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Song Zhiwen 宋之问

The Grand Yu Ridge 大庾岭, also known as the South Ridge, or just “The Ridge” (in the southwestern corner of modern Jiangxi Province) is an important landmark in Chinese poetry as well as Chinese geography. Legend has it that migrating geese would not fly any farther south than this ridge before stopping and turning back north. Thus, it also demarcates a psychological limit in the imagination of ancient Chinese poets: the landscape south of the ridge, despite its actual beauty, always evokes homesickness, a sense of alienation and banishment, as witnessed by the three poems translated below.

The life of Song Zhiwen (656-712) is tragically typical of the “talented poet” in medieval China. Passing the imperial examination at the age of nineteen, he entered the bureaucracy early enough. Unlike Wang Bo 王勃, who died young, or Song’s friend Du Shenyang 杜审言, who was kept at “petty offices” by a series of setbacks, Song Zhiwen worked his way up to the fairly high rank of an assistant undersecretary in the Imperial Personnel Department (*kao gong yuanweilang*). He accelerated his advancement in the court by ingratiating himself with Zhang Yizhi 张易之, Empress Wu Zetian’s 武则天 lover, and Princess Taiping 太平公主, the Empress’s daughter. (More information about the Princess is offered below in the translator’s note to the poet Han Yu 韩愈.) In the end, however, Song Zhiwen paid the ultimate price for his involvement with power. As Empress Wu lay dying, a powerful courtier killed Zhang Yizhi, and immediately after her death, in 705, Song Zhiwen was banished to Longzhou, in what is now Guangdong Province, as reflected in the first poem below. The scenery was apparently fresh, interesting, even exciting to him, but he missed the lands he knew in the north. The exact duration of this exile is unknown, but it lasted at least a couple of years (“Through winters and springs”). Song’s sense of homesickness and alienation must have been unbearable, for he escaped from his first exile and returned to his home in central China, said to have been in northwest Henan Province or even farther north, in mid-west Shanxi Province. Traditionally, his lines – “Now a fugitive nearing home in north,/I’m too scared to talk with anyone/who seems to come/That Way” – have been read as a deep concern for the wellbeing of his family and friends. Re-contextualizing those lines in history, however, we can see that his fear was real, and not just for family or friends, but for his own life as well. Indeed, he was soon (some time in or after 710) banished again, this time to Qinzhou, Guangxi Province, a place farther southwest than his first banishment. This time he did not even think of escape. Instead, he simply wished to see the plum blossoms on the ridge, blossoms symbolizing the utmost southern limit in the poetic imagination of his time. In this second exile, he was “graciously given the imperial order to commit suicide” (*ci si* 赐死), in 712, a year before Princess Taiping attempted to murder or banish Li Longji 李隆基, the emperor Xuanzong 玄宗 (r. 712-756). The Princess failed and received the same “gracious imperial order.”

In the life story of Song Zhiwen we see how naïve it can be to romanticize ancient Chinese poetry or landscape. The landscape in southern China is real, beautiful, and fresh to the poet from central China, but Shangri-la never existed in the “exotic Orient.” A Tang poet’s sense of place – or rather being out of place – was intertwined with and complicated by power struggles in the empire.

《早发始兴江口至虚氏村作》
(《全唐诗》卷 53)

候晓逾闽峤，乘春望越台。
宿云鹏际落，残月蚌中开。
薜荔摇青气，桄榔翳碧苔。
桂香多露裊，石响细泉回。
抱叶玄猿啸，衔花翡翠来。
南中虽可悦，北思日悠哉。
鬓发俄成素，丹心已作灰。
何当首归路，行剪故园莱。

Starting Early from Jiangkou River in Shixing County

Before dawn I travel over the sharp peaks of Min.
In spring I'll view the Terrace of Canton.*

Night clouds fall among the wings of rocs.†
The moon lingers between two peaks,
a pearl held by the shells of a clam.
The vines of climbing figs wave in greenish air.
Moss covers the trunks of ancient sugar-palms.
Dew-moistened cassia bark sends forth a rare fragrance.
Winding through rocks, the spring gurgles quietly.
Holding onto leaves, black monkeys howl back and forth.
Flowers between beaks, the kingfishers come and go.

The scenery of the south appears to be pleasant.
My thoughts of the north increase by the day.
In a few days my temples turn white.
My heart becomes as dead as ashes.
When can I turn around and head for home,
If only to weed my deserted garden?

* Min is now Fujian Province; Guangdong Province is its neighbor to the south. The Terrace of Canton, however, is at the southern end of the southern province of Guangdong.

† Mythical giant birds of Indian and Arabic origin.

《渡汉江》（《全唐诗》卷 53）

岭外音书断，经冬复历春。
近乡情更怯，不敢问来人。

Crossing the Han River

For the last winter and this spring, I've lived
South of the Grand Ridge.
Once an exile, now I'm a fugitive near home,
sick of waiting for letters, too scared
to ask travelers about any news.

《题大庾岭北驿》（《全唐诗》卷 52）

阳月初飞雁，传闻至此回。
我行殊未已，何日复归来。
江静潮初落，林昏瘴不开。
明朝望乡处，应见陇头梅。

Written on the Wall of the Northern Stage of Grand Yu Ridge

I've heard the legend of the wild geese
that stop here in their October flight.
I have to go on south from here,
not knowing when I could ever come back.

With the evening ebb the river falls quiet.
A deadly mist permeates the woods.
Tomorrow morning from a distant peak,
I hope to see these plum blossoms glowing
on the "southern-most" Grand Yu Ridge*

*The narrator of this poem obviously traveled much farther south from the
"southern-most" Ridge. All he could hope is to see the plum flowers on the
southern slope of the Ridge.