

## Selected Poems by Yi Tal

Introduced and translated by CHRISTINA HAN and WING S. CHU

---

Yi Tal (1539–1612), whose literary name is Son'gok, is regarded as a representative poet of the mid-Chosŏn period. As an illegitimate son of a *yangban*, despite his talent and education, Yi suffered state-sanctioned injustices like other members of his class. He had a brief career as an Education Official (*hakgwan*) in the Translation Office (*Sayŏg'won*) and served as a Diplomatic Attendant (*chongsagwan*) tasked with composing poems during an official visit by a Ming envoy.

Yi was a nonconformist and he lived and died as a wandering poet. As a poet, he aspired to High Tang poetry, especially the poetry of the Tang poet Du Fu. Influences from Du's poetry are noticeable in the themes and styles of Yi's poetic works, in particular in their shared autobiographical approach to poetry. Yi's literary talents were recognized by contemporary writers. He befriended *yangban* poets Ch'oe Kyŏngch'ang (1539–1583) and Paek Kwanghun (1537–1582), and the three were called the "Three Tang poets" in their literary circle. As a group, they were highly critical of the Song style of poetry and advocated for a revival of High Tang poetry. Yi taught poetry to Hŏ Kyun (1569–1618) and Hŏ Nansŏrhŏn (1563–1589), the sibling literary icons of the sixteenth century. After Yi's death, his poems were collected and published by Hŏ Kyun under the title *Son'gok chip* [The collected works of Sŏn'gok] in 1618.

Yi's poems contain sensitive and candid portrayals of life of a wandering poet, the misery of poverty, the devastation caused by the Japanese invasion of Korea, the comfort of friendship, and the simple joys of life.

---

CHRISTINA HAN (chan@wlu.ca) (chan@wlu.ca) is an associate professor in the Department of History, Wilfrid Laurier University, Canada.

WING S. CHU (wingschu8@gmail.com) is a translator of classical Chinese literature.

## The Translation of Selected Poems by Yi Tal

### Wandering

#### *Impromptu Chanting*

偶吟

The traveller keeps awake sitting through the chilly night.  
 In a desolate lane, the bramble gate encloses his loneliness.  
 Ji Zha travelled far and his fur coat became tattered.<sup>1</sup>  
 Sima was constantly sick and his sideburns slowly receded.<sup>2</sup>  
 Against the frost-bitten trees by the sea, a gust howls swiftly.  
 On the clear moonlit window, dewdrops densely form.  
 Tomorrow off to the Chŭng Mountain I shall return!  
 Along the bridge in the field, autumn grass will be swaying tall.

旅人無睡坐寒宵  
 窮巷柴扉閉寂寥  
 季子遠遊裘盡弊  
 馬卿多病鬢還凋  
 霜侵海樹風聲緊  
 月滿虛窓露氣饒  
 明日甌山歸去路  
 野橋秋草正迢迢

#### *Feeling Stirred while Sitting at Night*

夜坐有懷

Wandering and destitute, a long stay in Kwansŏ.  
 This spring I still cannot go home.  
 Sorrow comes to this traveller's pillow,  
 instead of a dream of the native hills.  
 In the present turmoil,  
 I am caught in the road of life.  
 The moon outside my window diligently  
 shines night after night on my decrepit face.

流落關西久  
 今春且未還  
 有愁來客枕  
 無夢到鄉山  
 時事干戈裏  
 生涯道路間  
 殷勤一窓月  
 夜夜照衰顏

#### *A Wanderer's Feelings*

客懷

This body doesn't care anymore west or east.  
 Moving here and there, it likes chasing the whirling hay.  
 An old friend, staying in the same lodge, has become destitute.  
 In a strange land, we face together a new year amid turmoil.  
 The shadows of returning geese glide over the thousand snow-capped peaks.  
 The sound of a distant horn wafts in the wind at the fifth night watch.  
 The river and cloud seem disheartened on the road beyond the frontier pass.  
 Slowly gazing at the fragrant grass, my thoughts are boundless.

此身那復計西東  
 到處悠悠逐轉蓬  
 同舍故人流落後  
 異鄉新歲亂離中  
 歸鴻影度千峯雪  
 殘角聲飛五夜風  
 惆悵水雲關外路  
 漸看芳草思無窮

<sup>1</sup> Ji Zha (576–484 BCE) was a prince of the State of Wu who declined the throne.

<sup>2</sup> Sima Xiangru (179–117 BCE) was a poet and politician from the Western Han dynasty in China.

*Sitting in the Night; Gifted to Hō Kyun*

夜坐 贈許端甫

My traveller's illness worsens in autumn.  
 Homesick feelings intensify in the depth of night.  
 Hidden crickets chirp near the walls.  
 Cool dew falls on the scattered bushes.  
 Being so long a guest in Luoyang,  
 yet I haven't forgotten my yearning for rivers and seas.  
 Incense burning, I sit and cannot sleep.  
 Royal clepsydra running, the night gets deeper and deeper.

旅病逢秋甚  
 鄉愁到夜深  
 暗蛩啼近壁  
 涼露墮疏林  
 久作洛陽客  
 未忘江海心  
 焚香坐不寐  
 宮漏更沈沈

*Journeying*

旅遊

On the road, worries are endless.  
 Stranded, my plans have gone astray.  
 Already the third watch, yet there's still no dream for this wanderer.  
 A dog barks at the bramble gate.  
 The setting moon peeps into the empty room.  
 Cold wind wafts the ragged drape.  
 Tomorrow morn, I shall continue my journey downstream,  
 and sincerely thank the host for arranging my journey home.

行役愁難盡  
 淹留計已違  
 三更無客夢  
 一犬吠柴扉  
 落月窺虛廡  
 寒風動弊幃  
 明朝下江路  
 深謝主人歸

*Crossing the P'ae River; A Poem on the Planting Pine Pavilion*

渡涇江 題栽松亭

With my back toward the lonely city far away,  
 I hear the tapping at the sides of the ferry boat.  
 Above the posthouse pavilion, the morning sun rises late.  
 From the riverside trees early autumn cicadas chirp.  
 Stranded so long, I always make plans to return home.  
 But at departure, separation still saddens me.  
 I carry with me nothing of worth.  
 Letting out a long howl, I look at my Wu sword.  
 It rains all morning at the travel lodge.  
 In the lakeside fields the wheat is ready for harvest.  
 Helpless feelings in a strange place  
 stir up the sorrow of an itinerant.  
 The courtyard is shrouded in deep gloom.  
 In the market place, noises have died down.  
 When will I be back in my native town?  
 My home is in the Haeseo Province.

背指孤城遠  
 鳴榔渡客舟  
 驛亭朝日晚  
 江樹早蟬秋  
 久滯常歸計  
 臨行又別愁  
 隨身無長物  
 長嘯看吳鉤  
 旅舍終朝雨  
 湖田小麥秋  
 無端爲客處  
 自起遠人愁  
 庭院重陰合  
 闌廛市語收  
 何時返鄉曲  
 家在海西州

*En Route to Sukchu*

肅州道中

Galloping on horseback, I cross the frigid river.  
 Pushing on and on, I climb up to the old fountainhead.  
 The autumn rays spread across the planted fields.  
 The sound of hammer on the anvil reaches from the village behind the hills.  
 Magpies riding on the wind cause the village tree leaves to fall.  
 Fireflies drenched with dew light up the grass roots.  
 This evening, on the moonlit highway,  
 where can this lonely soul go?

策馬渡寒水  
 行行登古源  
 秋光遍野稼  
 砧響隔山村  
 風鵲墜村葉  
 露螢明草根  
 今宵驛路月  
 何處獨銷魂

**Reflections on the War**

*The Resentment of Moving*

移家怨

The old man, carrying a cauldron on his back, walks through the woods.  
 His old wife, holding a grandson, is unable to follow him.  
 Whenever they meet people, they complain of the agony of moving.  
 Six years of military service have separated the father and son.

老翁負鼎林間去  
 老婦携兒不得隨  
 逢人却說移家苦  
 六載從軍父子離

*At Kongsan, Encountering Song Chǒng-ok*

公山 逢宋廷玉

Japanese bandits have raided us for years,  
 and fighting continues in Hangyang.  
 My relatives have all gone missing in this turmoil,  
 I dare not ask if they are dead or alive.  
 The sun in the west watches over the provisional palace.  
 The wind from the east arrives at my hometown.  
 Drinking with you face to face, in this tumultuous time,  
 dripping tears drench my clothes.

寇盜經年歲  
 兵戈滿漢陽  
 所親皆喪亂  
 不敢問存亡  
 西日瞻行殿  
 東風入故鄉  
 時危對君酌  
 涕淚欲沾裳

**Friendship**

*Seeing Yi U Off to the Capital*<sup>3</sup>

別李季獻之京

I can hardly contain the thought of separation.  
 Alas! The feelings at parting truly make me sigh.

別意不自制  
 別情良可嗟

<sup>3</sup> Yi U (1542–1609) was a calligrapher and painter. Kyeohŏn was his courtesy name.

<p>Having been a wanderer so long at the end of the world,          I have sent many off beyond the frontier pass.          Along the uninhabited riverbank, petals from trees flutter in the air.          Under the bridge in spring, waves ripple on the water.          Yet, just like a cuckoo          with tears I drench the branches in the forest.</p>	<p>海隅爲客久          關外送人多          野岸飛花樹          春橋水上波          猶同子規鳥          洒淚濕林柯</p>
--	---

*Feelings Stirred on the Day of Qingming Festival*

清明日感懷

<p>I think back of the days in Chang'an.          Wandering in spring, I recall our youthful years.          On horseback with a bow in hand, we strolled past the Golden Market.          Galloping, we dashed along the Wei Bridge.          Fifty years have flashed by.          Joys and sorrows, one after another.          The Double Three Festival is here again today.          A cup of wine in hand, I am left in a daze.</p>	<p>伊昔長安日          春遊憶少年          挾彈金市下          走馬渭橋邊          五十須臾過          悲歡次第連          還逢上巳節          把酒意茫然</p>
--	---

*At a Lakeside Temple,*

*I Saw in a Monk's Scroll Poems by Ch'oe Kyŏngch'ang  
 and Paek Kwanghun; In Sadness, I Gifted this Poem to Him*

湖寺  
 見僧軸有崔白詩  
 愴懷有贈

<p>I seldom leave the outer city wall and cross the river.          But in wet years, I often visited the temple.          I took Ch'oe and Paek with me.          At the temple we tried one another's poetic skills.          Alas! Old friends have become fewer, either fallen or scattered.          Every passing year, they leave us one after another.          Deep in thought, I lean against the pillar for a long time.          In the west, the sun sets over the feeding trough.</p>	<p>出郭渡江少          水年多往來          每携崔白輩          僧院課詩才          舊友凋零盡          流年次第催          沈吟倚柱久          西日下生臺</p>
---	---

## Reflections on Scenery

*Passing a Derelict Temple*

經廢寺

<p>When was this temple abandoned?          The pine path to the front gate is deep.          Steeping mountain mist rubbed out the inscriptions on steles.</p>	<p>此寺何年廢          門前松逕深          嵐蒸碑毀字</p>
---	--

Seeping rain discolored the golden statue of Buddha.  
 The old well is filled with autumn leaves.  
 In the shaded courtyard evening birds land to nestle.  
 Please don't be too sentimental.  
 Human life... how you falter away!

雨漏佛湫金  
 古井填秋葉  
 陰庭下夕禽  
 不須興慨感  
 人世幾消沈

*A Poem on Changsa Prefect's Four Seasons  
 of Reclusive Living in Nūngyang*

題長沙倅綾陽幽  
 居四時

You built a new thatched hut and laid the stone terrace  
 with a bamboo fence and a mossy trail amid the deep green.  
 All day long at the bramble gate no one arrives.  
 Everywhere spring clouds rise from distant hills.

新結茅茨覆石壇  
 竹籬苔逕翠微間  
 柴門盡日無人到  
 處處春雲生遠山

The spring river is calm with spring water in the second month.  
 Reeds begin to sprout like snow on the river sand.  
 Children hastily report the arrival of globefish.  
 At the stern, square nets are set along the river bank.

二月春江春水平  
 江沙如雪荻芽生  
 兒童急報河豚上  
 船尾持罾傍岸行

When the fourth month arrives the river fields' wheat turns yellow.  
 The alley to every house is filled with the fragrance of vegetable flowers.  
 At noon a thick shade covers the pavilion ground.  
 On a bamboo mat over the pigweed bed, the mountain dream continues.

四月江田大麥黃  
 家家門巷菜花香  
 濃陰滿地日亭午  
 竹簟蓼牀山夢長

Village south and village north, the rain has just cleared.  
 To grow melon in the field, I start to dig with a hoe.  
 In the deep alley, a day is long with nothing to attend to.  
 To the tree shade I move the couch and teach my son to read and write.

村南村北雨晴初  
 舍下瓜田手自鋤  
 深巷日長無箇事  
 樹陰移榻課兒書

At the foot of the Yeonju Mountain, an expansive river flows.  
 Above the river are layers of mountains covered in autumnal ivy.  
 At the sandy bank, away from the village path, I harvest the grains.  
 Beyond the woods, I hear a human voice from a fishing boat.

聯珠山下大江流  
 江上層巒薜蘿秋  
 沙岸刈禾村路遠  
 隔林人語釣魚舟

Far, far at the end of sky are the twelve peaks.  
 Their summits, at dawn and dusk, are shrouded in a thick coat of colorful clouds.  
 New frost descends from the mountains overnight.  
 The rugged and steep mountain range once again turns into fine brocade.

天際遙遙十二峯  
 峯頭朝暮綵雲濃  
 新霜一夜山中下  
 疊嶂連巒錦繡重

In the river village after a snowfall, the bramble gates are shut.

江村雪後掩柴扉

Cold smoke. Spare woods. Sparrows are few.  
Now and then an old man sits by the hearth and warms his hands.  
With a smile he watches his wife wadding winter clothes.

煙冷疏林鳥雀稀  
老子當爐時煖手  
笑看中婦絮寒衣

On the dust-covered wall hangs the old official cap.  
With one laugh, returning home, he reminisces the bygone years.  
Outside the window a lad comes to report good news.  
In the waterside village, after a light snow, the plum blossoms have bloomed.

塵埋屋壁舊烏紗  
一笑歸來感歲華  
窗外小童來報喜  
水村微雪有梅花

### Feelings of Home

#### *Not in the Evening*

No visitors this evening, the bramble gate is shut.  
With vigilance I guard against tigers and leopards.  
Pushing open the window, I watch the snowfall at night;  
and through the side window I let in the morning sun.  
My young daughter draws water from the cold spring.  
My indigent wife tastes the bean porridge.  
Don't complain about long years of deprived wandering.  
Wherever you stay is your native land.

#### 不夕

不夕柴荆掩  
多虞虎豹防  
拓窓看夜雪  
自牖納朝陽  
稚女寒泉汲  
貧妻豆粥嘗  
莫嗟流落久  
寓地即爲鄉

