

The New Criterion

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A despot's verse

by [John Derbyshire](#)

A review of *The Poems of Mao Zedong*, edited and translated by Willis Barnstone.

The Belgian sinologist Pierre Ryckmans (pen-name “Simon Leys”) was once asked for his opinion of Mao Tse-tung’s poetry. He replied: “Well, if poetry were painting, I would say that Mao was better than Hitler ... but not as good as Churchill.”

Ryckmans’ quip suggests the moral dilemma in confronting Mao’s poetry. Imagine yourself at an art show featuring numerous obscure painters. You spot a piece you rather like. On enquiry, you find that the price is acceptable but then, on the point of buying it, you learn that it is one of Hitler’s Vienna pieces. Do you withdraw from the purchase? Most of us would, I think.

What, then, of a poem by Mao Tse-tung, whose sinified version of Marxist-Leninism brought about the untimely deaths of tens of millions of his own countrymen, stifled all literary and intellectual activity in China for forty years, and established a terroristic police state that still, though with techniques of repression somewhat modified, monopolizes political power and prohibits the rise of rational, consensual government today, not only in metropolitan China but also in the old non-Chinese Manchu suzerainties?

You could argue that even to glance at one of these poems is a small act of disloyalty to the unknown, unnumbered thousands of far better poets who were terrorized to silence under Mao’s brutish tyranny, or who went unpublished because their work was judged insufficiently “correct” by brainless Party hacks, or who were murdered without pity by the Maoist goon squads as counter-revolutionary “enemies of the people.”

A counter-argument would be that anything we can learn about human nature, even in its furthest aberrations of depravity and megalomania, is worth knowing, so that a perusal of Mao’s verse might leave us a tad wiser about humanity at large. And then there is the “compartmentalization” defense. Plenty of good poets have been deplorable human beings—think of Shelley. Perhaps it was mere happenstance “their crimes confined;/ Forbade to wade through slaughter to a throne,/ And shut the gates of mercy on mankind.” Why shun only the poet whose anti-human malignity, by the random operations of fate, attained fulfillment? Why not condemn the creator while calmly evaluating his creations?

The latter arguments are the only ones available to me, since I compromised myself by owning, and reading, a volume of Mao’s poems thirty years ago. I shall therefore proceed with my review, only pausing once again to acknowledge those better Chinese poets intimidated, silenced, or killed by Mao and his thugs, and to offer my apologies to them, their shades, and their surviving kin.

That earlier volume I owned was in fact this one, very nearly. Willis Barnstone published his translation of these thirty-five poems, with notes and introduction, in 1972. The book under review here is a re-issue, lightly worked over, though I am going from memory here, as I no longer own the earlier book. The older method of transcribing Chinese names, for example, has been replaced by the newer *pinyin* method, “Mao Tse-tung” becoming “Mao Zedong,” “Nanking” becoming “Nanjing” (that latter one surely a grave loss to the writers of limericks), and so on.

Well, what of the poems? There is not much insight to be gleaned from them about the poet. That is probably just as well. If the recollections of Mao’s doctor can be relied on—the general agreement is that they can, and that they offer our closest look at Mao’s personality, at any rate in his later years—the dictator was boastful, cynical, callous, ruthless, slovenly, sensual, and self-indulgent.

Little of that shows here. The sensuality can be glimpsed in “Snow,” at least in the Chinese. “Only today are we men of feeling,” Barnstone gives for the poem’s last line, but the Chinese *feng-liu* has more bohemian carnality in it than this conveys. Ruthlessness breaks through the surface in “Capture of Nanjing”:

The sky is spinning and the earth upside down
We are elated
yet we must use our courage to chase the hopeless enemy.

Where’s the courage in *that*? one finds oneself thinking; and turns to the Chinese, where the words translated “hopeless enemy” are *qiong kou*, from Sun Tzu’s maxim urging mercy in victory: *qiong kou wu zhui*—“do not pursue a beaten foe.” Mao is, of course, mocking that maxim. He loved to boast of how much more pitiless he was than the tyrants of antiquity.

For the most part, however, the color of these poems is detached and impersonal. I tallied the following frequent topics, some present only in allusion:

Triumphalism; confidence of victory; invincibility of the cause; resolution in hardship; locative-historical musings; transience of worldly things; present superior to past in understanding and sensibility; nostalgia for old friendships.

At least two of those themes owe more, I am sure, to a desire to imitate the sentiments of classical poetry than to anything in Mao himself.

These poems fall into two chronological clusters. The first cluster covers the period 1925–1936, the poet then aged thirty-two to forty-three, building his movement while fighting continuously for its survival. The second cluster is from 1949–1961, the poet then aged fifty-six to sixty-eight and in supreme power.

All Mao’s poems follow classical forms belonging to two large families of forms, *ci* and *shi*. The *ci-shi* distinction is entirely formal; a form from either family can be adapted to any mood or topic.

Ci poems (this word is pronounced “tsz”) follow the more rigid prescriptions, more rigid than our sonnet or villanelle forms. There are, though, far more varieties of *ci*—over six hundred—so that the poet can select from a large menu. Having selected his *ci* form, he is then severely constrained in matters of line length, tone pattern, rhyme (most Chinese poetry rhymes), and placement of caesuras.

A *shi* poem (the pronunciation is “shr”) usually has lines all the same length, and there are fewer choices of overall pattern. *Shi* forms give the poet more freedom but within a narrower range. The Chinese regard *shi* as more difficult to write than *ci*, the catch-phrase being *xie shi, tian ci*—“you write *shi*, but you fill in *ci*.” And of course, being more difficult for the writer, *shi* poems are easier on the reader—easier to read off the first time, easier to memorize. (Harder to write, easier to read:

when is this *not* true, of any writing in any language?)

Practically all of the earlier cluster of Mao's poems are in *ci* forms; most of the later ones are *shi*. The common opinion, which seems to me correct, is that the earlier poems are better overall. To revert, perhaps not altogether fairly, to that catch-phrase: Mao was better at filling in than he was at writing.

The few examples of *ci* in the later cluster show Mao at his poetic best. His 1957 poem "The Gods," the last he ever wrote (or at any rate published) in a *ci* style, is at the summit, proof that even a mediocre artist can create something halfway memorable. "The Gods" is far from perfect as a poem, marred by at least one weary cliché—the "lonely and silent" goddess Chang E—and one unhappy image—the "ten-thousand-mile great void" (an allusion to the Great Wall: but voids are not linear, and the Great Wall is anyway a cliché in stone).

Somehow it comes off though, the turn of thought between the last two lines closing the poet-reader deal decisively. Various deceased and immortal souls are disporting themselves in heaven, when

Down on earth a sudden report of the tiger's defeat.
Tears fly down from a great upturned bowl of rain.

The Chinese is:

Hu bao ren jian ... ceng fu hu.
Lei fei dun zuo ... qing pen yu.

I have used ellipses to indicate the caesuras. These lines actually sound quite lovely, even when you know that the tiger is supposed to be Chiang Kai-shek, who, with all his numerous faults, would have left China a much better place than Mao did. (They died within a year and a half of each other.)

Putting down this book of poems, I pick up the latest issue of *China Journal*, a very useful twice-yearly compendium of China scholarship published by Australian National University. Page 142 discusses some village records from south China in the 1950s: "At this meeting two peasants expressed opposition to the new grain procurement system, saying that they wanted more food for their ducks. They were both sent to labor camps in Heilongjiang [in Chinese Siberia] for 15 years."

Food for their ducks! *Fifteen years!* Mao Tse-tung was not much of a poet. If he had been the greatest that ever lived, though, it would still have been better for his countrymen, and for the world at large, if he had been strangled in his cradle.

John Derbyshire's [reading](#) of "I Lost My Proud Poplar."

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