeed his passion for beauty was one expression of his love for his country, which he longed to see powerful and at peace again. His was a versatile genius: he wrote splendid and tragic poems as well as soft, charming lyrics, but his spirit is pre-eminently virile and heroic.

Lesser poets of the Southern Sung dynasty include Yang Wan-li, Fan Cheng-ta, Chen Liang, Chiang Kuei and Wen Tien-hsiang.

There were not many poets under the Golden Tartars. The most outstanding was Yuan Hao-wen, a native of Hsiujung in present-day Shansi, who lived from 1190 to 1257. He wrote of

the rugged scenery of the north, of his bitterness, of the hardships of the peasants under the invaders, and of the fearful massacres and pillage which took place when the Mongols attacked the country. He describes the agony of countless captives:

*No cave in the mountain to hide us,
No boat to carry us across the river —
A single enemy horseman
Can take a thousand captives;
And even if we live through this year,
What of the next?*

*Flight after flight,
Wild geese from south of the river!
Men sing, men weep,
Wild geese lament;
When autumn comes the geese fly back,
But will the captives from the south
Ever see their homes again?*

His deeply moving poems bear certain resemblances to those of Su Shih and Hsin Chi-chi.

Finally we come to the fiction and drama of this period.

The ***hua pen*** or story-tellers' scripts of this dynasty were used in the pleasure parks in different cities. Storytelling in public places of entertainment started in the Tang dynasty but became more popular during the Sung. By and large, these stories dealt with one of three topics: the life of the townsfolk, Buddhist legends, and historical incidents.

Most of the Sung and Yuan stories dealing with city life can be found in such collections as Popular Tales of the Capital. Although these stories contain elements of superstition or vulgarity, they deal in the main with the actual society and life of the time. Thus Fifteen Strings of Cash describes the ruin of a family of simple townsfolk because a conceited magistrate had no respect for human life. Tsui Ning was sentenced to death for murder, despite his pleas that he was innocent.

In a towering rage, the city magistrate thundered: "Nonsense! How could there be such a coincidence: they lost fifteen strings of cash, and you got fifteen strings for your silk! You are obviously lying. Besides, a man shouldn't covet his neighbour's wife or horse: if she was nothing to you, why were you walking together and putting up together? No doubt a cunning knave like you will never confess until I have you tortured."

. . . The unfortunate concubine and Tsui Ning were tortured until they broke down and agreed that they had been tempted by the money and killed Liu, then had taken the fifteen strings of cash and fled. The neighbours, acting as witnesses in the case, put their crosses to the confessions. Tsui Ning and the concubine were pilloried and sent to the prison for those condemned to death. And the fifteen strings of cash were returned to Mr. Wang, who found they were not enough to pay the men in the yamen!^{xi}

This story, founded on fact, gives us a picture of the crass stupidity, stubbornness and greed of the official world, which meant that the people had no one to defend their rights. Another of these tales, The Revolt of Wang Keh, describes a merchant and iron-smelter

who built up a fortune by his own efforts but was ruined by the corrupt authorities and forced to take his own life. This man lamented bitterly:

I was always a loyal subject till wicked men slandered me and I could not clear myself. I wanted to capture the assistant magistrate, find out the truth, take revenge and wipe out this disgrace. Then I meant to use the money in the local treasury to gather together a band of gallant men, seize the Huai River Valley and sweep away all these grasping, evil officials, to spread my fame throughout the empire. After that I should have placed myself at the service of the state and fought for my country, to win lasting renown. But now I have failed—this is fate!

This sharply delineated hero was a substantial, **law-abiding citizen**, who was driven **by** injustice to become an outlaw; **and his** story enables us to understand the **difficulties of his** class.

The historical stories which have come down to us in such works as the Popular History of the Five Dynasties and **Tales** of the Hsuan Ho Period are the immediate forerunners of the traditional novels. Thus the descriptions of Sung Chiang and other peasant leaders given in the Tales of the Hsuan Ho Period are the earliest sources for the adventures of the outlaws of Liangshan. This book reflects the unflinching courage and patriotism of common folk, and exposes the pride and extravagance of the rulers and their crimes against the people.

None of the Buddhist story-tellers' scripts have been preserved, but we have a chantable describing Hsuan-tsang's pilgrimage to the west which has certain features in common with both the stories about townsfolk and the historical tales, and is significant because it contains the first account of that immortal figure — Monkey Sun Wukung.

This period saw greater advances in the drama than the Tang dynasty, and the appearance of the long dramatic ballads known as chu kung tiao and of the Southern Drama was of particular significance. The dramatic ballads, which contained both songs and recitations, left their mark on the subject matter and music of the Yuan theatre. The Southern Drama, a form of local opera popular in the coastal regions of Chekiang from the end of the Northern Sung dynasty onwards, may be considered the forerunner of the Ming and Ching plays. Two chu kung tiao still in our possession are Liu Chih-yuan by an unknown writer of the Sung dynasty and The Western Chamber by a man named Tung in the Golden Tartar period. Though these are not plays they had a considerable influence on the development of the drama, and the literary merits of The Western Chamber are considerable. A fair number of mutilated versions of Southern plays dating from the end of the Sung and the early Yuan dynasties remain to us. The Successful Candidate Chang Hsieh, by an unknown writer, is complete. The heroine of this play is a striking figure, and the supporting cast is vividly drawn; the language is simple and concise, sometimes very lively and natural. The influence of this Southern Drama on later plays is obvious.

5. Yuan Dynasty

The main literary achievements of the Yuan dynasty are linked with the northern music. Lyrics set to the northern tunes were known as san chu, while the operas which used them were tsa chu, the celebrated Yuan drama. San chu are songs with lines of irregular length, somewhat akin to tzu. Most of the Yuan plays have four acts, occasionally more; though if the plot is an involved one, over twenty acts may be used. Apart from san chu and plays, this dynasty produced little good literature.

The two greatest dramatists of the Yuan dynasty are Kuan Han-ching and Wang Shih-fu.

Kuan Han-ching was a native of Tatu, present-day Peking. He was probably born at the time of the overthrow of the Golden Tartars, in 1234 or thereabouts, and died at the beginning of the fourteenth century. He had a wider experience of life than most of the literati, and his familiarity with ordinary townsmen enabled him to understand folk art and the life of the man in the street, so that in his work we sense his closeness to the common people.

Kuan Han-ching was the most prolific of the Yuan dramatists, and one of the most brilliant. He wrote on a wide range of topics, and the main themes of his plays are positive and clear. No matter whether he is dealing with corrupt officials or petty tyrants, heroes, beautiful girls or talented scholars, all his plays breathe defiant resistance to oppression.

Snow in Midsummer is one of his best works. The central theme of this play is the iniquity of the ruling class, and the main attack is directed against the injustice caused by foolish bureaucrats. The heroine, Tou Ngo, has great courage and strength of character. Before her execution she sings:

*you think Heaven knows no justice, men no pity?
Almighty Heaven will listen to men's prayers.
Once, in Tunghai, for three years no rain fell,
Because a good daughter-in-law was unjustly treated.
Now your district's turn has come.
Because officers here have no concern for justice,
The common citizens cannot tell the truth!^{xii}*

The plot is well integrated and highly dramatic, the language simple and moving.

The Butterfly Dream, The Wife-Snatcher and The Riverside Pavilion show us the overweening pride of the rich and mighty, who could not be called to account for murder and boasted of the fear they inspired. Rescued by a Coquette, Gold Thread Pool and other plays reflect the sufferings of singsong girls and their fighting spirit. Broad humanity and realism are evident in all these works.

Wang Shih-fu was a native of Yichow in present-day Hopei. The exact date of his birth is not known, but he is believed to have been active at the end of the thirteenth and beginning of the fourteenth centuries. After serving for a time as an official, he retired to live as a hermit.

He did not write many plays, and his masterpiece is The Western Chamber. Many Yuan dramatists attacked the feudal marriage system under which marriages were determined by money or social position and true love was cruelly suppressed, but The Western Chamber is the most outstanding work of this type.

Though the main theme of this play is the love between a scholar named Chang and Ying-ying, a girl of good family, the two most striking characters are Ying-ying and her maid Hung Niang. Ying-ying's personality was described in some detail in Tang dynasty stories, but Wang Shih-fu has added finishing touches to it. Hung Niang, however, is entirely his own creation. Intelligent, lively and brave, she has a strong sense of justice and plenty of fight. When her mistress cross-questions her sternly about the lovers, she gives a confident answer, conscious of being in the right.

*Why pry and probe any more, ma'am?
The proverb says: "Grown girls
Should not stay long at home". ...
He is a brilliant scholar,
She the most lovely young lady. . . .
If you force her to leave Master Chang
You will disgrace your house!
She is your own flesh and blood –
Think it over well, ma'am!*

Mischievous, ingenious Hung Niang has been a favourite with play-goers down the ages. Another reason for this play's popularity is its masterly construction and its language sparkling with life.

Other plays by Wang Shih-fu, such as Beautiful Spring Hall and A Tumbledown Cave, are inferior works.

In addition to Kuan Han-ching and Wang Shih-fu, there were many lesser Yuan dramatists, of whom we may mention two. Pai Pu (1226-1310) was a native of Chenting in present-day Hopei. His best work, Rain on the Plane Trees, while dealing with the tragic love of Emperor Ming Huang and Lady Yang, exposes the luxury and licence of the feudal rulers. This play shows penetrating psychological insight, and is skilfully constructed. Ma Chih-yuan, a native of Peking, lived slightly later than Pai Pu. His most representative work, Autumn in the Han Palace, tends to idealize Emperor Yuan of Han, but presents us with a noble heroine in the person of Wang Chiang, contrasting her courage and patriotism with the ineptness and cowardice of the military and civil officials.

A number of stirring Yuan dramas, such as Distributing Grain at Chenchow, are anonymous.

Many Yuan dynasty playwrights, including the four just mentioned, also wrote san chu. Other writers who specialized in this genre include Chang Yang-hao, Liu Chih, Feng Tzu-chen, Sui Ching-chen, Kuan Yun-shih, Hsu Tsai-sze, and Chang Ko-chiu who may be taken as a representative figure.

Chang Ko-chiu, a native of Chingyuan in present-day Chekiang, was probably born in the seventies of the thirteenth century and died in the forties of the fourteenth. He wrote over seven hundred verses, the majority of them dealing with natural beauty, as in this description of Tungpo Mountain in Chekiang:

*In the pine-scented breeze beside the small pavilion
A lyre plays a song of immortals.
The jade hare^{xiii} shivers in the autumn wind;
The chilly monkeys wail upon wild branches;
White clouds stretch to the horizon*

And the moon is small.

Sometimes he also wrote satires on current abuses:

*All men hate poverty,
All delight in riches. . . .
So they paste their essays into purses,
And turn their homes into houses of ill repute!*

His language verges occasionally on the pedantic, but he did not deliberately turn his back on common speech.

San chu continued to be written after the Yuan dynasty, becoming, indeed, one of the most popular poetic forms.

The foregoing is necessarily a brief summary only of the literature of the sixth to fourteenth centuries. During this period great poetry and fine essays were written, and unprecedented advances were made in fiction and drama. Owing to the decline of the hereditary landowning class and the growth of large towns and cities, new ideas and subjects were introduced into literature, and new forms and images were created. These factors combined with the development of the Chinese language to make these eight hundred years a fruitful period in the history of Chinese literature.

ⁱ From *More Translations from the Chinese* by Arthur Waley.

ⁱⁱ Translated by Rewi Alley.

ⁱⁱⁱ Translated by Rewi Alley.

^{iv} Translated by Rewi Alley.

^v Translated by Rewi Alley.

^{vi} From *170 Chinese Poems*, translated by Arthur Waley.

^{vii} Ten of these stories are included in *The Dragon King's Daughter* published by the Foreign Languages Press.

^{viii} A famous general of the kingdom of Wu in the Three Kingdoms period.

^{ix} Concubine of the king of Wu. in the Spring and Autumn Period. Her beauty is said to have proved her master's undoing.

^x It was the custom, during sacrifice to the ancestors, to announce important family news to their spirits.

^{xi} For the complete story, see *The Courtesan's Jewel Box*, a collection of twenty *hua pen* stories published by the Foreign Languages Press.

^{xii} From the *Selected Plays of Kuan Han-ching* published by the Foreign Languages Press.

^{xiii} Refers to the moon, where the legend says a jade hare lives.