

Foreword

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"I shall place them in brocade-lined boxes and store them with fragrant scent for my descendants as a family treasure. They may not know how to read them but can look upon them as Zhou and Shang bronze ware of antiquity to be revered and treasured all the same."

Chen Qing Shan (1957)

A Gestation of Six Years

2010 is a good year for the publication of *A Scholar's Path* as it commemorates the 50th Anniversary of Father's demise on 6 June 1960.

A Scholar's Path, an anthology of Father's poems, was first conceived in late 2003, not long after the publication of our first book *Lychee Fragrance* in 2002. That book comprises a sample and cross section of Father's writings which we published bilingually in Chinese with its English translation.

Father's great passion was poetry. To attempt writing a book about his poetry is a project of an entirely different order of magnitude. We are not scholars, but we are both fully retired.

What we lack in scholarship might perhaps be made up by, what we thought we had, an abundant availability of “time”. However, as we also have many other concurrent personal interests in life, it has taken us quite a while to complete this “assignment” we set ourselves.

We decided very early on, that every poem in the book should be complete with a Background, a verse Translation (in the English edition), a Paraphrase and an Appreciation. (In the Chinese edition, we would have Notes on the allusions used in the poems). This explains why this book has had a gestation period of six years!

We had advice from a number of people, including Associate Professor Chan Chiu Ming. Five years later, much of the work on the English edition and the rendering of the poems into modern Chinese were done, yet we had barely scratched the surface of the work for the Chinese edition. There were still many “gaps”. We were a long way off from achieving our ambition to bring out concurrently an English and a Chinese edition of the book.

About a year ago, we sought more help from Assoc Prof Chan, without which the book would never have been completed. He took responsibility for the detailed research and the complete writing of the Chinese edition. Our contribution to the Chinese edition was in providing and authenticating the material for the Background.

As Assoc Prof Chan worked on the Chinese edition throughout the past one year, his scholarly work thus became a dynamic source of reference for the English edition. In several of the poems in the English edition, the interpretation of some lines was revised as a result. Moreover Assoc Prof Chan’s interpretation and critique in the Appreciation section of each chapter of the Chinese edition provided fresh insight not previously available to us.

Source and Background of the Poems

After Father passed away, Mother carefully put together what she had kept of Father's poems. They were from a variety of sources: newspaper cuttings, Father's handwritten drafts and handwritten copies by others. It was only much later that we found some poems tucked away among the belongings of our fourth maternal uncle Wang Guang Guo, whose name features frequently in the Background of several chapters of this book. A couple of compositions published in the mid-1920s came from an old gentleman from Muar whom we had never even met. Finally we found a few more in the microfilm records of the Chinese Library of the National University of Singapore. But for the microfilm record, we would never have known of the existence of the 1952 poem in Chapter 29, *"Farewell to Inspector of Schools Wang Fu Wen on His Promotion and Transfer to Kuala Lumpur"*. Nor would we have known of the close "literary friendship" between Mr Wang Fu Wen and Father. (See Preface III by Professor Wang Gungwu).

No poem can be fully understood and interpreted without an adequate knowledge of the background and the circumstance of its writing. The poems were written over a period of 35 years from 1925 to 1960. Some of the circumstances of writing are within the personal experience of the two of us, but much is not. In the search for answers, we made many trips to Ipoh, Kampar, Taiping, Kuala Lumpur and even as far as Father's native Putian in Fujian. Alas, most of the people for whom the poems were written are no longer here. The most we could do was to speak to their children who are themselves already in their seventies, or look at what few photographs and documents they still possess.

We are fortunate to have the help of our two elder sisters Mei Xuan and Mei Yu. They each had a poem composed by Father, addressed to them (Chapters 10 and 11 respectively). They provided us background information about the two po-

ems. Even more valuable, they narrated anecdotes about the family and our lives during a period of time when the two of us were too young to understand or even to remember.

Book Title and Cover

The book title *A Scholar's Path* is taken from the poem in Chapter 10, "Admonition to My Daughter Xuan".

The book's front cover is illustrated with the picture of a late Shang early Zhou *ding* cast in bronze, decorated with animal face motif (商末周初 獸面紋鬲鼎), reproduced with the kind permission of National Palace Museum, Taiwan, Republic of China. The choice is inspired by the closing lines of Paragraph 7 of Chapter 63 "My Seven Principles of Poetry", quoted at the beginning of the Foreword.

English Translation

The work of a translator is never easy; it is often a thankless task. A translation, especially of poetry, often satisfies no one. The translation of Chinese poetry into English is doubly more difficult. There are barriers of language and culture. It is almost an impossible task to have to convey the intended meaning, retain the imagery and maintain "readability" in English. Could we ever do justice to Father's classical Chinese poems by translating them into English, and worse, in verse form? We could lose all the beauty of the original "music", "imagery" and "culture"! Alternatively, we could have just done an English paraphrase of the poem and omitted the verse translation.

However, in the end, we took Professor Chan's advice, "A paraphrase is not a translation. A paraphrase is aimed mainly at the interpretation of the semantic meaning of the text. A translation, on the other hand, aims at the preservation of the 'poetry' of the poem. Poetry lies more in the 'images', which can be better translated, than the 'sound.'" With the inclusion

of an English translation in verse, we do hope to be able to draw out some measure of this “poetry”.

No translation could ever capture all the qualities of the original poem. To make up for the deficiency of a translation, every chapter includes a Paraphrase and an Appreciation of the poem. What the reader misses in the translation, may be picked up in the Paraphrase. What is missed in the Paraphrase, is amplified in the Appreciation. Reading all three will, hopefully, help the reader to enjoy the “poetry” of the original poem. It will help even more those who read Assoc Prof Chan’s detailed notes in every chapter (in the Chinese edition).

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