

Qu Yuan

The Poetic Voice of the Warring States

The Chinese empire appeared in 221 B.C. That was the year when the country called Qin (“Chin”) completed its conquest of all the other countries in the region. The centuries leading up to that point are called the Warring States Period, a long slog of unending treachery, violence, and misery. And the conquering Qin, even in victory, and not knowing how else to behave, persisted in violence until finally the Han dynasty crushed it, ushering four centuries of more-or-less peace.

So even though China is named after the Qin (at least it is in English), the people themselves think of themselves as “Han.”

One of the finest poetry collections to appear from the Warring States period is called the *Songs of the South*. They were written in the southern state of Chǔ, and all ascribed to the famous diplomat Qu Yuan. Scholars now argue this complete authorship, but they all agree that he wrote the centerpiece to the collection, called the *Li Sao*, or "To Encounter Sorrow."

This poem, which captures the treachery of the times, is notable as one of the earliest personal poems, where the author inserts himself into the scenes that it describes. It captures his personal misfortunes, and expresses the frustrations of interactions with a king. It was a time of deceit, a time when honest men like Qu Yuan fell prey to the lies of rivals in the king’s court.

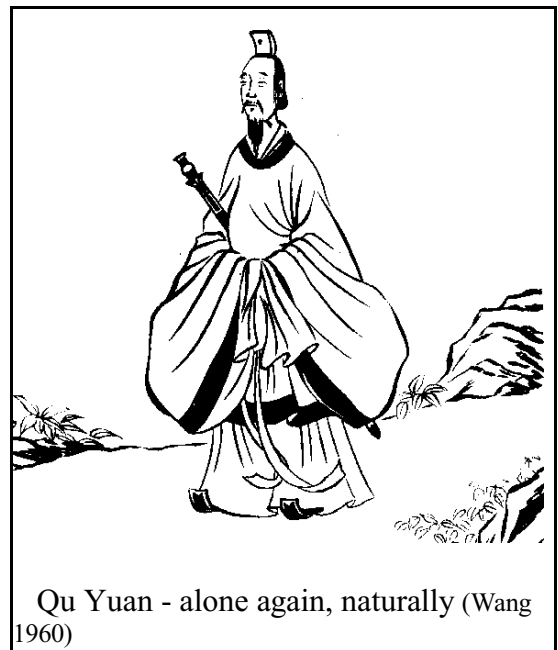
Qu Yuan was an advisor to King Huái of Chǔ, a large country located southwards from the Yangtze River. He continually admonished the king about the trickery of the other states, especially Qin.

However, advising the king was only his sideline. His “day job” was to be Chǔ’s comptroller, the officer who ensured that the government paid its bills honestly, that no one cheated the government, and that government workers didn’t waste or steal the government’s money.

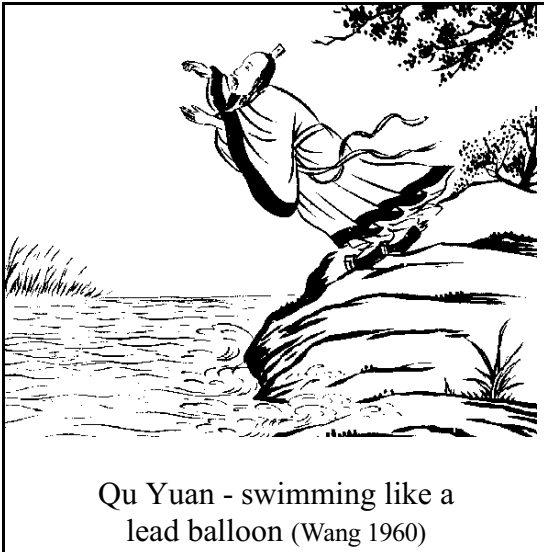
Since it was his job to do so, he often complained to the king about nobles wasting money on high living and fancy parties. And thus, he acquired a lot of enemies among the nobles. Eventually they banded together and spread some vicious rumors about him into the king’s ear. So he lost the job and got banished up north, out of the capital, and, indeed, outside of Chǔ.

Eventually he worked out this problem and returned to court. But then, under the subsequent king, he got banished again, the same way, except to the south this time.

During these periods of "retirement" he wrote many of his most famous poems, such as "The Great Summons." In that poem, the depressed poet sees his soul start to leave his body. He tempts it back again with the promise of physical pleasures. Yeah, Qu Yuan needed to lighten up a bit, but never



could quite manage to do so.



Qu Yuan - swimming like a lead balloon (Wang 1960)

Despairing of the direction that events were taking, and the fact that he couldn't do a heck of a lot about it, Qu Yuan decided that life in a world run by foolish leaders was not worth living. In 288 B.C. he strode out to the Miluo River, near Lake Dongting, and threw himself in. Ever since, the people of the Miluo River have commemorated that event by holding dragon boat races. The dragon boats invoke the memory of the boats which searched in vain for Qu Yuan's body¹.

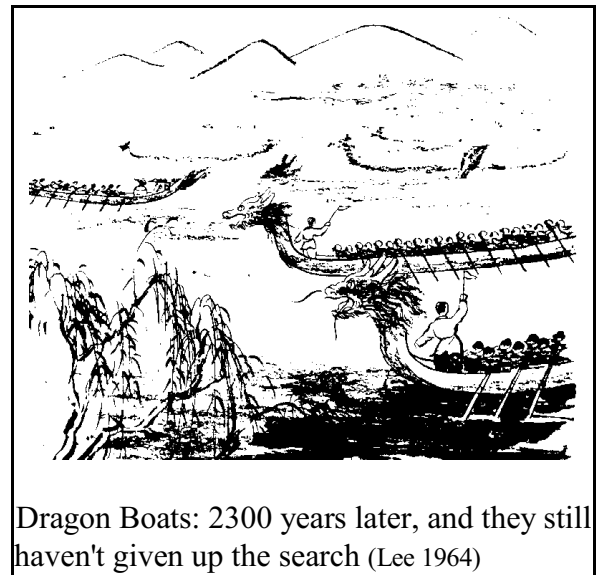
Before tossing himself in, though, Qu Yuan had penned the finishing touches on his masterpiece, "To Encounter Sorrow." It's a very metaphorical poem. The king and his scheming advisors are portrayed as various plants and flowers. The king himself is portrayed as a beautiful woman, whom the poet tries to win like a courting lover.

And in a long fantasy sequence, Qu Yuan travels magically to different lands, kind of like his serial banishments. This sort of poem was very new back then, and inspired similar flights of poetic fancy over the subsequent centuries.

In the Li Sao, Qu Yuan visits Shùn's grave². Shùn takes pity on him and lends him a chariot drawn by dragons and Phoenix birds so he can search for truth, his "ideal." During this journey by dragon cart, which symbolizes his exile from Chǔ, he travels to the gates of heaven, but God won't let him in. He searches in vain for an ideal bride (a sensible king to work for). In the end, he lands back in Chǔ, where he realizes that his quest had failed.

Over the years, the poem has been admired for its originality and beautiful use of language. On the other hand, it also seems like an elaborate means for Qu Yuan to mope around and feel sorry for himself!

The poem is written in lines of six or seven syllables, which do not occur in a planned scheme, but rather alternate freely between poetry and prose in order to emphasize particular points. This form tends to get lost in translation, of course. Here are some excerpts³:



Dragon Boats: 2300 years later, and they still haven't given up the search (Lee 1964)

¹Assemblages and races of dragon boats are still held today - 2300 years later.

²Referred to as "Chung Hua," he's one of the three wise emperors of ancient times.

³As translated by David Hawkes in Birch 1965, and modified by me.

Li Sao (To Encounter Sorrow)

The first few stanzas describe the poet's birth and the beauty of his mind (poets didn't have to be modest back then). Then the poet relates how he'll go on a quest to win his "fair one," the king:

*Three Emperors of old were most pure and perfect.
Then, indeed, fragrant flowers had their proper place.
Peppers and cinnamon were brought together.
The most prized blossoms were woven into garlands.
Glorious and great were these two: Yáo and Shùn⁴,
Because they kept their feet on the right path.
How great was the foolishness of Jié or Dixīn⁵,
Who followed crooked paths, and so came to grief.*

*Fools enjoy their careless pleasures,
But their journey is dark and leads to danger.
I fear no danger for myself,
Only that My Lord's chariot might be broken.
I hurried about that chariot in attendance,
Leading him in the paths of the ancient kings.
But the Fragrant One⁶ failed to perceive my true feelings.
Listening instead to slander, he raged against me.*

*How well I know that loyalty brings disaster,
Yet I will endure - I cannot give it up.
I called on the ninefold Heaven to be my witness,
All for the sake of the Fair One⁷, and no other.
He used to speak with me openly.
But then he reconsidered, changing his mind.
I don't care, for my own sake, about this divorce,
But it grieves me to find the Fair One so unfaithful.*

The next few verses describe how carefully the poet tended his "garden," (his government duties) but the "Fair One" did not appreciate it. So the poet resolved to travel to the four quarters of the earth in his quest for beauty. Metaphorically, he was looking for someone else in a powerful position who would listen to his sage advice.

I thought to amuse myself here, in the House of Spring,

⁴The founders of the most ancient Chinese dynasty/

⁵Emperors whose profligate lifestyles ended their dynasties.

⁶The king, that is.

⁷Again, the king.

*And broke off a branch of jasper⁸ to add to my belt.
Before the jasper flowers had shed their bright petals
I would look for a maiden below to give it to.
And so I made Feng Lung ride off on a cloud
To seek out the dwelling-place of the lady Fufei.
I removed my belt as a pledge of my love for her,
And ordered Jienxiu to be the go-between.*

*Many were the hurried meetings and partings with her
Willful and full of caprice, she was hard to win.
In the evenings she stayed in the Chiungshi Mountains.
In the mornings she washed her hair in the Weipan stream.
With proud disdain she guarded her beauty,
Passing each day in idle, lustful pleasures.
Fair she may be, but she lacks any grace.
Come! I'll have none of her. I'll search somewhere else!*

His success with other "women" was no better, but the poet didn't give up easily. In the deep South, he found the grave of Shùn, who gave him a magic chariot pulled by dragons. First he journeyed to Heaven, where he was refused admission. Then he traveled about the earth, trying to win himself a bride. Metaphorically, of course, these women all stand for various members of the government whom he thought were friends, but instead betrayed him.

*I will follow my natural bent and please myself.
I will wander off in search of a lady.
Adorned in the purest beauty,
I will travel and search both high and low.
Ling Fen told my fortune favorably,
So I planned a lucky day to start my journey,
Broke off a branch of jasper to serve as meat,
and ground fine jasper meal for my journey's meals.*

*"Harness the dragons to be my team
Let my chariot be made of finely worked jade and ivory!
How can I live with men whose hearts are strangers to me?
I will depart upon a long journey to escape them."
I took the way that leads to Kunlun Mountain⁹,
A long, long road with many twists and turns,
The cloud-embroidered banner flapped its great shade above us,
and the jingling jade yoke bells tinkled merrily.*

I set off at morning from the Ford of Heaven

⁸A hard mineral, a type of quartz. It often contains bright colored patterns, often in red or green.

⁹A legendary (but not real) mountain, perhaps the highest in the world, full of powerful spirits.

*At evening I arrived at the world's western end.
Phoenixes followed me, bearing up my flags,
Soaring high aloft with majestic wing beats
"See - I have come to the desert of moving Sands!"
Cautiously I drove along the banks of the Red Water
Then, asking the dragons to make a bridge for me,
I summoned the God of the West to take me over.*

*Long was the road that lay ahead - and full of difficulties.
I sent word to my other chariots to take the short route and wait.
The road wound leftwards around the Buzhou Mountains
I marked out the Western Sea as our meeting place.
There I commanded my thousand chariots to form a row,
Each Jade wheel hub meeting another, they galloped next to each other.
My team of eight dragons flew on in twisting curves.
My cloud - embroidered banners flapped in the wind.*

*I tried to curb my growing desires, and slow the swift pace,
But the spirits soared high, far into the distance.
They played the Nine Songs, and danced the Nine Shao Dances.
I wanted to take time for pleasure and entertainment.
But as I ascended the splendor of the heavens,
I suddenly caught a glimpse below of my old home.
This driver's heart grew heavy; the horses were filled with longing,
arching their heads back and refusing to go on.*

*Enough!
It is over.
There is no man in the state.
None in the kingdom know me.
Why do I cherish the city of my birth?
Since none are worthy enough to rule it well with me,
I shall follow Peng Xian¹⁰ to his home.*

Such was the misery of working for a king in the world of the Warring States.

¹⁰Pen Xian was a famous shaman, or magician, who killed himself by drowning. Either this last line is a prediction of the poet's death, or a declaration that he will give up on society completely and spend the rest of his days studying ghosts and demons instead.