

Book Review

Zong-Qi Cai, Editor. How to Read Chinese Poetry: A Guided Anthology, New York: Columbia University Press, 2008. 426pp. (ISBN 0231139411)

How to Read Chinese Poetry is a detailed anthology of English translation of Chinese poems with Chinese characters and *pinyin*. It is arranged chronologically in six parts, ranging from the Zhou Dynasty--the era of the *The Book of Poetry (Shijing)*--to the Qing Dynasty, ending with Gan Lirou's (1743-1819) poetry. It covers all major poetic genres, such as poetry (*shi*), rhapsody (*fu*), lyric (*ci*), and song poems (*qu*). The fifteen contributors to this anthology are all excellent scholars in their own fields. For example, David R. Knechtges, who has translated all the rhapsodies preserved in the *Selections of Refined Literature (Wen xuan)* outstandingly, contributed the chapter on rhapsodies: "An Ancient-Style Rhapsody (*Gufu*)"; Grace S. Fong, who is well known for her works on gender and poetry in late imperial China, composed the chapter on "*Shi* Poetry of the Ming and Qing Dynasties".

A very useful feature of this anthology is that it not only provides English translation, but also offers Chinese characters and corresponding *pinyin*. I used part of this book when teaching pre-modern Chinese literature, and found that students appreciated the way that poems were presented and analyzed, because most of them were learning Chinese language at the same time. To re-enhance the learning experience, there is a web-based sound recording as a companion to this volume, which allows students to listen to native speakers reading the poems.

This book also includes very helpful alternate table of contents organized by thematic categories: intellectual and cultural milieu, themes, prosody, diction, syntax, and structure. If readers

want to know more about a particular aspect of poetic development, they can refer to specific readings. For example, if one is interested in farmstead poetry, one can look up “Farming and Reclusion” and find poems by Tao Qian (365?-427), Xie Lingyun (385-433), Lu You (1125-1209), Fan Chengda (1126-1193), and Qiao Ji (1280-1345). At the end of each chapter, there is a list of suggested readings in English and Chinese, including the most important primary and secondary scholarship on the topics addressed.

In addition to polished translations, many contributors adopted word-for-word translation, which facilitates students understanding the rules of Chinese poetic language and composition. This literal translation preserves the sequence and organization of the original Chinese poems as far as possible. Readers who are not familiar with Chinese can still use the gloss to come up with their own interpretation of how these poems work without being limited by the translation.

After translation of each poetic piece, the contributors further provided extensive analysis and contextualization of these poems. For example, Wendy Swartz discusses the last couplet of Tao Qian’s famous poem, “Returning to Live on the Farm, No.1”, “For long I have lived within a cage, And now I may return to nature ” (p. 123). She emphasizes the importance of nature (*ziran*) in the broader literary milieu of the Chinese tradition: “This tripartite pattern (explanation of natural disposition, description of pastoral life, and affirmation of choice of lifestyle) was often borrowed by Tang writers of farmstead poetry, such as Wang Wei (701?-761) and Chu Guangxi (fl. 726), who likely found this logic of representation effective in vindicating an alternative way of life, reclusion” (p. 124). She continues to explain how Wang Wei adapts this last couplet from Tao Qian and changes it into an example of the High Tang (713-755) style. In providing the historical lineage of this concept, she offers readers with its multiple meanings in Chinese literary tradition.

Many allusions found in Chinese poetry present challenges for both translation and understating, because several lines of elegant poetic language often encapsulate long narrative settings in rich historical context. To understand different levels of the meanings in these poems requires readers to have familiarity with both the general and literary history of China. Many of the poets in this anthology

juxtapose allusions to demonstrate complex emotions, and employ intertextual links among various literary texts. A valuable aspect of this anthology is that the contributors dealt with them explicitly, explaining the allusions. For instance, Xiaofei Tian discusses Yu Xin's (513-581) poem "In Response to Director Liu Zhen", in which the first couplet includes two layers of allusions: "To the south I climbed the bank of Guangling, And turned my head toward the Fortress of the Shooting Star" (p. 154). Tian explains that this couplet consists of an allusion to Wang Can's "Seven Sorrows" (Qi ai), where Wang himself alludes to the *Book of Poetry* to express his pain at the loss of the capital Chang'an and the cruelty of warfare. Yu used the same structure and similar diction to describe his feelings about the downfall of Jiankang, the capital of the Liang Dynasty (502-557). Tian asserts, "Yu Xin's quatrain is therefore like a textual set of Chinese boxes, with one box containing another containing yet another" (p. 155). Such a careful investigation of the use of allusion adds great depth to the appreciation of this poem by contemporary English readers.

The editor of this anthology Zong-qi Cai states, "The goal of this anthology is to help students overcome language barriers and engage with Chinese poetical texts in ways that yield as much aesthetic pleasure and intellectual insight as one gets from the originals" (p. xxi). This book successfully achieves its goal of helping students to overcome linguistic difficulties and to appreciate Chinese poems in their original settings. This is an excellent guided anthology of selected representative works in pre-modern Chinese poetry, and is suitable for students majoring in East Asian/Chinese Studies, teachers of Chinese literature, and readers who want to learn how to better appreciate various forms and genres of Chinese poetry. This anthology is well received, because there is also a forthcoming companion workbook titled *How to Read Chinese Poetry Workbook* edited by Jie Cui and Zong-qi Cai (New York: Columbia University Press, 2012).

Reviewed by
Yue Zhang

Department of East Asian Studies, University of Toronto