

**Classic Poetry Series**

**Chu-i Po**

**- poems -**

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### **A Song of the Palace.**

Her tears are spent, but no dreams come.  
She can hear the others singing through the night.  
She has lost his love. Alone with her beauty,  
She leans till dawn on her incense-pillow.

Chu-i Po

### **A Suggestion to My Friend, Liu.**

There's a gleam of green in an old bottle,  
There's a stir of red in the quiet stove,  
There's a feeling of snow in the dusk outside --  
What about a cup of wine inside?

Chu-i Po

## Grasses

Boundless grasses over the plain  
Come and go with every season;  
Wildfire never quite consumes them --  
They are tall once more in the spring wind.  
Sweet they press on the old high- road  
And reach the crumbling city-gate....  
O Prince of Friends, you are gone again....  
I hear them sighing after you.

Chu-i Po

## Song of the Guitar.

In the tenth year of Yuanhe I was banished and demoted to be assistant official in Jiujiang. In the summer of the next year I was seeing a friend leave Penpu and heard in the midnight from a neighbouring boat a guitar played in the manner of the capital. Upon inquiry, I found that the player had formerly been a dancing-girl there and in her maturity had been married to a merchant. I invited her to my boat to have her play for us. She told me her story, heyday and then unhappiness. Since my departure from the capital I had not felt sad; but that night, after I left her, I began to realize my banishment. And I wrote this long poem -- six hundred and twelve characters.

I was bidding a guest farewell, at night on the Xunyang River,  
Where maple-leaves and full-grown rushes rustled in the autumn.  
I, the host, had dismounted, my guest had boarded his boat,  
And we raised our cups and wished to drink-but, alas, there was no music.  
For all we had drunk we felt no joy and were parting from each other,  
When the river widened mysteriously toward the full moon --  
We had heard a sudden sound, a guitar across the water.  
Host forgot to turn back home, and guest to go his way.  
We followed where the melody led and asked the player's name.  
The sound broke off...then reluctantly she answered.  
We moved our boat near hers, invited her to join us,  
Summoned more wine and lanterns to recommence our banquet.  
Yet we called and urged a thousand times before she started toward us,  
Still hiding half her face from us behind her guitar.  
...She turned the tuning-pegs and tested several strings;  
We could feel what she was feeling, even before she played:  
Each string a meditation, each note a deep thought,  
As if she were telling us the ache of her whole life.  
She knit her brows, flexed her fingers, then began her music,  
Little by little letting her heart share everything with ours.  
She brushed the strings, twisted them slow, swept them, plucked them --  
First the air of The Rainbow Skirt, then The Six Little Ones.  
The large strings hummed like rain,  
The small strings whispered like a secret,  
Hummed, whispered-and then were intermingled  
Like a pouring of large and small pearls into a plate of jade.  
We heard an oriole, liquid, hidden among flowers.  
We heard a brook bitterly sob along a bank of sand...  
By the checking of its cold touch, the very string seemed broken  
As though it could not pass; and the notes, dying away  
Into a depth of sorrow and concealment of lament,  
Told even more in silence than they had told in sound....  
A silver vase abruptly broke with a gush of water,  
And out leapt armored horses and weapons that clashed and smote --  
And, before she laid her pick down, she ended with one stroke,  
And all four strings made one sound, as of rending silk  
There was quiet in the east boat and quiet in the west,  
And we saw the white autumnal moon enter the river's heart.  
...When she had slowly placed the pick back among the strings,  
She rose and smoothed her clothing and, formal, courteous,  
Told us how she had spent her girlhood at the capital,  
Living in her parents' house under the Mount of Toads,  
And had mastered the guitar at the age of thirteen,

With her name recorded first in the class-roll of musicians,  
Her art the admiration even of experts,  
Her beauty the envy of all the leading dancers,  
How noble youths of Wuling had lavishly competed  
And numberless red rolls of silk been given for one song,  
And silver combs with shell inlay been snapped by her rhythms,  
And skirts the colour of blood been spoiled with stains of wine....  
Season after season, joy had followed joy,  
Autumn moons and spring winds had passed without her heeding,  
Till first her brother left for the war, and then her aunt died,  
And evenings went and evenings came, and her beauty faded --  
With ever fewer chariots and horses at her door;  
So that finally she gave herself as wife to a merchant  
Who, prizing money first, careless how he left her,  
Had gone, a month before, to Fuliang to buy tea.  
And she had been tending an empty boat at the river's mouth,  
No company but the bright moon and the cold water.  
And sometimes in the deep of night she would dream of her triumphs  
And be wakened from her dreams by the scalding of her tears.  
Her very first guitar-note had started me sighing;  
Now, having heard her story, I was sadder still.  
"We are both unhappy -- to the sky's end.  
We meet. We understand. What does acquaintance matter?  
I came, a year ago, away from the capital  
And am now a sick exile here in Jiujiang --  
And so remote is Jiujiang that I have heard no music,  
Neither string nor bamboo, for a whole year.  
My quarters, near the River Town, are low and damp,  
With bitter reeds and yellowed rushes all about the house.  
And what is to be heard here, morning and evening? --  
The bleeding cry of cuckoos, the whimpering of apes.  
On flowery spring mornings and moonlit autumn nights  
I have often taken wine up and drunk it all alone,  
Of course there are the mountain songs and the village pipes,  
But they are crude and-strident, and grate on my ears.  
And tonight, when I heard you playing your guitar,  
I felt as if my hearing were bright with fairy-music.  
Do not leave us. Come, sit down. Play for us again.  
And I will write a long song concerning a guitar."  
...Moved by what I said, she stood there for a moment,  
Then sat again to her strings-and they sounded even sadder,  
Although the tunes were different from those she had played before....  
The feasters, all listening, covered their faces.  
But who of them all was crying the most?  
This Jiujiang official. My blue sleeve was wet.

Chu-i Po

## Song of Unending Sorrow.

China's Emperor, craving beauty that might shake an empire,  
Was on the throne for many years, searching, never finding,  
Till a little child of the Yang clan, hardly even grown,  
Bred in an inner chamber, with no one knowing her,  
But with graces granted by heaven and not to be concealed,  
At last one day was chosen for the imperial household.  
If she but turned her head and smiled, there were cast a hundred spells,  
And the powder and paint of the Six Palaces faded into nothing.  
...It was early spring. They bathed her in the FlowerPure Pool,  
Which warmed and smoothed the creamy-tinted crystal of her skin,  
And, because of her languor, a maid was lifting her  
When first the Emperor noticed her and chose her for his bride.  
The cloud of her hair, petal of her cheek, gold ripples of her crown when she moved,  
Were sheltered on spring evenings by warm hibiscus curtains;  
But nights of spring were short and the sun arose too soon,  
And the Emperor, from that time forth, forsook his early hearings  
And lavished all his time on her with feasts and revelry,  
His mistress of the spring, his despot of the night.  
There were other ladies in his court, three thousand of rare beauty,  
But his favours to three thousand were concentrated in one body.  
By the time she was dressed in her Golden Chamber, it would be almost evening;  
And when tables were cleared in the Tower of Jade, she would loiter, slow with wine.  
Her sisters and her brothers all were given titles;  
And, because she so illumined and glorified her clan,  
She brought to every father, every mother through the empire,  
Happiness when a girl was born rather than a boy.  
...High rose Li Palace, entering blue clouds,  
And far and wide the breezes carried magical notes  
Of soft song and slow dance, of string and bamboo music.  
The Emperor's eyes could never gaze on her enough-  
Till war-drums, booming from Yuyang, shocked the whole earth  
And broke the tunes of The Rainbow Skirt and the Feathered Coat.  
The Forbidden City, the nine-tiered palace, loomed in the dust  
From thousands of horses and chariots headed southwest.  
The imperial flag opened the way, now moving and now pausing- -  
But thirty miles from the capital, beyond the western gate,  
The men of the army stopped, not one of them would stir  
Till under their horses' hoofs they might trample those moth- eyebrows....  
Flowery hairpins fell to the ground, no one picked them up,  
And a green and white jade hair-tassel and a yellowgold hair- bird.  
The Emperor could not save her, he could only cover his face.  
And later when he turned to look, the place of blood and tears  
Was hidden in a yellow dust blown by a cold wind.  
... At the cleft of the Dagger-Tower Trail they crisscrossed through a cloud-line  
Under Omei Mountain. The last few came.  
Flags and banners lost their colour in the fading sunlight....  
But as waters of Shu are always green and its mountains always blue,  
So changeless was His Majesty's love and deeper than the days.  
He stared at the desolate moon from his temporary palace.  
He heard bell-notes in the evening rain, cutting at his breast.  
And when heaven and earth resumed their round and the dragon car faced home,  
The Emperor clung to the spot and would not turn away

From the soil along the Mawei slope, under which was buried  
 That memory, that anguish. Where was her jade-white face?  
 Ruler and lords, when eyes would meet, wept upon their coats  
 As they rode, with loose rein, slowly eastward, back to the capital.  
 ...The pools, the gardens, the palace, all were just as before,  
 The Lake Taiye hibiscus, the Weiyang Palace willows;  
 But a petal was like her face and a willow-leaf her eyebrow --  
 And what could he do but cry whenever he looked at them?  
 ...Peach-trees and plum-trees blossomed, in the winds of spring;  
 Lakka-foliage fell to the ground, after autumn rains;  
 The Western and Southern Palaces were littered with late grasses,  
 And the steps were mounded with red leaves that no one swept away.  
 Her Pear-Garden Players became white-haired  
 And the eunuchs thin-eyebrowed in her Court of Pepper Trees;  
 Over the throne flew fire-flies, while he brooded in the twilight.  
 He would lengthen the lamp-wick to its end and still could never sleep.  
 Bell and drum would slowly toll the dragging night hours  
 And the River of Stars grow sharp in the sky, just before dawn,  
 And the porcelain mandarin-ducks on the roof grow thick with morning frost  
 And his covers of kingfisher-blue feel lonelier and colder  
 With the distance between life and death year after year;  
 And yet no beloved spirit ever visited his dreams.  
 ...At Lingqiong lived a Taoist priest who was a guest of heaven,  
 Able to summon spirits by his concentrated mind.  
 And people were so moved by the Emperor's constant brooding  
 That they besought the Taoist priest to see if he could find her.  
 He opened his way in space and clove the ether like lightning,  
 Up to heaven, under the earth, looking everywhere.  
 Above, he searched the Green Void, below, the Yellow Spring;  
 But he failed, in either place, to find the one he looked for.  
 And then he heard accounts of an enchanted isle at sea,  
 A part of the intangible and incorporeal world,  
 With pavilions and fine towers in the five-coloured air,  
 And of exquisite immortals moving to and fro,  
 And of one among them-whom they called The Ever True-  
 With a face of snow and flowers resembling hers he sought.  
 So he went to the West Hall's gate of gold and knocked at the jasper door  
 And asked a girl, called Morsel-of-Jade, to tell The Doubly- Perfect.  
 And the lady, at news of an envoy from the Emperor of China,  
 Was startled out of dreams in her nine-flowered, canopy.  
 She pushed aside her pillow, dressed, shook away sleep,  
 And opened the pearly shade and then the silver screen.  
 Her cloudy hair-dress hung on one side because of her great haste,  
 And her flower-cap was loose when she came along the terrace,  
 While a light wind filled her cloak and fluttered with her motion  
 As though she danced The Rainbow Skirt and the Feathered Coat.  
 And the tear-drops drifting down her sad white face  
 Were like a rain in spring on the blossom of the pear.  
 But love glowed deep within her eyes when she bade him thank her liege,  
 Whose form and voice had been strange to her ever since their parting --  
 Since happiness had ended at the Court of the Bright Sun,  
 And moons and dawns had become long in Fairy-Mountain Palace.

But when she turned her face and looked down toward the earth  
And tried to see the capital, there were only fog and dust.  
So she took out, with emotion, the pledges he had given  
And, through his envoy, sent him back a shell box and gold hairpin,  
But kept one branch of the hairpin and one side of the box,  
Breaking the gold of the hairpin, breaking the shell of the box;  
"Our souls belong together," she said, " like this gold and this shell --  
Somewhere, sometime, on earth or in heaven, we shall surely  
And she sent him, by his messenger, a sentence reminding him  
Of vows which had been known only to their two hearts:  
"On the seventh day of the Seventh-month, in the Palace of Long Life,  
We told each other secretly in the quiet midnight world  
That we wished to fly in heaven, two birds with the wings of one,  
And to grow together on the earth, two branches of one tree."  
Earth endures, heaven endures; some time both shall end,  
While this unending sorrow goes on and on for ever.

Chu-i Po

## **To My Brothers & Sisters Adrift in Troubled Times This Poem of the Moon.**

Since the disorders in Henan and the famine in Guannei, my brothers and sisters have been scattered. Looking at the moon, I express my thoughts in this poem, which I send to my eldest brother at Fuliang, my seventh brother at Yuqian, My fifteen brother at Wujiang and my younger brothers and sisters at Fuli and Xiagui.

My heritage lost through disorder and famine,  
My brothers and sisters flung eastward and westward,  
My fields and gardens wrecked by the war,  
My own flesh and blood become scum of the street,  
I moan to my shadow like a lone-wandering wildgoose,  
I am torn from my root like a water-plant in autumn:  
I gaze at the moon, and my tears run down  
For hearts, in five places, all sick with one wish.

Chu-i Po