

Classic Poetry Series

Mei Yuan
- poems -

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Mei Yuan(1716 - 1798)

(梅 堯臣; pinyin: Yuán Méi, 1716–1797) was a well-known poet, scholar, artist, and gastronome of the Qing Dynasty.

Yuan Mei was born in Qiantang (錢塘, in modern Hangzhou), Zhejiang province, to a cultured family who had never before attained high office. He achieved the degree of jinshi in 1739 at the young age of 23, was immediately appointed to the Hanlin Academy (翰林院). However, he proved unable to do so and failed the language exam. Therefore, he received appointment instead as a provincial magistrate. From 1742 to 1748, Yuan Mei served in four different provinces in Jiangsu. However, in 1748, shortly after being assigned to administer part of Nanjing, he resigned his post and returned to his hometown to pursue his literary interest.

Literary career

In the decades before his death, Yuan Mei produced a large body of poetry, essays and paintings. His works reflected his interest in Chan Buddhism and the supernatural, at the expense of Daoism and institutional Buddhism - both of which he rejected. Yuan is most famous for his poetry, which have been described as "unusually clear and elegant language". His views on poetry as expressed in the Suiyuan shihua (隨園詩話) stressed the importance of personal feeling and technical perfection. In his later years, Yuan Mei came to be called "Mister Suiyuan" (隨園先生). Among his other collected works are treatises on passing the imperial examinations and food.

Throughout his lifetime, Yuan Mei travelled extensively throughout southern China, visiting Huangshan, Guilin, Tiantai, Wuyi and other famous mountains. On some of those visits, Yuan kept journal entries, representative of which is the You Guilin zhu shan ji ("Record of tours of the mountains of Guilin"). He also accepted students. Since he admired women's poetry, he also took several female students and helped them publish their work under their own names.

Yuan as a gastronome

The food writer Fuchsia Dunlop has described Yuan as "China's Brillat-Savarin," and is called one of the four classical gastronomes. In a time when the taste among his contemporaries was for opulence and exotic display, Yuan stood for the "orthodox" style. "Nowadays," he wrote, "at the start of the feast the menu is

about a hundred feet long." This is "mere display, not gastronomy." After such a dinner Yuan returned home and cooked congee to appease his hunger. He instructed cooks "do not fuss with the natural state of the food just to show that you are a clever cook. Bird's nest is beautiful -- why shape it into balls?" Yuan criticized his contemporary Li Liweng's magnolia pudding as "created by artifice." Yuan also resented what he regarded as the corruption of Chinese food by Manchu cooks. The appeal of Manchu cooking was in their stews and roasts, while Chinese cooked broths and soups, but when Manchus serve Chinese dinners and Chinese serve Manchu food, "we lose our originality" and we "toady to each other." He published his collection of recipes in his *Suiyuan Shidan* (Cookery Book).

Delirium (Joking At Illness)

I don't want to come, yet suddenly I'm here;
I don't want to leave, yet suddenly I'm gone.
Don't know where I've come from. or gone from, either.
In this there is, of course, True News.
Since heaven can't speak, I'll have to pass it on.
Just wait for old Master Chaos to come back to life.
If I search for myself, I'll certainly find me.

Mei Yuan

Just Done

All the heart needs is a home

in which to dwell in the quiet.

The flavor of desirelessness

lasts longest.

So a boy runs off

to snatch at floating willow silks...

If he didn't capture them

how could he let them go?

Mei Yuan

On The Road To T'Ien-T- Ai

On the Road to T'ien-T- Ai

Wrapped, surrounded by ten thousand mountains.

Cut off, no place to go...

Until you're here, there's no way to get here.

Once you're here, there's no way to go.

Mei Yuan

Rain Passes

Rain passes, washing the face of the mountain.

Clouds come, the mountain's in a dream.

Clouds and rain come and go as they please.

Only the mountain, forever green, remains.

Mei Yuan