The Book of Songs (c. sixth century B.C.)

The Book of Songs, also known as The Book of Odes, is an anthology of 305 ancient Chinese poems. According to tradition, Confucius (see p. 264) chose the poems to be included. It is doubtful that Confucius actually selected the poems, but he did know them well and recommended their study.

Because of the book’s honored status and its association with Confucius, traditional Chinese interpreters of the poems have stressed their political and social importance. These interpreters have sometimes gone to great lengths to find hidden meanings in what appear to be simple love songs. In recent years, however, scholars have begun to interpret the ancient songs more literally, appreciating them for their simplicity and directness and using them as a window into the lives of the early Chinese people.

T’ao Ch’ien (A.D. 365–427)

T’ao Ch’ien (tā’ chēn’ én’) was born into a family of prominent but impoverished government officials. As an adult, T’ao Ch’ien himself began a career in government service, but he found it difficult to behave in the subservient manner required of lower-ranking officials. When he was about thirty-five, he resigned from office and retired to a farm on the outskirts of a rural village.

In his later years, T’ao Ch’ien devoted most of his energy to writing poetry. Inspired by the serenity of his life in the countryside, T’ao Ch’ien wrote many poems about the simple beauty of the landscapes surrounding farms and villages. In addition to showing his love for nature, T’ao Ch’ien’s poetry reveals his passion for some of his favorite activities—farming, spending time with his family, and writing poetry.

Li Po (701–762)

Along with Tu Fu, Li Po (li’ po) is considered one of the supreme masters of Chinese poetry. The details of Li Po’s early life are not clear, but he probably grew up in southwestern China, in the region that is now Szechwan province. During his mid-twenties, he moved to eastern China, and throughout the remainder of his life he moved from place to place.

Li Po is known for his free-spirited, graceful, and lyrical style. His poetry frequently conveys a love of freedom and a sense of harmony with nature. These qualities, along with Li Po’s vivid imagery and timeless insights, have earned him a place among China’s finest works of literature.

Tu Fu (712–770)

Tu Fu (tū’ fu) is regarded as the supreme craftsman of Chinese Shih poetry. In all of his poetry—poems dealing with social issues and those that focus on his personal experiences—Tu Fu shows a command of language and a mastery of the Shih form. As a result, his poems are admired as much for their form as for their content.

Early in Tu Fu’s career, China was relatively peaceful and prosperous, but later the poet witnessed a major rebellion, the destruction of the capital city, and an invasion by tribes from the northwest. In his poems, Tu Fu gives some of the most vivid accounts of war and destruction in all of Chinese literature. He also harshly criticizes the nobility’s extravagance in the face of extreme poverty among the common people.
I Beg of You, Chung Tzu

I beg of you, Chung Tzu,
Do not climb into our homestead,
Do not break the willows we have planted.
Not that I mind about the willows,
9 But I am afraid of my father and mother.
Chung Tzu I dearly love;
But of what my father and mother say
Indeed I am afraid.

10 I beg of you, Chung Tzu,
Do not climb over our wall,
Do not break the mulberry trees we have planted.
Not that I mind about the mulberry trees,
But I am afraid of my brothers.
Chung Tzu I dearly love;
But of what my brothers say
Indeed I am afraid.

15 I beg of you, Chung Tzu,
Do not climb into our garden,
Do not break the hardwood we have planted.
Not that I mind about the hardwood,
But I am afraid of what people will say.
Chung Tzu I dearly love;
But of all that people will say
Indeed I am afraid.

Thick Grow the Rush Leaves

Thick grow the rush leaves;
Their white dew turns to frost.
He whom I love
Must be somewhere along this stream.
5 I went up the river to look for him,
But the way was difficult and long.
I went down the stream to look for him.
And there in mid-water
Sure enough, it's he!

10 Close grow the rush leaves;
Their white dew not yet dry.
He whom I love
Is at the water's side;
Up stream I sought him;
But the way was difficult and steep.
Down stream I sought him,
And away in mid-water
There on a ledge, that's he!

15 Very fresh are the rush leaves;
The white dew still falls.
He whom I love
Is at the water's edge.
Up stream I followed him;
But the way was hard and long.
Down stream I followed him,
And away in mid-water
There on the shoals is he!

Critical Reading

1. (a) Recall: In "I Beg of You, Chung Tzu," what are the speaker's fears? (b) Analyze: What conflicting feelings does she have? (c) Interpret: What does the speaker hope for? (d) Evaluate: What is the speaker's attitude towards Chung Tzu? (e) Compare: In terms of their subjects, how are these two poems similar? (f) Contrast: What makes them different?

Literary Analysis

Chinese Poetic Forms

Find two refrains in this stanza that identify the poem as a song.

Reading Strategy

Responding: What is your response to the speaker's fears? Explain.
**Form, Shadow, Spirit**

T'ao Ch'ien translated by David Hinton

**Background**

T'ao Ch'ien was among the finest "old style" shih poets. In classical Chinese, each line of a shih poem has the same number of syllables, words, and characters. Classical Chinese is not written with letters; instead, characters stand for words. For example, the character 木 means "tree" or "wood." T'ao Ch'ien's simple, direct style is easy to enjoy in translation, but his carefully formed structure, unfortunately, is not preserved.

Rich or poor, wise or foolish, people are all busy clinging jealously to their lives. And it's such delusion. So, I've presented as clearly as I could the sorrows of Form and Shadow. Then, to dispel those sorrows, Spirit explains occurrence coming naturally of itself. Anyone who's interested in such things will see what I mean.

1 **Form Addresses Shadow**

Heaven and earth last. They'll never end. Mountains and rivers know no seasons.

and there's a timeless law plants and trees follow: frost then dew, vigor then ruin.

They call us earth’s most divine and wise things, but we alone are never as we are again. One moment we appear in this world, and the next, we vanish, never to return.

And who notices one person less? Family? Friends? They only remember when some everyday little thing you’ve left behind pushes grief up to their eyes in tears.

I’m no immortal. I can’t just soar away beyond change. There’s no doubt about it.

death’s death. Once you see that, you’ll see that turning down drinks is for fools.

2 **Shadow Replies**

Who can speak of immortality when simply staying alive makes such sad fools of us?

We long for those peaks of the immortals, but they’re far-off, and roads trail away early. Coming and going together, we’ve always shared the same joys and sorrows.

Resting in shade, we may seem unrelated, but living out in the sun, we never part.

This togetherness isn’t forever, though. Soon, we’ll smother in darkness. The body can’t last, and all memory of us also ends. It scars the five feelings. But in our good works, we bequeath our love through generations. How can you spare any effort?

Though it may be true wine dispels sorrow, how can such trifles ever compare to this?
I BUILT MY HOUSE NEAR WHERE OTHERS DWELL

T‘ao Ch‘ien
translated by William Acker

I built my house near where others dwell, And yet there is no clamor of carriages and horses. You ask of me “How can this be so?” “When the heart is far the place of itself is distant.”

I pluck chrysanthemums under the eastern hedge, And gaze afar towards the southern mountains. The mountain air is fine at evening of the day And flying birds return together homewards. Within these things there is a hint of Truth, But when I start to tell it, I cannot find the words.

Critical Reading

1. Respond: Do you agree that “When the heart is far the place of itself is distant”? Why or why not?
2. (a) Recall: In lines 1-8 of “Form, Shadow, Spirit,” what key difference does Form identify between humans and mountains, rivers, plants, and trees? (b) Connect: In what way does this contrast support Form’s conclusion in lines 15-16?
3. (a) Infer: What attitude toward nature does the speaker reveal in lines 5-8 of “I Built My House Near Where Others Dwell”? (b) Connect: What lines in “Form, Shadow, Spirit” reflect a similar attitude toward nature?
4. Take a Position: Considering the ideas he expresses in these poems, how do you think T‘ao Ch‘ien would respond to living in a modern industrial city? Explain.