

**POEMS FROM
THE CHINESE**

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Poems from the Chinese by Arthur Waley

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ARTHUR WALEY

**POEMS FROM
THE CHINESE**

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The Augustan Books of English Poetry

(Second Series)

Edited by Humbert Wolfe

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F. Pollock

The publishers owe due acknowledgments to Messrs. Constable and Messrs Allen and Unwin for permission to reprint some of the poems included in this selection.

These are called "Poems from the Chinese," and we have Mr. Waley's assurance that there are in existence Oriental originals. But if it be so (and, of course, it is), then we have here a literary miracle. It is a platitude that translation of poetry is either bad verse or bad translation. But Mr. Waley, translating not merely from one language into another, but almost from one planet into another, has produced a body of living poetry, in which there is every reason to believe he re-creates, without distorting, the Chinese poets.

This is an unparalleled feat. But as we are, with about six exceptions in the whole of Great Britain, incapable of comparing the English and the Chinese, we must address ourselves to these poems as though they had been written by an Englishman of the twentieth century, and judge them on that basis. It is a severe test to apply to translations, but Mr. Waley emerges from it serenely victorious. Indeed, serenity is the keynote of all this work—the serenity of assured mastery in a difficult medium, but still more of outlook. The beauty with which these poems are inlaid is fundamentally a wise beauty, and the wisdom is as much in the shape of Mr. Waley's mind as in that of China. There is no need to hurry here. Wisdom goes at an even pace, and has time between her penetrations of the stars to observe the smallest things of life. Her leisurely glance sweeps over them with patient gold, and they settle, almost without a sigh, into decoration and into pattern. We have lost (and the Chinese have lost) the secret of their enamels of the great periods. But Mr. Waley has private access to them, and his poems, varnished with just that cool and even certainty of paint and texture, achieve one final translation—the translation of colour into speech.

HUMBERT WOLFE.

Waley, Arthur D.

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From the "Book of Odes"

ANON. (c. 1000 B.C.)

AS a boat is danced
Where the waves will,
So I on my bed
In torment tossed
Lie long awake;
Nor wine, nor sport
Can ease my pain.

Oh that my heart were a glass
Wherein I might read!
To my brothers I went,
Sought help and found it not,
But anger only.

My heart is not a stone,
To be rolled aside;
My heart is not a mat,
To be folded away.
What have I done? If I a jot have erred,
Show me my fault!

My heart is dull with dread;
I am girt around
With the scorn of little men.
Much torment have I seen,
Much insolence endured,
Have sunk in idle thought
And, waking, beat my breast.

O Sun, O Moon,
Why have you dwindled and changed? . . .
Sorrow to my heart

Clings like an unwashed dress;
I am borne down
By useless thoughts, and cannot
Take wing to fly away.

Odes, I., 3, i.

From the "Book of Odes"

ANON. (c. 1000 B.C.)

ALL day the wind blew wild.
You looked at me and laughed;
But your jest was lewdness and your laughter mockery.
Sick was my heart within.

All day the wind blew with a whirl of dust.
Kindly you seemed to come,
Came not, nor went away.
Long, long I think of you.

The dark wind will not suffer
Clean skies to close the day.
Cloud trails on cloud. Oh, cruel thoughts!
I lie awake and moan.

The sky is black with clouds;
The far-off thunder rolls;
I have woken and cannot sleep, for the thought of you
Fills all my heart with woe.

Odes, I., 3, v.

From the "Book of Odes"

ANON. (c. 1000 B.C.)

THERE grows an elm-tree on the hill,
And by the mere an alder-tree—
You have a coat, but do not wear it,
You have a gown, but do not trail it,
You have a horse, but do not ride it,
A coach, but do not drive it,
So will it be till you are dead
And others can enjoy them!
There grows a gum-tree on the hill,
And by the mere a chestnut-tree.
You have wine and food, why do you forget
Sometimes to play your lute,
Sometimes to laugh and sing,
Sometimes to steal new playtime from the night?
Shall it be so till you are dead
And others have your house?

Odes, I, 10, ii.

Cock-Crow Song

ANON. (1st cent. B.C.)

IN the eastern quarter dawn breaks, the stars flicker pale.
The morning cock at Ju-nan mounts the wall and crows.
The songs are over, the clock¹ run down, but still the feast
is set.
The moon grows dim and the stars are few; morning has
come to the world.
At a thousand gates and ten thousand doors the fish-shaped
keys turn.
Round the Palace and up by the Castle, the crows and
magpies are flying.

¹ A water-clock.

Meeting in the Road

ANON. (1st cent. B.C.)

IN a narrow road where there was not room to pass
My carriage met the carriage of a young man.
And while his axle was touching my axle
In the narrow road I asked him where he lived.
“The place where I live is easy enough to find,
Easy to find and difficult to forget.
The gates of my house are built of yellow gold,
The hall of my house is paved with white jade,
On the hall table flagons of wine are set,
I have summoned to serve me dancers of Han-tan.¹
In the midst of the courtyard grows a cassia-tree,—
And candles on its branches flaring away in the night.”

On the Death of his Mistress

BY THE EMPEROR WU-TI (157-87 B.C.)

THE sound of her silk skirt has stopped.
On the marble pavement dust grows.
Her empty room is cold and still.
Fallen leaves are piled against the doors.
 Longing for that lovely lady,
How can I bring my aching heart to rest?

¹ Capital of the Kingdom of Chao, where the people were famous for their beauty.