

Charles Hwang

Dale Hoiberg

LITR 245-001

7 December 2018

Term Paper

The poem “Nineteen Old Poems XIII”, as the title implies, is a poem in a series of nineteen poems written sometime during the Eastern Han dynasty, around the third century. There is no listed author for this series of poems which made it difficult to narrow the time period of its writing. The poem describes a person (presumably, during this early time period, a man) riding his horse to the city gates of Luoyang with tombs in distant view and reflecting on the shortness of life. He speculates that the people represented by the tombs all sought to extend their lives through various means, but were caught up in this quest for longevity and were not able to fully enjoy their own lives. He suggests that the reader should instead enjoy life in the present before it passes.

The poem is eighteen lines long and roughly divided into nine pairs of lines, with each pair constituting a sentence and having its own literary significance and contribution to the poem. The first sentence, “I drove my wagon out Upper East Gate / and gazed at far tombs north of the walls” (Owen 260), sees the author looking at tombs that lay beyond the city walls. Cities in China were historically built as fortresses with protective walls around them and gates, like the one the author mentions, through which travelers can pass and city officials can check for enemies. The author continues in the second sentence with several references to nature: “Winds whistles in silver poplars, / cypress and pine lined the wide lanes.” He uses the imagery of wind as an important aspect of nature and the setting he is in. He also uses images of the poplars,

cypress, and pine because they are different types of trees with long lifespans that traditionally serve as symbols of longevity and prosperity. These trees are usually present around areas with tombs, as the author notes, for this reason. The third and fourth sentences highlight the boldest metaphor that the author uses in the poem: “Beneath them lay men long dead, / fading far off into endless night. / They sleep under Yellow Springs sunken from sight, / and never will wake in a thousand years.” The author describes the men buried as “long dead,” taking note of the age of the tombs, and the irreversible course of death as “fading off.” In Chinese mythology and lore, the Yellow Springs represent the underworld to which the men went. He uses the metaphor of an “endless night” in Yellow Springs as a “sleep” from which they will never “wake,” or come back to the real world. He also interestingly notes that these men are “sunken from sight,” a phrase with multiple interpretations. The obvious one is a physical interpretation, where the faces of these men will never be seen by anyone ever again. However, the more subtle interpretation, a figurative one, refers to these men being sunken from the sights of minds, of sorts. In this view, these men will rarely be thought of or talked about again, except by family. Although they may be remembered every once in awhile, they cease to occupy the thoughts of people on an everyday basis. Overall, these powerful uses of imagery capture the attention of the reader as a quick transition from the aspects of nature around the tombs.

The author returns to nature in the fifth sentence, writing: “Shadow and Light move in endless floods, / our destined years are like morning’s dew.” The invocation of shadow and light by the author is another use of imagery and an allusion to the yin and yang in Chinese philosophy. In this case, the shadow and light reference the contrasts of darkness and light that cast or “flood” themselves upon the tombs of these men through the cycles of night and day. He also mentions how the “destined years” of life can pass as quickly as dew fades in the morning.

This alludes to the broad scope of time in his poem and how the duration of one's life is like that of dew when compared to the universe. It is a continuation of the persistent theme of nature present in the second sentence. The author remains within this broad scope of time in the sixth sentence: "Man's life is as brief as a sojourner, / old age lacks the firmness of metal or stone." He continues his analogies of one's life to short durations, comparing it to someone who takes a short stay somewhere. He also mentions the frailty of old age with an image of nature: even as metal rusts and stones are weathered, they can survive over long periods of time due to their sheer strength, whereas humans at an old age cannot survive through nature and as nature does through such long periods of time. The author illustrates the extreme difference in time between the universe and one's life by defining a shorter time period and showing how much it still outlasts one's life in the seventh sentence: "They have brought men here for thousands of years, / a span unmatched by good man or Sage." He points out that men have been buried underneath the tombs for many generations, far beyond the time that a man or even a wise sage could have endured. Even though thousands of years is considered a short period for human history and minuscule for the universe, it is still far longer than one's lifespan. This is another example from the author of nature outlasting mankind.

In the final two sentences in the poem, arguably the most important, the author describes how many have tried and failed to prolong their lives and offers the reader a suggestion. The author writes: "With pills and diets men seek the Undying, / and are usually duped by elixirs. / The better way is to drink fine ale / and dress yourself in satin and silk." The author notes that many have long sought immortality through different rumored foods and medicinal supplements; however, they are "duped" when it either fails to give them immortality or backfires and kills them as an unintended consequence due to their toxicity. This also alludes to how many people

will try to “mess with” nature through manmade means but ultimately meet the same fate, showing how strong and powerful the will of nature is. The author ends by suggesting to the reader that instead of going to great efforts to try to prolong one’s life and, in his view, to “delay the inevitable,” one should enjoy life and its greatest intricacies by doing what one wants to do. This is a direct appeal to the reader, as he switches from beginning the poem in the first person to ending it in the second person. These final two sentences outline the theme of the entire poem.

The central theme of the poem is to enjoy life to the fullest while the opportunity is still present and available. This mentality suggests that life is precious and nothing can be taken for granted. The poem also paints a very broad perspective of the universe: in the large picture, one’s life is infinitesimally small, and it would be foolish and futile to waste it by “delaying the inevitable” and trying to extend it by an even smaller amount. The poem has a rather philosophical tone in observing the qualities of life. Emotionally, the poem takes a more serious tone, but ends on a somewhat happy tone when suggesting that the reader enjoy life. The poem uses many images: the tombs, winds, poplar, cypress, pine, shadow and light, dew, and metal and stone, to name a few. These images, excluding the manmade tombs, are all aspects found in nature and the outside world. The author of the poem made it important to incorporate nature as an integral aspect because of its close relationship to the natural flow of life. These images are all understandable and believable because they are found in nature and serve as appropriate analogies to the author’s main points.

Within my own life, it is often difficult to put into perspective how short life is because of everything in the foreground: academics, personal life, employment, errands, finances, politics, and technology, to name a few. Cultural differences arise on how one learns to enjoy life through personal experiences and one’s surroundings. Reading this poem made me reflect upon my own

life and ways to enjoy it more in the future rather than getting caught up in things insignificant to it. This poem showed that longevity was important to many people in Chinese society at the time, and still is. Living a long and prosperous life was considered a result of good fortune, as well as having the more practical benefits of survival and being able to raise a family. Because of the relatively shorter lifespans in the third century compared to lifespans in China today, living a long life was considered even more important because of its greater impact.

It is unfortunate that the author is anonymous so that he does not receive due credit, although the other eighteen poems in the Nineteen Old Poems series can also speak to his creativity in poetry. The complete combination of these nine pairs results in a poem whose topic is unrivaled in *Anthology of Chinese Literature*. Few other poems in Chinese literature can claim to speak to such a profound topic that is also practical to today's society. Outside of the first sentence where the author describes the walls of Luoyang, the poem can easily be related to a similar scene today. Even as everyone enjoys their own life as they see fit, the author's point applies universally. This shows that "Nineteen Old Poems XIII" has stood the test of time and will continue to do so for many years.

Works Cited

“Nineteen Old Poems XIII.” *An Anthology of Chinese Literature: Beginnings to 1911*, by

Stephen Owen, W. W. Norton, 1997, pp. 260.

“Selected Poems from Nineteen Old Poems (Eastern Han Dynasty, 25 - 220 A.C.).” Translated

by Burton Watson and John A Turner, *Translated Chinese Poetry: Poems by Li Po*, 1

Dec. 2003, www.shigeku.org/xlib/lingshidao/hanshi/poem19.htm.