

TWENTIETH CENTURY
CHINESE POETRY

AN ANTHOLOGY

*Translated and Edited
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Wen Yiduo

Wen I-to (1899-1946) (hear one thing and it amounts to a lot)

"Often do I heave long sighs
To hide my tears, silent tears,
Sorrowing for the lives of my people
That are so full of grief and fears!"

Wen I-to inscribed these lines, by the third-century B.C. poet, Ch'ü Yuan, on a friend's paper fan only about a month before he died on July 15, 1946. It was a politically benighted year, and he died a victim of assassination.

The old poem spoke Wen's mind. Poet, artist, and scholar, Wen was also a sturdy warrior. His imagination was fired by the suffering of the people and by political abuse. He came, after a tortuous detour in his search for the higher values of life, to the conclusion that the entire political and social order of China must be changed before the common citizen's lot could be improved. What he said and the way he said it were not tolerated. The forces that were hurt by his criticism silenced him.

The path of Wen's intellectual development is the one that most Chinese intellectuals have traveled since the beginning of the century. Born in Hupeh Province, he was given an excellent traditional education in the Chinese classics by his parents and tutors, and wrote quite good poetry in the classical style until his exposure to Western literature as a student at Tsing-hua College (the only Western-supported college in China) prompted him to try the vernacular.

All his life Wen oscillated between his love for the cultural tradition of his country, and his genuine appreciation of the good elements in Western cultures. At first he admired Western literature and art, but after a number of years at Tsing-hua College, he became critical of America and defensive about things Chinese. Then he came to America. From 1922 to 1925 he studied painting at the Art Institute of Chicago and Colorado College, and later at the Art Students League in New York, but his interest was

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Studied painting in the U.S. (1922-5)

met contemporary American poets in Chicago, but still favored 44

Keats;
Wen was a romantic and sought for an ideal marriage between Truth & Beauty ✓

Twentieth Century Chinese Poetry

steadily veering toward poetry. In Chicago he met Harriet Monroe, Carl Sandburg, and Amy Lowell. But it was John Keats, whose poetry satisfied Wen's love for beauty as well as his respect for abstract ideas, who became his poetic mentor, and Wen the Romanticist remained throughout his life committed to the search for an ideal marriage between Truth and Beauty.]

Wen the poet grew homesick in America, and in his poetic imagination China became a symbol of everything noble, exalted, and warm. Wen the patriot was pushed further in his dislike of the United States when he visited American Chinatowns and felt the stings of racial discrimination. He recorded his reaction in his famed "Laundry Song," an imitation of Thomas Hood. ← "the song of the shirt"

His adoration of his fatherland, however, was not without reservations. He remembered certain things in the old society of China that rankled. One of these was the situation of absolute parental authority. Wen married early. The bride was selected by his father. The marriage, fortunately, was a happy one, despite the intellectual distance between them. Wen sent his wife a long poem from America, the fourteenth stanza of which reads:

I am sending these verses to you;
It matters not if you cannot read them all.
Just rest your fingertips on these words . . .
The throbbing you feel will pulse
In unison with your own heart.

The letter containing this poem was intercepted by his parents, and she never saw it until it was published much later. Wen's father disapproved of his son's writing to his wife from America. This act made Wen an avowed crusader against the tyranny of old social conventions and ignorance. Homeward-bound in 1925, he carried with him no Ph.D. diploma, but a small library of Western poetic works and a sense of mission to spearhead an intellectual revolution that would save his country—with art and poetry.

The China he found upon his return, as he recorded in "Discovery," was disappointing. There was no lack of tension in Shanghai and Peking, but it was not easy to carry out a literary revolution. Even getting a job was a problem. His domestic affairs were also disturbing. He had been unhappy with the arrangement of leaving his wife in his parents' house while he was in America; now he was further grieved over the death of his four-year-old daughter,

not overly didactic but not an extreme advocate of "art for art's sake" . . .

Wen I-to (1899-1946)

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which he blamed on his parents' old-fashioned ideas. A series of political events reminded him that he had agreed to start a drive with a number of his friends to revive the nationalistic spirit of his fellow countrymen. So while teaching in Peking, in 1925-26, he was active in trying to organize his intellectual friends to develop a program of political action. But his heart was not in politics, and he soon found himself turning toward the publication of a literary journal. And it was in his studio apartment that the Crescent group of poets was formed, Hsü Chih-mo, recalling the founding of the Crescent Society, has written:

I heard that the house of Wen I-to was the paradise of poets. . . . Last Saturday I went there. The three studio rooms were decorated with unusual taste. He had painted all the walls black, highlighting them with a narrow gold strip. The effect was like a naked African beauty wearing only a pair of gold bracelets and anklets. In one of the rooms a niche was carved in the wall, in which was placed, naturally, a sculpture of Venus de Milo about a foot high. . . . Against the totally black backdrop, the soft and warm-colored marble statue was rich in dreamy suggestiveness.

In this atmosphere, with his friends, Wen I-to worked out his theories about poetry and experimented with them in his own verse. His was not an extreme position of the "art for art's sake" principle, but under his and Hsü Chih-mo's leadership the Crescent school of poetry ran counter to the main literary current, which was drifting toward social and political literature. Always sensitive to the inequities of life, Wen felt that the nation needed something more than poetry. At the same time he was not prepared to contribute more directly to the nation's salvation. Frustrated, he retreated to the Chinese classics to restudy what he had read in his young student days, both because he wanted to prove to his colleagues teaching Chinese literature that he also had scholarly command in this field, and because he was sincerely convinced that true value and wisdom could be found in them. He became a distinguished authority on Ch'ü Yüan, the author of the third-century B. C. anthology, the *Ch'u-tz'u*.

The war did not permit him to remain "buried in the old papers" long. He had to flee Peking when Tsing-hua University was

moved to Changsha in Hunan Province, and lost most of his books. In 1938 when the college had to move again, farther south to Kunming in Yunnan Province, he led an exodus of several hundred students, walking through the mountains of central China for sixty-eight days before they arrived in Kunming. The situation continued to worsen. Japanese troops pressed closer every day, and every day some of his students would leave to join either the Communist or the Nationalist army. When Wen realized that these young people were dying in a civil war, he was infuriated. He protested against the government then in power, the Kuo-mintang. His expressions appeared to be more and more in sympathy with the left, and his death warrant was sealed.

Wen I-to's contribution to modern Chinese poetry lies chiefly in his theory about rhyme, form, and imagery. He believed that the Chinese language offered an unusually rich range of rhymes of which the Chinese poet ought to take advantage. While accepting the vernacular language as a promising poetic medium, he criticized the indiscriminate use of colloquialism in poetry. He objected to Hu Shih's interpretation of "natural rhythm," and urged poets to distill the poetical and musical elements from the plain speech. He himself wrote vernacular verse with a metrical cadence to show that it could be effectively done, constructing a new prosody for the new language. "If we compare poetry to the game of chess," he said, "we can easily understand why poetry without form, like a game of chess without rules, must be such a meaningless thing!" He admitted that there was form in nature, but maintained that any form copied intact from nature could not be perfect; perfection in form was achieved only after much patient chiseling. He quoted Goethe's letter to Schiller, and the words of the seventh-century Chinese man of letters, Han Yü (768-824), to support his theory that "The greater the artist, the more he enjoys dancing in fetters." Wen's own poems, which observe all these tenets, have a sculptured structural beauty.

CHAMPION

O my love, you are a champion;
But let's play a game of chess.
My aim is not to win,

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I wish only to lose to you—
My body and soul,
Both in their entirety.

1922
Wen, Complete Works, Ting, 79

DEATH

O, my soul's soul
My life's life!
All my failures, all my debts
Now have to be claimed against you,
But what can I ask of you?

Let me be drowned in the deep blue of your eyes.
Let me be burnt in the furnace of your heart.
Let me die intoxicated in the elixir of your music.
Let me die of suffocation in the fragrance of your breath.

Or may I die ashamed in front of your dignity,
Or frozen in your unfeeling chill,
Or crushed between your merciless teeth,
Or stung by your relentless poison-sword.

For I shall breathe my last in happiness
If my happiness is what you decree;
Otherwise I shall depart in endless agony
If my agony be your desire.
Death is the only thing I beg of you,
And to you I offer my life, my supreme tribute.

1922
Wen, Complete Works, Ting, 75

AUTUMN COLORS¹

Water in the creek
As purple as ripe grapes

¹ In earlier editions, the title was "Autumn Forest."—Ed.

Rolls out golden carp's scales
Layer upon layer

Several scissor-shaped maple leaves
Like crimson swallows
Whirling and turning, rising and dipping
On the water.

Thick and fat like bears' paws,
Those dark brown leaves
Scattered on the green.
Busy, timid squirrels
Scurry out and in among the leaves,
Gathering food for the approaching winter.

Chestnut tree leaves, now of age,
Complained to the western wind all night long.
Finally win their freedom.
With a deep blush on their dry faces,
They giggle and bid farewell to the ancient branches.

White pigeons, multi-colored pigeons,
Red-eyed silver gray pigeons,
Raven-like black pigeons,
With a golden sheen of purple and green on their backs—
So many of them, tired of flying,
Assemble beneath the steps.
Their beaks buried in their wings,
Quietly they take their afternoon nap.

Crystalline air, like pure water, fills the world;
Three or four pert children
(In orange, yellow, and black sweaters)
Dart through the clove bushes,
Like goldfish cavorting among the seaweeds.

Aren't they a forest of masts on the Huang-p'u River?
Those countless ascetic poplars
Stand piercing the slate-blue sky in stony silence.

That aspen stands like a gallant youth,
Draped in a gold-embroidered cape.
Resting one hand on his hip,
He gazes at the jade-green pool,
Admiring his own reflection.

As they lean on the zig-zag crystal balustrades,
The morning sunbeams smile at the world.
From their smile flows liquid gold—
Yellow gold on the oaks,
Red gold on the oaks,
White gold on the barks of the pines.

Ah, these are no longer trees,
But tinted clouds—
Of amber, of agate,
Fanned by sensitive winds and kindled by the sun.
These are no longer trees,
But exquisite, bejeweled clouds,

Ah, these are no longer trees,
But a palace in the Forbidden City—
Yellow-glazed tiles,
Green-glazed tiles;
Story upon story, pavilion on pavilion—
The silvery songs of the birds
Imitate the chimes under the flying eaves.
These are no longer trees,
But an imperial capital in full regal splendor.

You, majestic, festooned autumn trees!
Neither brocades of Lord Ling-yang,
Nor carpets from Turkey,
Nor the rose window of Notre Dame,
Nor the frescoes of angels by Fra Angelico,
Can rival your colors and brilliance.

You, majestically garbed autumn trees!
I envy your romantic world.

*admixture of
Chinese &
Western
imagery*

Chinese

Western

Your bohemian life,
And your colors.

I'll ask T'ien Sun to weave me an embroidered robe²
So that I may wear your colors;
Or press you from grapes, oranges, and kaoliang
So that I may drink your colors!
And from Puccini's *La Bohème*,
And from the seven-jeweled censer of Po-shan,
I will listen to your colors,
And inhale your colors.

Ah, how I long to lead a life of colors,
As dazzling as these autumn trees!

1922

Wen, *Complete Works, Ting*, 106-10

sounds very Chinese
yet very "modern"
at the same time
in its perspective
on death

THE DREAMER

If that blue ghost light
Is the sparkle bursting from the dream
Of the entombed,
What fear have I of death?!

1922

Wen, *Complete Works, Ting*, 113

THE LAST DAY

The dewdrops sob in the roof-gutters,
The green tongues of banana leaves lap at the window panes.
The four white walls seem to back away from me:
I alone can not fill such a big room.

new use of
images

A brazier aflame in my heart,
I quietly await a guest from afar.
I feed the fire with cobwebs, rat dung,
And snakeskins in place of split wood.

²T'ien Sun is the star Weaving Maid, who resides across the Milky Way from the Ox Herd.—Ed.

As the roosters urge time, only ashes remain;
A chilly breeze steals over to caress my mouth.
The guest is already right in front of me;
I close my eyes and follow him away.

1926

Wen, *Complete Works, Ting*, 15-16

THE LAUNDRY SONG

(One piece, two pieces, three pieces.)
Washing must be clean.
(Four pieces, five pieces, six pieces.)
Ironing must be smooth.

I can wash handkerchiefs wet with sad tears;
I can wash shirts soiled in sinful crimes.
The grease of greed, the dirt of desire . . .
And all the filthy things at your house,
Give them to me to wash, give them to me.

Brass stinks so; blood smells evil,
Dirty things you have to wash.
Once washed, they will again be soiled.
How can you, men of patience, ignore them!
Wash them (for the Americans), wash them!

You say the laundry business is too base,
Only Chinamen are willing to stoop so low?
It was your preacher who once told me:
Christ's father used to be a carpenter.
Do you believe it? Don't you believe it?

There isn't much you can do with soap and water.
Washing clothes truly can't compare with building warships.
I, too, say what great prospect lies in this—
Washing the others' sweat with your own blood and sweat?
(But) do you want to do it? Do you want it?

seems to be a critique
of America's heartless
materialism and
relentless greed

highlights
the hypocrisy of
"Christian" peoples

Year in year out a drop of homesick tears;
Midnight, in the depth of night, a laundry lamp . . .
Menial or not, you need not bother,
Just see what is not clean, what is not smooth,
And ask the Chinaman, ask the Chinaman.

I can wash handkerchiefs wet with sad tears,
I can wash shirts soiled in sinful crimes.
The grease of greed, the dirt of desire . . .
And all the filthy things at your house,
Give them to me—I'll wash them, give them to me!

1925 (?)

Wen, *Complete Works*, Ting, 28-30

FORGET HER

Forget her, as a forgotten flower—
That ray of morning sun on a petal
That whiff of fragrance from a blossom—
Forget her, as a forgotten flower.

Forget her, as a forgotten flower,
As a dream in the wind of spring,
As in a dream, a bell's ring.
Forget her, as a forgotten flower.

Forget her, as a forgotten flower.
Listen, how sweetly the crickets sing;
Look, how tall the grass has grown.
Forget her, as a forgotten flower.

Forget her, as a forgotten flower.
No longer does she remember you.
Nothing now lingers in her memory.
Forget her, as a forgotten flower.

Forget her, as a forgotten flower.
Youth, what a charming friend,
Who makes you old overnight.
Forget her, as a forgotten flower.

Forget her, as a forgotten flower,
If anyone should ask,
Tell him she never existed.
Forget her, as a forgotten flower.

Forget her, as a forgotten flower.
As a dream in the wind of spring,
As in a dream, a bell's ring.
Forget her, as a forgotten flower.

Winter 1926

Wen, *Complete Works*, Ting, 13-14

CONFESSION

Let me not deceive you, I am no poet,
Even though I adore the integrity of white gems,
The blue pines and immense ocean, the sunset on crows' backs,
And our national flag unfurling in the wind . . . all these
You know that I love heroes and towering mountains,
And our national flag unfurling in the wind . . . all these
From saffron to the antique bronze of chrysanthemums.
Remember, my food is a pot of bitter tea.

But, aren't you afraid?—In me there is yet another man,
Whose thought follows a fly's to crawl in the garbage can.

1926-27

Wen, *Complete Works*, Ting, 5

*Sophisticated
twist
at the
end of a
seemingly
straightforward verse*

A CONCEPT

You, a perpetual myth, a beautiful tale,
A persistent question, a flash of light,
An intimate meaning, a leaping flame,
A distant call . . . what are you?
I don't doubt; the law of causality is ever so true.
I know; the sea is always faithful to its sprays.
Being the rhythm one complains not against the song.
Ah, you, tyrannical deity, you've subdued me;

You've conquered me, you dazzling rainbow—
Memory of 5000 years, please hold still.
I only ask how to embrace you tightly,
You, such an untamable spirit, such a beauty.

1927
Wen, *Complete Works*, Ting, 21

DISCOVERY

I've come, I shout, bursting out in tears of woe,
"This is not my China—Oh, no! No!"
I've come because I heard your summoning cry.
Riding on the wind of time, raising a torch high,
I came. I knew not this to be unwarranted ecstasy.
A nightmare I found. You? How could this be!
This is terror, a bad dream over the brim of an abyss,
But not you, not what my heart continues to miss!
I ask heaven, ask the winds of all directions.
I ask (my fist pounding the naked chest of the earth)
But there is no answer. In tears I call and call you
Until my heart leaps out—ah, here you are!

1927
Wen, *Complete Works*, Ting, 21-22

YOU SWEAR BY THE SUN

You swear by the sun, and let the wintry geese on the horizon
Attest to your faithfulness. Fine, I believe you completely,
Even if you should burst out in tears I wouldn't be
surprised.
Only if you wanted to talk about "The sea may dry up and the
rocks may rot . . ."
That would make me laugh to death. Isn't this moment while
my breath lasts
Not enough to get me drunk? What need is there to talk about
"forever"?
Love, you know my desire lasts only the duration of one breath,
Hurry up then and squeeze my heart, hurry, ah, you'd better go,
you go . . .

I have long guessed your trick—no, it's not that you've changed—
"Forever" you have long promised someone else, only the dregs
are my lot.

What the others get is your essence—the eternal spring.
So you don't believe me? But if one day Death produced your
own signature,

Will you go? Yes, go to linger in His embrace and only
Talk to Him about your undying loyalty.

1927 (?)
Wen, *Complete Works*, Ting, 6

I WANTED TO COME HOME

I wanted to come home
While your little fists were like the orchids yet to open;
While your hair still remained soft and silken;
While your eyes shone with that spirited gleam;
I wanted to come home.

I did not come home,
While your footsteps were keeping cadence in the wind;
While your little heart was beating like a fly against the
window pane;
While your laughter carried that silver bell's ring,
I did not come home.

I should have come home,
While a spell of blur covered your eyes;
While a gust of chilly wind put out a fading light;
While a cold hand snatched you away like a kite;
I should have come home.

1927
Wen, *Complete Works*, Ting, 18-19

← on the
death of
his 4-yr
old
daughter
in China
while he
was in
the U.S.

THE DESERTED VILLAGE

where did they go? How has it come to pass?
 On stoves squat frogs, in ladles lilies bloom;
 Tables and chairs float in fields and water ponds;
 Rope-bridges of spiderwebs span room on room.
 Coffins are wedged in doorways, rocks block windows:
 A sight of strange gloom that rends my heart.
 Scythes lie rusting away in dust,
 Fishing nets, abandoned, rot in ash-piles.
 Heavens, even such a village cannot retain them,
 Where roses forever smile, and lily leaves grow as big as umbrellas;
 Where rice sprouts are so slender, the lake so green,
 The sky so blue, and the birds' songs so like dew-pearls.
 Who made the sprouts green and the flowers red?
 Whose sweat and blood is it that is blended in the soil?
 Those who have gone left so resolutely, unhesitatingly,
 What was their grievance, their secret wish?
 Now, somebody must tell them: "Here the hogs
 Roam the streets, ducks waddle among the pigs,
 Roosters trample on the peony, and cows browse on vegetable
 patches."
 Tell them: "The sun is down, yet the cattle are still on the hills.
 Their black silhouettes pause on the ridge, waiting,
 While the mountains around, like dragons and tigers,
 Close in on them. They glance about and shiver.
 Bowing their heads, too frightened to look again."
 This, too, you must tell them: "These beasts recall days of old
 When evening chill approached and poplars trembled in the wind,
 They only needed to call once from the hilltop.
 Though the trails were steep, their masters would help them,
 And accompanying them home there would be the scent of hay.
 As they think thus, their tears fall.
 And they huddle together, jowl against jowl . . ."
 Go, tell their masters, tell them.
 Tell them everything, do not hide anything.
 Ask them to return! Ask them to return!
 Ask them why they do not care for their own cattle.

Don't they know that these beasts are like children?
 Poor creatures, so pitiful, so frightened.
 Hey, where are you, messenger?
 Hurry now, tell them—tell Old Wang the Third,
 Tell the Eldest Chou and all his eight brothers,
 Tell all the farm hands living around the Lin-huai Gate,
 Tell also that red-faced blacksmith Old Li,
 Tell Old Woman Huang and all the village women,
 Tell them all these things, one by one,
 Tell them to come back, come back!
 My heart is torn by this sight of gloom.
 Heavens, such a village cannot retain these people,
 Such a paradise on earth without a man!

1937

Wen, *Complete Works*, *Trig.*, 24-26

QUIET NIGHT

This light, and the light-bleached four walls,
 The kind table and chair, intimate as friends,
 The scent of old books, reaching me in whiffs,
 My favorite teacup as serene as a meditating nun,
 The baby sucking contentedly at his mother's breast,
 A snore reporting the healthy slumber of my big son . . .
 This mysterious quiet night, this calm peace.
 In my throat quiver songs of gratitude,
 But the songs soon become ugly curses.
 Quiet night, I cannot accept your bribe.
Who treasures this walled-in square foot of peace?
My world has a much wider horizon.
 As the four walls cannot silence the clamor of war,
 How can you stop the violent beat of my heart?
 Better that my mouth be filled with mud and sand,
 Than to sing the joy and sorrow of one man alone;
 Better that moles dig holes in this head of mine,
 And vermin feed on my flesh and blood,

life is
 more than
 the
 attainment
 of
 personal
 salvation

Than to live only for a cup of wine and a book of verse,
Or for an evening of serenity brought by the ticking clock,
Hearing not the groans and sighs from all my neighbors,
Seeing not the shivering shadows of the widows and orphans,
And the convulsion in battle trenches, mad men biting their
sickbeds,

And all the tragedies ground out under the millstone of life.
Happiness, I cannot accept your bribe now.
My world is not within this walled-in square foot,
Listen, here goes another cannon-report, another roar of Death.
Quiet night, how can you stop the violent beat of my heart?

1927
Wen, *Complete Works*, Ting, 20-21

A REPLY

Shining glories I dare not accept;
No halos to crown my head.
Banners and drums are not my share;
No yellow earth for the path I tread.

Let not pride plate me in gold,
I decline a visit from "success."
With both hands grappling busy strife,
I guess the dawn, without looking.

Give to others the pomp of silken robes;
For me, only hard labor—a joy so real.
To make me temper songs of plain tunes
God has promised me a will of steel.

But please, no banners and drums for me.
No yellow earth for the path I tread.
Shining glories I dare not accept;
No halos to crown my head.

1927
Wen, *Complete Works*, Ting, 21

PRAYER

Please tell me who the Chinese are,
Teach me how to cling to memory.
Please tell me the greatness of this people
Tell me gently, ever so gently.

Please tell me: Who are the Chinese?
Whose hearts embody the hearts of Yao and Shun?
In whose veins flow the blood of Ching K'o and Nich Cheng?
Who are the true children of the Yellow Emperor?*

Tell me that such wisdom came strangely—
Some say it was brought by a horse from the river:
Also tell me that the rhythm of this song
Was taught, originally, by the phoenix.

Who will tell me of the silence of the Gobi Desert,
The awe inspired by the Five Sacred Mountains,
The patience that drips from the rocks of Mount T'ai,
And the harmony that flows in the Yellow and Yangtze Rivers?

Please tell me who the Chinese are,
Teach me how to cling to memory.
Please tell me the greatness of this people
Tell me gently, ever so gently.

1927
Wen, *Complete Works*, Ting, 22-23

ONE SENTENCE

There is one sentence that can light fire,
Or, when spoken, bring dire disasters.
Don't think that for five thousand years nobody has said it
How can you be sure of a volcano's silence?
Perhaps one day, as if possessed by a spirit,

* All legendary and historical heroes and sages of China.—Ed.

Suddenly out of the blue sky a thunder
Will explode:
"This is our China!"

How am I to say this today?
You may not believe that "the iron tree will bloom."
But there is one sentence you must hear!
Wait till the volcano can no longer be quiet,
Don't tremble, or shake your head, or stamp your feet,
Just wait till out of the blue sky a thunder
Will explode:
"This is our China!"

1927

Wen, *Complete Works*, Ting, 23-24

PERHAPS (A DIRGE)

Perhaps you are too tired of crying,
Perhaps you want to sleep awhile.
Then I'll tell the owls not to cough,
Frogs to hush, and bats to stay still.

I'll not let the sunshine pry your eyelids,
Nor let the wind your eyebrows sweep.
Nobody will be allowed to awaken you,
I hold a pine umbrella to shelter your sleep.

Perhaps you hear earthworms turning dirt,
Perhaps you hear grassroots sucking water.
Perhaps prettier than man's cursing voice
Is this kind of music you now hear.

I'll let you sleep, yes, let you sleep—
Close your eyes now, tightly.
And tell paper ashes to fly lightly.
I'll cover you gently with yellow earth,

1927 (?)

Wen, *Complete Works*, Ting, 23-24

死水

usu. read as a
metaphor for 中国

DEAD WATER

Here is a ditch of hopelessly dead water.
No breeze can raise a single ripple on it.
Might as well throw in rusty metal scraps
or even pour left-over food and soup in it.

Perhaps the green on copper will become emeralds.
Perhaps on tin cans peach blossoms will bloom.
Then, let grease weave a layer of silky gauze,
and germs brew patches of colorful spume.

Let the dead water ferment into jade wine
covered with floating pearls of white scum.
Small pearls chuckle and become big pearls,
only to burst as gnats come to steal this rum.

* an uncanny
beauty in dec

And so this ditch of hopelessly dead water
may still claim a touch of something bright.
And if the frogs cannot bear the silence—
the dead water will croak its song of delight.

Here is a ditch of hopelessly dead water—
a region where beauty can never reside.
Might as well let the devil cultivate it—
and see what sort of world it can provide.

1927 (?)

Wen, *Complete Works*, Ting, 16-17

THE NIGHT SONG

A toad shivered, feeling the chill,
Out of the yellow earth mound crawled a woman.
Beside her no shadow was seen,
And yet the moon was so very bright.

Out of the yellow earth mound crawled a woman,
And yet no crack showed itself in the mound,
Nor was a single earthworm disturbed,
Nor a single thread of a spider web broken.

In the moonlight sat a woman;
She seemed to have quite youthful looks.
Her red skirts were frightful, like blood,
And her hair was draped all over her back.

The woman was wailing, pounding her chest.
And the toad continued to shiver.
A lone rooster crowed in a distant village,
The woman disappeared from the yellow earth mound.

1927 (?)
Wen, *Complete Works*, Ting, 19-20

MIRACLE

Never have I sought the red of fire, nor the black
Of the Peach Blossom Pool at midnight, nor the plaintive
tune of a lute,
Nor the fragrance of roses. Never have I loved the proud
dignity of a leopard.

The tenderness I longed for, no white dove could offer,
I never wanted these things, but their crystallization,
A miracle ten thousand times more miraculous than them all!
But, this soul of mine being so famished, I simply cannot
Let it remain without food. So, even trash and dregs
I have to beg for, don't I? Heaven knows I am not
Willingly doing this, nor am I too stubborn, nor too stupid.
Only I cannot wait for you, wait for the approach of that
miracle.

I dare not let my soul go unsustained. Who doesn't know
How little these things are worth;
A tree full of singing cicadas, a pot of common wine.
Even the mention of misty mountains, valleys at dawn, or
glittering starry skies,

Is no less commonplace, most worthlessly commonplace. They
do not deserve

Our ecstatic surprise, our effort to call them in touching terms,
Our anxiety to coin golden phrases to cast them in song.
I, too, would say that to burst into tears because of an
oriole's song

Is too futile, too impertinent, too wasteful.
Who knows that I have to do it; this heart is too hungry,
Forcing me to make believe, to use coarse cereals for fine viands.

I am ready to confess, the moment you—
The moment that miracle occurs, I shall at once abandon the
commonplace

Never again will I, gazing at a frostbitten leaf,
dream of the glory of a spring blossom.

Never will I squander the strength of my soul in peeling the
stubborn rocks

In vain search of the sheen of jade; just give me a miracle,
I shall never again whip the "ugly" for the meaning
Of its opposite. In truth, I have long been tired
Of these doings, these brain-wracking implications.
I only ask for a plain word, jewel-like, radiating
Luster. I ask a whole, positive beauty.

Not that I am so stubborn or stupid that I cannot imagine
The angelic face behind the fan when I see a fan.
So—

I will wait for no matter how many incarnations—
Since a pledge has been made, also an unknown number of
Incarnations ago—I'll wait, without complaint, only quietly wait
For the arrival of a miracle. There must be such a day.
Let thunderbolts strike me, volcano blast me, the entire hell
Turn over to crush me . . . Afraid? Have no fear for me, as
No gusty wind can extinguish the lamp of the soul. To have this
Body turned into ashes is nothing because that is precisely
My one moment of eternity—a divine fragrance, a most mystifying
Silence (the sun, the moon, and all the stars are halted in their
Revolutions, even time stands still), a most perfect peace . . .
I hear the sound of a door latch, suddenly,

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Twentieth Century Chinese Poetry

And from afar comes the rustling of a skirt—that then is the
miracle—
In the half-opened golden gate, there you are, crowned with
a halo.

1930
The Selected Works of Wen I-to, 89-92