

**IN RESPONSE TO THE
HOWLING MONKEYS ALONG THE YANGTZE**

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East Asian Research Aids and Translations, Volume 7

In Response to the Howling Monkeys Along the Yangtze:

An American Eco-Critic's Translation of Three Hundred and Eleven Tang Poems,

by Ning Yu with Carlos Martinez

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“数猿肠断和云叫”：
一个生态文学批评者的
英译唐诗三百十一首

Ning Yu with Carlos Martinez

Center for East Asian Studies,
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Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Yu, Ning, 1955-
In response to the howling monkeys along the Yangtze : an American eco-critic's translation of three hundred and eleven Tang poems / Ning Yu with
Carlos Martinez.

p. cm
(East Asian Research Aids and Translations ; v. 7)

Includes bibliographical references.

ISBN 978-0-914584-33-9

1. Chinese poetry—Tang dynasty, 618-907—Translations into English. 2. Sustainability—Poetry. 3. Human-animal communication—Poetry. 4. Nature in literature. I. Title. II. Title: "Shu yuan chang duan he yun jiao". III. Series

PL2658.E3 Y83 2015

Manufactured in the United States of America

Introduction

If you have read Tang poetry, you have probably encountered its ubiquitous monkeys, especially along the narrow, rapid waterway of the Three Gorges. Sometimes, they cry sadly, sometimes they howl with excitement. Sometimes, hand in hand, they form a “monkey ladder,” taking turns descending to quench their thirst from the stream that rushes by a rocky cliff. Sometimes they approach a traveler, a poet, their one-time master, who, urged by his conscience the year before, broke the gold chains around their necks and set them free. They howl to the poet, as if sending a message to humanity through their master-friend.

Humanity, however, has not responded well to the monkeys’ call. These crying messengers went silent in Chinese poetry long before the Three Gorges Dam was built, long before the 1960s and 1970s, when people chopped down trees to create terraced fields and blew up the mountains to quarry limestone for the construction of their “Four Modernizations.” Yet the howling monkeys have left such a profound impression on the Chinese imagination that in 2007 the government and private business re-introduced eighty monkeys to the banks of the Yangtze at the Qutang Gorge, just so tourists on cruise boats could hear the famous howl once again.

Carlos Martinez and I were led to this project when we became aware of the disappearance of wild monkeys from both the actual and poetic landscapes. Personally, I read and re-read forty-three thousand poems written by twenty-five hundred Tang poets before selecting and translating three hundred and eleven poems that share a focus on the non-human environment. Carlos then worked through two subsequent drafts to finalize the translation; we cooperated closely to ensure the poetic effects experienced by American readers are as near as possible to those experienced by fluent readers of the original Chinese.

In the process of researching, translating, and revising, we confirmed once more what we had always believed: poets are meant to be misunderstood. Li Bai (in an older transcription, Li Po) in his “Prose Overture to the Banquet at the Peach and Plum Garden in a Spring Night” states that “the Great Lump [of earth] lends him his writing.”¹ What he meant was that his literary inspiration came from the natural beauty of the landscape. He simply borrowed from nature; the ultimate ownership of his talent belonged to the earth itself. In the course of history, however, the concept of “the Great Lump” was twisted to mean “writing of great length.” William Shakespeare stated that the purpose of theater, and by extension literature in general, is to “hold, as ’twere, the mirror up to Nature” (*Hamlet*. Act III, Scene ii, l. 24). Perhaps due to Hamlet’s own narrow interpretation, “Nature” has been read as the world of human affairs, including human emotions and states of mind, political struggles, military conflicts, romantic affairs, and bloody revenge. The tendency to read “Nature” in its narrower sense as the human world has led people, especially people in the “socialist bloc,” to define literature as “the study of man.” This was encouraged by Maxim Gorky, who, trying to clarify his line of writing, said his work was human studies rather than local studies. This narrower definition is obviously too limited. It was on such a literary principle that some Chinese literary scholars centuries ago misinterpreted the first poem in *The Book of Odes*, “Quack, Quack, the Wild Duck,” interpreting it as a celebration of the virtues of the kings’ queens and concubines. Gorky himself would find it hard to imagine his self-clarification evolving into such a formulaic doctrine, a notion that “literature equals the study of man.” For in his own fiction, *Tales from Old Lady Izezil* (which I read in Chinese translation many years ago, as 《伊则吉尔老婆婆》), the

eagle, the steppe, and the forests of Russia played roles as important as the human characters. The male protagonist in the first tale is a son born to an eagle and a woman.

Shakespeare's "Nature" – like Li Bai's "Great Lump" – includes, but is not limited to, human nature and the human world. To put it another way, the human world is part of a much vaster world. This inclusion is perhaps better demonstrated by the case of "Quack, Quack, the Wild Duck." The poem starts with a vivid depiction of a spring scene, where all lives wake up to the rather demanding task of perpetuating the species. Under the pressure of the mission of life itself, princes and court ladies get busy, just as do the glorious quacking ducks on the river island. Ancient folk singers sang the praises of life as a whole. The "mirror" they held up reflected a network of close connections among all life forms. If we define literature only as the study of humankind, we won't be able to explain why Confucius encouraged young people to read *The Book of Odes* not only as a "human study" about how to serve their fathers and princes, but also as a way to learn the names of birds, beasts, grasses, and trees. In fact, *The Book of Odes* – a collection of three hundred and five poems – mentions twenty-four different grain crops, thirty-eight kinds of vegetables, seventeen medicinal herbs, thirty-seven grasses and weeds, forty-three trees, fifteen fruit-bearing flowers, forty-three birds, forty animals, twenty-seven different names for horses, thirty-seven insects, and sixteen fishes.² *The Book of Odes* shows us that human beings do not exist in isolation. Our survival depends on many other species that accompany and support us. When literary critics theorize, they shouldn't overlook the important role nature, or less confusingly, the non-human environment, plays in world literatures. Eco-criticism emerged in the late 1990s in part in response to an academic failure to acknowledge the pressures humans have placed on the non-human world, through depletion of natural resources, environmental pollution and global warming.

Granting that literary theories should include a broader definition of literature, which embraces rather than expels nature from art and literature, is it still appropriate to apply a critical theory developed in late twentieth-century America to poems written twelve hundred years ago in the Tang Dynasty? In other words, is it advisable to read Tang poetry in light filtered through the green glasses of twenty-first-century ecology and environmentalism? My answer to this question is in the affirmative, as the rise of the Tang Empire, together with its poetry, was closely connected to the natural environment of the eighth-century world.

During the first half of the eighth century – about a hundred years after the Mayan Golden Age (300–600), one hundred and eighty years before Basil I began to expand the Byzantine Empire, and as Charles Martel, "The Hammer," stopped in France the expansion of the Islamic Empire – the Tang Empire in China reached its apogee. As one of the two super powers of the age – the other being the caliphate, at the other end of Eurasia – it was ambitious in territorial expansion, confident in diplomacy, active in international trade, innovative in technology, and creative in artistic expression. The poetry of the "High Tang" period has always been celebrated as free and original, reflecting the bursting vitality of a prosperous empire.³ According to S. A. M. Adshead, during the second half of the first millennium, relatively mild temperatures and higher levels of precipitation led to rapid growth of the world economy. As economies grew, empires rose. And it was, he states, the economy of the Tang Empire that grew the fastest, along with its population, which increased by fifty percent, from fifty million to seventy-five million.⁴ In accordance with Adshead's postulations, Chinese historians also point out that as the physical territory of the Tang Empire expanded, its culture came to dominate in the newly-conquered territories as well as in the heartland of China.⁵ To imagine the growth of the Tang Empire, you can visualize the following: at the beginning of Tang Dynasty, its size was about half that of modern China; in less than a century, it grew

to be one-third larger than what China is now. In short, the size of the empire nearly tripled, as it came to include Mongolia in the north, parts of Vietnam, Myanmar, and Laos in the south, the coast in the east, the Korean Peninsula in the northeast, and much of Central Asia in the west.

Thus, Li Bai, arguably the most famous of the Tang poets, was born and raised in Suiye City, located in what is now Kyrgyzstan. The city was then the seat of China's far-west military governorate, which controlled a region extending farther west into land that is now Tajikistan, Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, and Afghanistan. Li Bai himself spoke several Central Asian languages, and some Chinese historians have argued that he was not a Chinese, but a *hu ren*, a foreigner.⁶

As I reviewed forty-three thousand and translated four hundred Tang poems, I noticed among the diverse subject matters of High Tang poetry a ubiquitous concern for sustainability, both of the empire and of the non-human environment that had made human society sustainable in the first place. As if through intuition, the Tang poets seem to have known that human life depends on land and is interconnected with the lives of many other species. They saw that over-expansion and over-exploitation would hurt the land, which sustains the working people who labor to support the empire. What the poets found in nature was not only literary inspiration, but also an ethical lesson: humans must live within the means allowed them by nature. The rise and fall of empires, they believed, depends upon observance of this ethic. Their contemplation on and imagination of these issues are certainly relevant to the concerns of people living in the twenty-first century, an age when concerns about climate change, environmental pollution, and depletion of natural resources have not as yet led the general populace to shed their obsession with a growth-driven economy.

In response to my findings, from the four hundred translated poems I've selected three hundred and eleven to be included in this collection. These poems were written by seventy-six poets, and by one horse. I am pleasantly surprised by my ancestors' faith in a horse-poet, and I am proud of the fact that, for over a thousand years, no fellow Chinese has ever questioned that a Tang Dynasty horse could use human language to compose a short lyrical poem. I still find it hard to believe that a horse could speak Tang Chinese, but I do believe that all lives are created equal and they all have their own intelligence. My belief has been confirmed by the poems I translate, poems among which the motif of friendship and spiritual communication between humans and animals is recurrent. For the horse-poet as well as the human poets, I have written my translator's notes, providing socio-geographical and historical information about the time and place in which the poems were written. In some cases, I contrast historical geography with what I saw in those places during trips I made in 2002, 2006, and 2009.

Now, exact translation of poetry is indeed an impossible endeavor. To try the impossible, we have to be prepared to compromise. Instead of struggling for a formalistic fidelity, in this volume I aim at the sharing of emotions similar to those conveyed by the original; it is my sincere hope that my translation will provoke these feelings in an American audience unfamiliar with Chinese language or culture. My approach has been to read aloud the Chinese originals together with my translation in the presence of my good friend, poet Carlos Martinez, who then offered feedback and suggestions for further revision. We then worked together to fine-tune the translation, until he indicated reception of poetic effects similar to those I experienced reading the original. Though difficult, the process was as a whole extremely pleasant and rewarding.

As the Bible states, there is nothing new under the sun. In this collection, we can see that the Tang poets and an environmentally conscious audience in the twenty-first century share many concerns about the non-human environment that sustains us. That, however, should not lead us to the false conclusion that eco-criticism has nothing new to offer, for what is new is how we cope with the problems that humans have faced over the centuries. If, with the help of these sensitive and generous poets, we begin to give up some of the biases by which we place ourselves at the center of attention and instead begin to see that the larger picture includes other peoples and other species, we may reverse our tendency toward over-consumption and pollution at the cost of the interconnected biosphere on which our own survival depends, we may

control our behavior so that our lifestyle will stay at a level sustainable by the ecosystem, and so give our children and grandchildren a healthier environment in which they can grow up without fear of environmental catastrophe. We may even hope that someday – as a result of lifestyle changes which help mend the damage already inflicted upon nature – our progeny may hear the howl of freeborn and wild monkeys, like those Li Bai once encountered. That, indeed, would be a new thing under the sun.

Let's read these ancient poems and work toward new things under the sun.

Ning Yu, Summer 2013, Bellingham, Washington.

¹ *Guwen Guanzhi* (Beijing: Zhonghua Press, 1978), p. 311. Translation mine. The notion of “Great Lump,” *da kuai* 大块, can be traced back to the Daoist philosopher, Zhuangzi.

² Guo Shaoyu, ed., *Zhongguo Lidai Wenlun Xuan* (Shanghai: Zhonghua Press), 1962, p. 2.

³ See Ge Xiaoyin, “Lun chu, sheng Tang shige gexin de jiben tezheng,” in *The Social Sciences of China*. 1985, Vol. 2.

⁴ S. A. M. Adshead, *T'ang China: The Rise of the East in World History* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2004), pp. 68–100.

⁵ For territorial expansion see Hou Bolin, *Tangdai yidi bianhuan shiliu* (Taipei: Shangwu yinshuguan, 1972), pp. 180–86. For the cultural interaction and intermingling, see Li Hongbi, *Tangchao zhongyang jiquan yu minzu guanxi* (Beijing: Minzu chubanshe, 2003), p. 53.

⁶ See Lu Weifen, Zhang Yanjin et al., eds., *Sui Tang Wudai Wenxue Yanjiu* (Beijing, Beijing Press, 2001), pp. 769–74