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Han Ancient-style Poetry : The "Nineteen Old Poems" : The magic of one additional character and the rise of reflective poetry

Zong-qi CAI

Lingnan University; University of Illinois

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How to Read Chinese Poetry Podcast

Topic 7 Han Ancient-style Poetry: The “Nineteen Old Poems”

Host: Zong-qi Cai (Lingnan University; University of Illinois)

Episode 19 The Magic of One Additional Character and the Rise of Reflective Poetry

I. Text

I Ride My Carriage to the Upper East Gate 驅車上東門

I ride my carriage to the Upper East Gate,

Gazing at the graves north of the wall.

White poplars, how bleak they are in the wind!

Pine and cypress flank the broad paths.

Underneath them, the dead from long ago,

Dark, dark is their long night.

Lost in sleep beneath the Yellow Springs,

Come a thousand years, they will not awaken.

Seasons of growth and decay march on and on,

The years allotted to man are like morning dew.

Man's life is as transient as a sojourn,

His frame is not as firm as metal or stone.

qū chē shàng dōng mén

驅車上東門

yáo wàng guō běi mù

遙望郭北墓

bái yáng hé xiāo xiāo

白楊何蕭蕭

sōng bó jiǎ guǎng lù

松柏夾廣路

xià yǒu chén sǐ rén

下有陳死人

yǎo yǎo jí cháng mù

杳杳卽長暮

qián mèi huáng quán xià

潛寐黃泉下

qiān zǎi yǒng bú wù

千載永不寤

hào hào yīn yáng yí

浩浩陰陽移

nián mìng rú zhāo lù

年命如朝露

rén shēng hū rú jì

人生忽如寄

shòu wú jīn shí gù

壽無金石固

Ten thousand years have gone by,
No sages or worthies can cross the flow of time.
Some take drugs and hope to become immortals,
Many only end their life with poison.
Far better to drink fine wine
And wear clothes made of choice white silk.

wàn suì gēng xiāng sòng
萬歲更相送
shèng xián mò néng dù
聖賢莫能度
fú shí qiú shén xiān
服食求神仙
duō wéi yào suǒ wù
多為藥所誤
bù rú yǐn měi jiǔ
不如飲美酒
pī fú wán yǔ sù
被服紈與素

(Verbs: **characters in red**)

[Translated by Zong-qi Cai]

The poem read in English by Brian Zeng

The poem read in Mandarin by Zhao Sikun

II. Episode Notes

1. The Pentasyllabic Form

- Pentasyllabic poetry (*wuyanshi* 五言詩): five-character-line poetry
- Eastern Han dynasty (25-220 CE)
- Convergence of sound and sense in pentasyllabic poetry
- Binom: two-character compound in Chinese
- The rhythm of pentasyllabic lines: 2+(1+2 or 2+1)

2. “Nineteen Old Poems”

- Two types of poems: “Poems of the Wandering Man” and “Poems of the Abandoned Woman”
- The theme of human transience

3. Language factor for the Rise of Reflective Poetry

- Syntactic flexibility as shown in the positioning of verbs
- The syncing of poetic lines with reflective process
- Luoyang, capital city of the Eastern Han

III. Textual Source

Zong-qi Cai. "Pentasyllabic Poetry: "The Nineteen Old Poems." In *How to Read Chinese Poetry: A Guided Anthology*, ed. Zong-qi Cai. New York: Columbia University Press, 2008, pp. 103-117, especially pp. 103-104; 107-109.

