V

I built my hut beside a traveled road
Yet here no noise of passing carts and horses.
You would like to know how it is done?
With the mind detached, one's place becomes remote.
Picking chrysanthemums by the eastern hedge
I catch sight of the distant southern hills:
The mountain air is lovely as the sun sets
And flocks of flying birds return together.
In these things is a fundamental truth
I would like to tell, but lack the words.

IX

I heard a knock this morning at my door
In haste I pulled my gown on wrongside out
And went to ask the caller, Who is there?
It was a well-intentioned farmer, come
With a jug of wine to pay a distant call.
Suspecting me to be at odds with the times:
'Dressed in rags beneath a roof of thatch
Is not the way a gentleman should live.
All the world agrees on what to do—
I hope that you will join the muddy game.'
'My sincere thanks for your advice, old man.
It's my nature keeps me out of tune.
Though one can learn of course to pull the reins,
To go against oneself is a real mistake.
So let's just have a drink of this together—
There's no turning back my carriage now.'[1]

X

Once I made a distant trip
Right to the shore of the Eastern Sea
The road I went was long and far,
The way beset by wind and waves.
Who was it made me take this trip?
It seems that I was forced by hunger.
I gave my all to eat my fill
When just a bit was more than enough.
Since this was not a famous plan
I stopped my cart and came back home.

1. That is, from following the course of life he has chosen.

From On Reading the *Seas and Mountains Classic*[1]

I

In early summer when the grasses grow
And trees surround my house with greenery,
The birds rejoice to have a refuge there
And I too love my home.
The fields are plowed and the new seed planted
And now is time again to read my books.
This out-of-the-way lane has no deep-worn ruts
And tends to turn my friends' carts away.
With happy face I pour the spring-brewed wine
And in the garden pick some greens to cook.
A gentle shower approaches from the east
Accompanied by a temperate breeze.
I skim through the *Story of King Mu*[2]
And view the pictures in the *Seas and Mountains Classic*.
A glance encompasses the ends of the universe—
Where is there any joy, if not in these?

1. A fabulous geography of the countries surrounding China, inhabited by strange creatures and oddly shaped human beings. 2. This is a travel narrative of the Chou king Mu's visits to fantastic places beyond China.

T'ANG POETRY

Lyric poetry has generally been considered China's most important traditional literary form, and in the two millennia during which classical poetry played a powerful role in the culture, no period ever quite seemed to equal the T'ang Dynasty (618–907). The role of lyric poetry in traditional China was very different from that of lyric poetry in the West. By the T'ang Dynasty lyric poems had come to be used in a wide range of situations in both private and social life—in letters to friends, as contributions to a party, or as commemorations of visits to famous places. An educated person visiting the home of a friend might leave a poem if the host was not at home. On returning the host might reply by sending a poem to express regret at having missed the visit. Officials traveling on imperial business would write poems about their journeys on the white plaster walls of government post houses, sometimes responding to other poems on the wall left by previous visitors. In addition to the wide range of social situations that called for or invited the composition of poetry, poems were also written for the more private occasions that are familiar subjects of Western poetry: finding words for the difficult moments of life, communicating love, and simply evoking imaginary scenes and old legends.

In such a world few people defined themselves exclusively as "poets." To write poetry with grace (or at least technical competence) was expected of an educated person. During much of the T'ang period, poetic composition made part of the *chin-shih* examination, by which a candidate qualified for a government appointment. Thus poetic skill touched career, social life, and private life. Although in later centuries women's circles engaged widely in poetic composition, in the T'ang period composition of poetry by women was most common at the top and on the margins of

the social order. In certain periods women of the imperial court actively participated in poetry competitions and court occasions for composition. But poetry played an even larger role in the demimonde, as part of the commerce between courtesans, often trained in music and song, and their clients.

On one level, poetry was a craft that taught people how to pay attention to significant moments in their lives—to find something lovely in a scene, to express feelings about some painful or joyous event, and to find words for what would otherwise be awkward or impossible to say. Among a much smaller group, that shared social craft achieved the status of great art. Of some fifty thousand T'ang poems that survive today, by more than twenty-two hundred individuals, the works of thirty or forty truly talented poets constitute about half. Yet there are a remarkable number of memorable poems by otherwise undistinguished writers, who, by some gift of circumstance and their shared poetic training, rose briefly to compose poems that would be read and memorized for the next thousand years.

Most Chinese poems of this period have lines of either five or seven syllables. Because Chinese words are of either one or two syllables, these rhythms came as easily as iambic pentameter comes to English. The couplet was the basic unit of verse, and the last syllable of the couplet rhymed with the last syllable of other couplets. There were many forms; the most common were the two-couplet quatrain (*chüeh-chü*) and the four-couplet regulated verse (*lü-shih*). Longer poems and stanzaic ballads were also common. Poems that had no metrical requirements other than line length and rhyme were called old-style verse. Poems requiring a balance of tones (Chinese being a tonal* language) and parallelism within the couplet were said to be in the recent style.

Parallelism, which involved matching words of similar categories in corresponding positions in the lines of a couplet, was not only a structuring device but also a way of looking at the world and seeing significant pattern in it. Hence a brilliant parallel couplet held the kind of aesthetic interest that a good metaphor has in English poetry. The following couplet is by Po Chü-i:

徑	滑	苔	粘	履
path	slippery	moss	stick to	shoes
潭	深	水	沒	篙
pool	deep	water	sinks	boat-pole

Or to paraphrase: "the path is glossy and slick, so that the moss sticks to the bottom of my shoes; where the stream deepens into a pool, the pole, by which the boat is pushed along, sinks under the water." The reader first notices the visual similarity between the shiny wet surface of the mossy path and the surface of the stream (the "pool" here is a deep and wide section of a river or stream). The word *hua* ("slippery" or "glossy") suggests the danger of losing one's footing. The couplet encourages us to imagine legs walking on this shiny, slippery surface, a foot sinking down into the moss, meeting solid ground, and coming up with moss stuck to the shoe. The second line shifts to a parallel motion, punting down a stream instead of walking down a path, with the boat pole taking the place of the walking legs. Coming to a deep pool, the pilot pushes the pole into the water but instead of hitting bottom, the pole unexpectedly sinks under the surface. With wit and a beautiful play of visual pattern, Po Chü-i says something about peril and pitfalls, both anticipated and unexpected.

The Chinese poetic language differs strongly from English or European poetic languages. Although in context a couplet like the one above would be only slightly more

*All languages are "tonal," but in most languages, including English, the tones are associated with sentence patterns. Chinese differs in having the tones attached to individual words.

ambiguous than an English couplet, much depends on the reader's trained expectations. A situation established in the title will let a reader know that such a couplet is to be read with a first person subject and in the present tense, even though pronouns and tense markers are missing in the text. Furthermore, what seems impersonal and general in English glosses can be personal and even idiosyncratic in Chinese.

Because poetry was a sociable art exchanged among friends, readers who would never meet the poets whose work they read came to think of them as familiar characters. Even today T'ang period poets are often spoken of as acquaintances, each with a distinct, sometimes quirky personality. The best way to approach such poetry is as a cultural drama with a vivid cast of characters. Their real lives, mostly spent passing through the vagaries of government service, are finally less important than the personalities they created for themselves in their poetry.

PRONOUNCING GLOSSARY

The following list uses common English syllables and stress accents to provide rough equivalents of selected words whose pronunciation may be unfamiliar to the general reader.

chin-shih: *jin–sherr*

chüeh-chü: *jooeh–joo*

hua: *hwa*

lü-shih: *loo–shir*

Po Chü-i: *bwoh joo-ee*

LI PO
701–762

Li Po was from western China, and some have suspected that his family was of Turkish origin. In an age that valued family background, he was a nobody. To make a place for himself in upper-class society, he had to "invent" himself as an eccentric personality and as poet, a task he undertook with gusto. Social success in T'ang period China depended either on family connections or on the civil service examination (the training for which depended in some measure on family). Li Po had neither. But the dynasty also patronized Taoist "wizards," and through his connection with one eminent wizard, Li Po gained entrance to the Han-lin Academy, an imperial establishment for entertainers, intellectuals who did not advance through the normal channels, and interesting eccentrics.

In the Han-lin Academy Li Po seems to have been something of a cross between court poet and jester. As legend has it, his much-admired eccentricity, aided by alcohol, passed over the delicate boundary into rudeness; he offended powerful figures in the court and was dismissed. He dignified this dismissal as an exile brought on by the slander of his enemies and a failure to recognize his exceptional worth. The emperor may have been no longer amused, but Li Po retained the admiration of many intellectuals, who saw his rare talent.

Much T'ang poetry tended to treat the world at hand; Li Po gave it an additional dimension of poetic fantasy, describing the worlds of the Taoist heavens, evoking moments of history and legend, and even transforming more everyday occasions into something wondrous and strange. For such flair and capacity to see the world with fresh eyes, his contemporaries called him the "banished immortal," one of those ethereal beings who dwell in the heavens and who, for some extravagant misdemeanor, have been exiled to live out a lifetime in the world of mortals.

PRONOUNCING GLOSSARY

The following list uses common English syllables and stress accents to provide rough equivalents of selected words whose pronunciation may be unfamiliar to the general reader.

Ch'ang-an: chahng–ahn
Ching-t'ing: *jing–ting*
Hsi-ho: *shee–huh*
Jo-yeh: *rwoh–ye*
Li Po: *lee bwoh*
Lu-yang: *loo–yahng*
P'ing-lo: *ping–luh*
Tan-ch'iu: *dahn–chyoh*
Ts'ao Chih: *tsau jerr*
Ts'en: *tsuhn*
Yüeh: *yooeh*

The Sun Rises and Sets[1]

The sun comes up from its nook in the east,
Seems to rise from beneath the earth,
Passes on through Heaven,
  sets once again in the western sea,
And where, oh, where, can its team of six dragons
  ever find any rest?
Its daily beginnings and endings,
  since ancient times never resting.
And man is not made of its Primal Stuff—
  how can he linger beside it long?
Plants feel no thanks for their flowering in spring's wind,
Nor do trees hate losing their leaves
  under autumn skies:
Who wields the whip that drives along
  four seasons of changes—
The rise and the ending of all things
  is just the way things are.

Hsi-ho![2] Hsi-ho!
Why must you always drown yourself
  in those wild and reckless waves?
What power had Lu-yang[3]
That he halted your course by shaking his spear?
This perverts the Path of things,
  errs from Heaven's will—
So many lies and deceits!
I'll wrap this Mighty Mudball of a world
  all up in a bag
And be wild and free like Chaos itself!

1. All selections translated by Stephen Owen. 2. Goddess who drove the sun's carriage. 3. Reference to the legend that the lord of Lu-yang, engaged in combat, made the sun stop in its course so that the fight could continue.

Bring in the Wine

Look there!
  The waters of the Yellow River,
  coming down from Heaven,
  rush in their flow to the sea,
  never turn back again
Look there!
  Bright in the mirrors of mighty halls
  a grieving for white hair,
  this morning blue-black strands of silk,
  now turned to snow with evening.
For satisfaction in this life
  taste pleasure to the limit,
And never let a goblet of gold
  face the bright moon empty.
Heaven bred in me talents,
  and they must be put to use.
I toss away a thousand in gold,
  it comes right back to me.
So boil a sheep,
  butcher an ox,
    make merry for a while,
And when you sit yourself to drink, always
  down three hundred cups.
  Hey, Master Ts'en,
  Ho, Tan-ch'iu,[1]
  Bring in the wine!
  Keep the cups coming!
And I, I'll sing you a song,
You bend me your ears and listen—
The bells and the drums, the tastiest morsels,
  it's not these that I love—
All I want is to stay dead drunk
  and never sober up.
The sages and worthies of ancient days
  now lie silent forever,
And only the greatest drinkers
  have a fame that lingers on!
Once long ago
  the prince of Ch'en[2]
    held a party at P'ing-lo Lodge.[3]
A gallon of wine cost ten thousand cash,
  all the joy and laughter they pleased.
    So you, my host,
How can you tell me you're short on cash?
Go right out!
  Buy us some wine!
    And I'll do the pouring for you!

1. Master Ts'en and Tan-ch'iu are Li Po's friends. 2. The poet Ts'ao Chih (192–232). 3. Reference to a party described in one of Ts'ao Chih's poems.

Then take my dappled horse,
  Take my furs worth a fortune,
Just call the boy to get them,
  and trade them for lovely wine,
And here together we'll melt the sorrows
  of all eternity!

Yearning

  Endless yearning
  Here in Ch'ang-an,[1]
Where the cricket spinners cry autumn
  by the rail of the golden well,
Where flecks of frost blow chill,
  and the bedmat's color, cold.
No light from the lonely lantern,
  the longing almost broken—
Then roll up the curtain, gaze on the moon,
  heave the sigh that does no good.
A lady lovely like the flowers,
  beyond that wall of clouds,
And above, the blue dark of heavens high,
And below, the waves of pale waters.
Endless the sky, far the journey,
  the fleet soul suffers in flight,
And in its dreams can't touch its goal
  through the fastness of barrier mountains—
    Then endless yearning
    Crushes a man's heart.

Ballad of Youth

A young man of Five Barrows suburb
  east of the Golden Market,[1]
Silver saddle and white horse
  cross through wind of spring.
When fallen flowers are trampled all under,
  where is it he will roam?
With a laugh he enters the tavern
  of a lovely Turkish wench.

1. The T'ang Dynasty's capital.

1. In Ch'ang-an.

The Girls of Yüeh

A girl picking lotus on Jo-yeh Creek[1]
Sees the boatman return, singing a rowing song.
With a giggle she hides in the lotus flowers
And, pretending shyness, won't come out.

Dialogue in the Mountains

You ask me why I lodge in these emerald hills;
I laugh, don't answer—my heart is at peace.
Peach blossoms and flowing waters
  go off to mysterious dark,
And there is another world,[1]
  not of mortal men.

Summer Day in the Mountains

Lazily waving a fan of white feathers,
Stripped naked here in the green woods,
I take off my headband, hang it on a cliff,
My bare head splattered by wind through pines.

My Feelings

Facing my wine, unaware of darkness growing,
Falling flowers cover my robes.
Drunk I rise, step on the moon in the creek—
Birds are turning back now,
  men too are growing fewer.

Drinking Alone by Moonlight

Here among flowers a single jug of wine,
No close friends here, I pour alone
And lift cup to bright moon, ask it to join me,
Then face my shadow and we become three.
The moon never has known how to drink,
All my shadow does is follow my body,
But with moon and shadow as companions a while,
This joy I find must catch spring while it's here.
I sing, the moon just lingers on,

1. In southeastern China in a region famous for its beautiful women.

1. The image suggests the Peach Blossom Spring described by T'ao Ch'ien, a place removed from the troubles of this world.

I dance, and my shadow scatters wildly.
When still sober we share friendship and pleasure,
Then entirely drunk each goes his own way—
Let us join in travels beyond human feelings
And plan to meet far in the river of stars.

Sitting Alone by Ching-t'ing Mountain

The flocks of birds have flown high and away,
A solitary cloud goes off calmly alone.
We look at each other and never get bored—
Just me and Ching-t'ing Mountain.

TU FU
712–770

If Li Po was associated with Taoism and the free, uncaring immortals, Tu Fu has always been strongly associated with Confucian virtues, embodied in his political commitment, his social concerns, and his love of family. A consensus of readers considers Tu Fu to be China's greatest poet, with each successive age finding in Tu Fu's work its own sense of what constitutes greatness. That very ability to satisfy changing values is a tribute to the diversity of his work. Yet he was esteemed in every age of Chinese poetry but his own.

During his lifetime Tu Fu was eminently unsuccessful, both as political figure and as poet. The grandson of one of the most famous court poets of the early eighth century, the young Tu Fu sought political office with no success. When the great rebellion of 755 took the capital by surprise and the emperor fled west, Tu Fu was trapped behind enemy lines. Some of his finest early poems were written at this period, as he heard of the defeat of one imperial army after another. Eventually he slipped through the lines and made his way to the court of the new emperor, who was directing military operations against the rebels. There he briefly held one of those court posts he had so much desired, but following the recapture of the capital, he was exiled to a minor provincial post, a job he came to detest. He quit this post in disgust and took up a life of wandering, first to the northwest, then west to Ch'eng-tu, the capital of Szechwan, then down the Yangtse River, coming in his last year to the lakes region in central China. It was during these last years of his life that Tu Fu wrote most of his poetry.

Because Chinese poetry treats both the minor details and the major crises of a person's life, a poet's work as a whole can be seen as autobiography or even diary. The culture valued poetry as a key to the historical person. One reason for Tu Fu's appeal may be the way he documents his life, from the smallest details to the largest dimensions of social context. Traditional critics often refer to him as the poet historian, in whose work incidents from that important moment in Chinese history come alive. He was also a meticulous craftsman, constantly revising his poems. In that process, like Li Po, he created the personality later readers so admire. But unlike Li Po, he presents himself as a character who has suffered, endured much, and changed.

PRONOUNCING GLOSSARY

The following list uses common English syllables and strees accents to provide rough equivalents of selected words whose pronunciation may be unfamiliar to the general reader.

An Lu-shan: *ahn loo–shahn*
Ch'ang-an: *chahng–ahn*
Ch'eng-tu: *chuhng–doo*
Chiang: *jyahng*
Fu-chou: *foo–joe*
Lu-tzu: *loo–dzuh*
P'eng-ya: *puhng–yah*
Sun Tsai: *swun dzai*
T'ung-chia: *toohng–jyah*

Song of P'eng-ya[1]

I remember when first we fled the rebellion,[2]
Hurrying north, we passed through hardship and danger.
The night was deep on the P'eng-ya Road,
And the moon was shining on Whitewater Mountain.
The whole family had been traveling long on foot—
Most whom we met seemed to have no shame.
Here and there birds of the valley sang,
We saw no travelers going the other way.
My baby girl gnawed at me in her hunger,
And I feared wild beasts would hear her cries:
I held her to my chest, covered her mouth,
But she twisted and turned crying louder in rage.
My little son did his best to take care of things,
With purpose went off and got sour plums to eat.
It had thundered and rained half the past week,
We clung together, pulling through mud and mire,
And having made no provision against the rain,
The paths were slippery, our clothes were cold.
At times we went through great agony
Making only a few miles in an entire day.
Fruits of the wilds served as our provisions,
Low-hanging branches became our roof.
Then early in mornings we went through the runoff,
To spend the evening at homestead smoke on horizon.
We stayed a while in T'ung-chia Swamp
And were about to go out Lu-tzu Pass,
When an old friend of mine, Sun Tsai by name—
His great goodness reached the tiers of cloud—
Welcomed us as night's blackness was falling,
Hung out lanterns, opened his many gates,
With warm water had us wash our feet,
Cut paper flags to summon our souls,
Then afterward brought in his wife and children,
Whose eyes, seeing us, streamed with tears.

1. All selections translated by Stephen Owen. 2. That is, the time Tu Fu took his family out of the path of An Lu-shan's rebel army.

As if unconscious, my brood was sleeping;
He woke them kindly and gave them plates of food.
And I make this vow to you,
That forever I will be your brother, your kin.
Then he emptied the hall where we sat,
I rested peacefully—he offered what gave me joy.
Who else would be willing in times of such trouble
To show his good heart so openly?
Since we have parted, a year has run its course,
And still the barbarian weaves his calamities.
When shall I ever have the wings
To fly off and alight before your eyes?

Moonlit Night[1]

The moon tonight in Fu-chou
She[2] watches alone from her chamber,
While faraway I think lovingly on daughters and sons,
Who do not yet know how to remember Ch'ang-an.[3]
In scented fog, her cloudlike hairdo moist,
In its clear beams, her jade-white arms are cold.
When shall we lean in the empty window,
Moonlit together, its light drying traces of tears.

Chiang Village[1]

From west of the towering ochre clouds
the sun's rays descend to the level earth.

Birds raise a racket in the brushwood gate
as the traveler comes home from a thousand miles.

Wife and children are amazed I survived,
when surprise settles, they wipe away tears.

I was swept along in the turmoil of the times,
by chance I managed to make it back alive.

Our neighbors are filling the wall,[2]
so deeply moved they're sobbing too.

Toward night's end I take another candle,
and face you, as if it still is a dream.

1. Tu Fu is trapped behind rebel lines in the capital Ch'ang-an. 2. His wife. 1. Written after Tu Fu finally rejoined his wife after escaping through rebel lines. 3. That is, the person in the capital, Tu Fu himself. 2. In other words, all the neighbors are gathering to witness the reunion. Even modest houses had low walls around the yard.

Thousand League Pool

The blue creek fuses dark mystery within,
A holy creature, sometimes appearing, sometimes concealed—
A dragon resting in massed waters coiled,
His lair sunken under a thousand leagues.
Pace each step with care, pass over cliff rim,
Bent for balance go down into mist and haze,
Look out over a stretch of mighty waves,
Then stand back on a greatness of gray stone.
The mountain is steep, the one path here now ends
Where sheer banks form two facing walls:
Thus were they hewn, rooted in nothingness,
Their inverted reflections hung in shaking waters.
The black tells of the vortex's bottom,
The clear parts display a shattered sparkling.
Deep within it a lone cloud comes,
And the birds in flight are not outside.
High-hung vines for its battle tents,
The winter trees rank its legions' standards.
Streams from afar twist their flows to reach here,
Caves give subterranean vent to swift scouring.
I have come to a place hidden, a realm without men,
The response it stirs is all our own.
Now, asking my leave, unwillingness hangs strongly on,
As old age approaches, this visit, the finest.

Hiding himself away, he sleeps in long scales;
The mighty stone blocks his going and his coming—
Oh, when shall the blazing skies of summer pass,
That his will may exult in the meeting of wind and rain.

My Thatched Roof Is Ruined by the Autumn Wind

In the high autumn skies of September
the wind cried out in rage,
Tearing off in whirls from my rooftop
three plies of thatch.
The thatch flew across the river,
was strewn on the floodplain,
The high stalks tangled in tips
of tall forest trees,
The low ones swirled in gusts across ground
and sank into mud puddles.
The children from the village to the south
made a fool of me, impotent with age,
Without compunction plundered what was mine
before my very eyes,
Brazenly took armfuls of thatch,
ran off into the bamboo,

And I screamed lips dry and throat raw,
but no use.
Then I made my way home, learning on staff,
sighing to myself.
A moment later the wind calmed down,
clouds turned dark as ink,
The autumn sky rolling and overcast,
blacker towards sunset,
And our cotton quilts were years old
and cold as iron,
My little boy slept poorly,
kicked rips in them.
Above the bed the roof leaked,
no place was dry,
And the raindrops ran down like strings,
without a break.
I have lived through upheavals and ruin
and have seldom slept very well,
But have no idea how I shall pass
this night of soaking.
Oh, to own a mighty mansion
of a hundred thousand rooms,
A great roof for the poorest gentlemen
of all this world,
a place to make them smile,
A building unshaken by wind or rain,
as solid as a mountain,
Oh, when shall I see before my eyes
a towering roof such as this?
Then I'd accept the ruin of my own little hut
and death by freezing.

A Guest Comes

North of my cottage, south of my cottage,
spring waters everywhere,
And all that I see are the flocks of gulls
coming here day after day,
My path through the flowers has never yet
been swept for a visitor,
But today this wicker gate of mine
stands open just for you.
The market is far, so for dinner
there'll be no wide range of tastes,
Our home is poor, and for wine
we have only an older vintage.
Are you willing to sit here and drink
with the old man who lives next door?
I'll call to him over the hedge,
and we'll finish the last of the cups.

Spending the Night in a Tower by the River

A visible darkness grows up mountain paths,
I lodge by river gate high in a study,
Frail cloud on cliff edge passing the night,
The lonely moon topples amid the waves.
Steady, one after another, a line of cranes in flight;
Howling over the kill, wild dogs and wolves.
No sleep for me. I worry over battles.
I have no strength to right the universe.

Writing of My Feelings Traveling by Night

Slender grasses, breeze faint on the shore;
here, the looming mast, the lonely night boat.

Stars hang down on the breadth of the plain,
the moon gushes in the great river's current.

My name shall not be known from my writing,
sick, growing old, I must yield up my post.

Wind-tossed, fluttering—what is my likeness?
in Heaven and Earth, a single gull of the sands.

YÜAN CHEN
779–831

Long fiction was a relatively late development in China. Some elements of a tradition of historical saga survive from the ancient period, but early Chinese literature showed its considerable narrative genius primarily in the anecdote and parable. During the early middle period, between the third and seventh centuries, the anecdotal tradition was further developed in accounts of eccentric or exemplary behavior and witty dialogues. At the same time we begin to find collections of short tales about ghosts, fox spirits, and assorted demons, a genre that remained very popular up to the present century. During the T'ang period (618–907), writers began to expand on the skeletal narrative style of the earlier period.

There are two distinct groups of T'ang stories: one written in classical Chinese and the other in early vernacular Chinese. The vernacular narratives, elaborating known stories from the Buddhist tradition and Chinese history, were discovered early in the twentieth century in a sealed Buddhist repository at Tun-huang, an outpost of the caravan route in northwest China. Most of the tales in classical Chinese, a far larger corpus, were printed in a large collection in 981 and have been known throughout the tradition. The classical tales, known as *ch'uan-ch'i* ("accounts of remarkable things"), are still comparatively short by Western standards, but they show a true delight in the craft of telling—in atmosphere, characterization, and detail. Unlike

the vernacular stories, these classical tales are all "original" material (even though most claim to have heard the story from someone else). Supernatural stories, particularly of erotic encounters between mortal men and supernatural women, are the most common; but the *ch'uan-ch'i* also incorporate tales of heroism and love.

T'ang love stories, whether between mortals or between mortals and supernatural beings, often turn on the question of faith kept or broken. The love was usually in some way illicit, and by the end of the eighth century we can see a fully developed idea of romantic love, which offers interesting comparisons with images of romantic love in the Western tradition. "The Story of Ying-ying" is the most famous but in many ways the most anomalous work in this tradition of love stories. The usual literary love affair involves a talented young scholar and a courtesan or a supernatural being in the guise of a mortal woman. "The Story of Ying-ying" describes an illicit affair between a young man and his distant cousin, a situation in which marriage is not only acceptable but the obvious solution. Yet the lovers, each in his or her own way, thwart the possibility of legitimate marriage to create a conventional tale of broken love. In a tradition of fiction so consistently concerned with the extraordinary, the treatment of the ordinary becomes itself extraordinary. So unexpected is this story in the context of T'ang tales of romantic love that Chinese critics have wished to see it as a thinly disguised account of the personal experiences of the author, the famous poet Yüan Chen. If it is indeed autobiographical, the author is portraying himself in a most unflattering way.

The plot of "The Story of Ying-ying" could not be more straightforward: a young man has an affair with his cousin, leaves her to go to the capital to take the civil service examination, loses interest in her, and breaks off the relationship. But within this simple plot "The Story of Ying-ying" mocks the T'ang love narrative. Both of the lovers are acting roles that never quite fit them. The young man, like any hero of a T'ang love story, at first disdains the usual erotic adventures of his peers, looking for the perfect woman; and as a lover should, he falls helplessly in love with Ying-ying at their first meeting. When he falls out of love and it serves his interests, he changes his role and condemns Ying-ying with platitudes of conventional public morality. Yet this pose of rectitude does not keep him from wanting to see her again, after she is married, when he happens to be in the neighborhood.

Ying-ying herself is no less an actor. By a display of bad temper to her mother she blocks the first stage of an easy route to a socially acceptable marriage. Then she plays the role of the conventionally virtuous young woman, offended by the young man's advances. Next she is the romantic heroine, overcome with passion. Finally she plays the lover who keeps faith, cruelly abandoned by a heartless young man. Yet despite her vows of undying love and faith unto death, she soon marries someone else. Everywhere the story calls attention to the difference between real people and the roles they play, both literary and social. In the context of the narrative, even poetry is exposed as a glittering lie: Yüan Chen's poem transforms the rather mundane affair into one between a mortal and a goddess, and poetic convention transforms his desertion into the inevitable separation of the goddess and her mortal lover.

The context makes Ying-ying's letter to her lover Chang, written in the most florid and formal prose, an ambiguous piece of T'ang eloquence. It may be read either as a genuine expression of a young woman's pain or as a manipulative attempt to work on his sympathies and regain control of the situation. Irony, whether intentional or not, pervades the story. At the close of the letter she warns him, "Be circumspect [in what you say] and careful, and do not think too often of my unworthy person." The very next sentence is: "Chang showed her letter to his friends, and in this way word of the affair got around." Both Ying-ying and Chang try to make claims on the reader's sympathy and approval, but in the end it is hard to give full approval to either. None of the cherished values of T'ang society survives unquestioned—whether pious public values or the private values of passionate and faithful love. By the end of the story

these all seem merely the convenient excuses of the fallible human beings who use them. Almost unique among contemporary works, the story is finally ambivalent; each of the main characters tries to assert that his or her viewpoint is correct, and neither succeeds.

Yüan Chen was a well-known poet and close friend of the poet Po Chü-i. Passing through the usual phases of exile and reinstatement in party politics, he eventually rose to a high position in the T'ang government. "The Story of Ying-ying" is his only tale.

The story became a popular one, and in the process of its popularization it went through some drastic transformations. The final and most famous version was the thirteenth-century play *Romance of the Western Chamber.* Here all the troubling aspects of the work are ironed smooth. The remarkably willful and tempestuous Ying-ying is transformed into an ordinary, docile heroine, and the lovers are at last reunited to live happily ever after.

PRONOUNCING GLOSSARY

The following list uses common English syllables to provide rough equivalents of selected words whose pronunciation may be unfamiliar to the general reader.

Chen-yüan: *juhn–yooahn*
Cho Wen-chün: *jwoh wuhn–joon*
ch'uan-ch'i: *chwahn–chee*
Hsiao shih: *shyao shir*
Hsieh K'un: *shyeh kwun*
Hsi wang-mu: *shee wahng–moo*
Huan-lang: *hwahn–lahng*
Hung-niang: *huhng–nyahng*
Li Kung-ch'ui: *lee guhng–chway*
Pao-ssu: *bao–suh*
Po Chü-i: *bwoh joo–ee*
P'u: *poo*
Ssu-ma Hsiang-ju: *szih–mah shyahng roo*
Teng-tu tzu: *duhng–too dzuh*
Ting Wen-ya: *ding wun–yah*
Ts'ui: *tsway*
Tu Ch'üeh: *doo chooeh*
Tun-huang: *dwuhn–hwahng*
Yu: *yoh*
Yü: *yoo*
Yüan Chen: *yooahn juhn*

The Story of Ying-ying[1]

During the Chen-yüan period[2] there lived a young man named Chang. He was agreeable and refined, and good looking, but firm and self-contained, and capable of no improper act. When his companions included him in one of their parties, the others could all be brawling as though they would never get enough, but Chang would just watch tolerantly without ever taking part. In this way he had gotten to be twenty-three years old without ever having had relations with a woman. When asked by his friends, he explained, "Teng-t'u tzu[3] was no lover, but a lecher. I am the true lover—I just never happened to meet the right girl. How do I know that? It's because things of outstanding beauty never fail to make a permanent impression on me. That shows I am not without feelings." His friends took note of what he said.

1. Translated by James Robert Hightower. All notes are the translator's unless otherwise indicated.
2. From 785 to 804 [editors' note]. 3. An archetypal lecher.