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CHANTING ABOUT ONESELF
Poems by four Song scholars (11th–13th c.)

Song poets describe the most mundane aspects of their daily lives as well as their lofty ambitions and unfulfilled dreams.

Poetry played a larger role in Chinese culture and society than in Western civilization for a variety of reasons. The Classic of Poetry’s (Shijing) classification as a Confucian classic elevated the place of poetic writing and appreciation. Another important factor was the strong belief that good poetry “was the highest form of speaking to someone else, an activity appropriate to all human beings on certain occasions and in certain states of mind.” For these reasons, poetry remained a key component of general education for men throughout imperial Chinese history. All educated men grew up memorizing a large number of poems and were trained in the basic rules for the patterns of tones and use of imagery, then tried their hand in composing their own poems. The greatest age of Chinese poetry was the Tang dynasty. The Complete Tang Poems (Quan Tang shi) includes about 49,000 poems by 2,200 poets. Even more survive from the Song, as The Complete Song Poems (Quan Song shi) contains about 270,000 poems by close to 90,000 poets.

Good poetry was often autobiographical. Poets recorded their observations of changes in natural conditions and visits to scenic spots. Other prominent themes included drinking and banqueting, bidding farewell, missing family
and friends, and life in exile. All are revealing of the poet’s everyday life and professional experiences. A particular type of poem, entitled “chanting about oneself,” stands out for its vivid depiction of daily and private life. In these poems, the poet often resorts to humor or self-denigration to convey his innermost feelings of contentment, disappointment, or frustration. The selections below vary greatly in their tone but address several topics of general concern to members of the scholar-official class: aging, hobbies and taste, enduring poverty, and office-holding and its alternatives.

Chanting about Myself at Forty,  
by Wei Ye 魏野 (960–1020)

At rest my heart does not pound,  
But I realize that my memory is growing weaker.  
Chess skills retrogressing, it is hard to yield to my guests;  
Out of practice on my qin, I have to ask my son for the right notes.  
Hands lazy, the agricultural tools are left randomly.  
Body falling apart, my Daoist gear reveals.  
What are the uses of the brush and inkstone  
Other than to polish old poems.

Mocking Myself, by Bi Zhongyou 畢仲遊  
(1047–1121)

Once there were fresh, delicious crabs under my chopsticks,  
Now only old filtered muddy wine in the jug.  
When I get drunk today, please do not laugh at me—  
The grandson of a past minister of personnel

Pitying Myself, by Bi Zhongyou 畢仲遊  
(1047–1121)

I pity myself for wanting to be a scholar despite my poverty and ill health.  
For over ten years, I have stayed up late to study,  
Once a boy, now already old.  
On my desk still a pile of books to be read.
Laughing at Myself, by Zheng Gangzhong 鄭剛中 (1088–1154)

Other people invest their money in fields and gardens,
Then worry about getting rich too slowly.
In my case, I borrow money to buy rare books,
Vexed that I never have enough for all the ones I want.
Since I do not put essential needs first,
How could I have jars filled with grain?
My foolishness makes me laugh and laugh,
Done laughing, I playfully pick up a book to read.

Cautioning Myself, by Lu You 陸游 (1125–1210)

Hair falling out—it gets tangled in my comb in the morning.
Deserted fields get hoed at dusk.
The arrival of cool weather lets me set aside the round fan.
As my health improves, I use my short walking stick less often.
In pursuing the Way of the sages, I have accomplished little,
And I haven’t yet cut off all human ties.
Fortunately, the lonely green lamp is steadfast.
Moving closer to it, I read an unfinished book.

Amusing Myself, by Lu You 陸游 (1125–1210)

For half of my life I was stuck in officialdom and rushed about
in society.
Only when drunk did I relax and dream of the quiet life.
Now I get to enjoy having nothing to do.
When tired of reading, I go roaming in the mountains.

Notes


Further Reading


