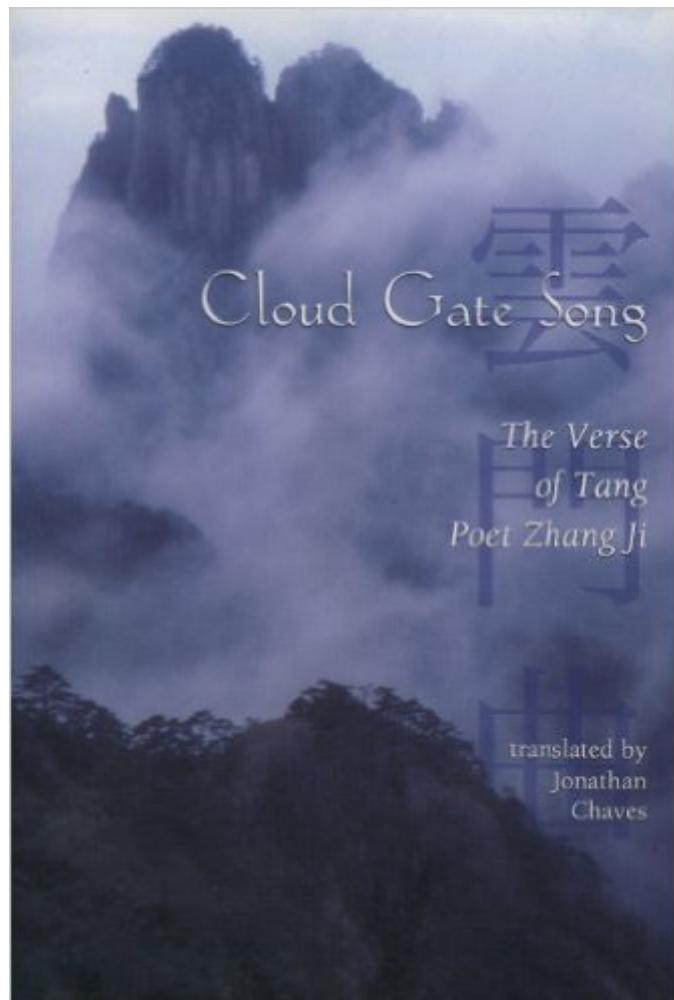


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Cloud Gate Song: The Verse Of Tang Poet Zhang Ji



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Customer Reviews

As a reader of Chinese poetry with no knowledge of Chinese in either its written or verbal forms I am, like many others, dependent entirely on the talent and scholarship of translators. Over the years we have become accustomed to seeing renderings into English in a compressed free verse style that aims at a Zen-like combination of direct observation with allusive emotional undertones. At its best, this style of translation gives us an English version of the Chinese characterized by what one reviewer here calls a "minimalist lucidity and elegance." I have always questioned whether these translations, striking and lovely as they can be in their own right, are giving us more than a fragment of what the original audience found in this poetry. Characteristically, these "minimalist" translations strike the reader as free from (apparent) artifice and formality. They appear gem-like, appreciable without history or context. In reality though, any classical Chinese poem is part of a conversation that has its origins at the very beginning of literacy. By the time of Zhang Ji in the Tang period, this conversation was enshrined in a tradition already over a millennium old and had embraced an elaborate formalism backed by an equally elaborate scholarly apparatus surpassing anything known in the west at that time. The linking of the study and writing of poetry with the bureaucratic exam system made poetic form a matter of almost staggering importance to the prospective scholar-official. An error in rhyme or meter could result in failure, disgrace and poverty. The poet's work was accomplished within this tradition, playing with and against the formal conventions of his genre. Each work resonates back down the prior thousand plus year history and echoes forward continuing the conversation.

I highly recommend this book, especially for non-specialists interested in a sense of the original forms of Chinese poetry. Zhang Ji is an important figure in the development of later Tang verse, and in a parallel way this book is an important step in foreign understanding of that poetry. We have many translations, both formal and free verse, of the High Tang poetry of Li Bo and Du Fu. Li's powerful spirit and Du's richly-textured lines translate well, either into free verse or a tightly-wound modern lyric. But looking further into the Tang, the poetry of Zhang Ji and the later Han Yu had yet to be forcefully translated so as to express the direct quality of the originals. This may well be part of the confusion. After citing Frost and Longfellow as models, Chaves' translations are much closer in spirit to far earlier English popular ballads. The description is plain but melodious. Inversion and archaism are scattered throughout. The reader who reflexively sees in this a Victorian stuffiness will be missing out. The same qualities, freshly and vigorously applied to topics of everyday life, are the primary quality of early English poetry. A careful reader will find the same in Chaves' lines. While some might criticize this as not in line with the modern aesthetic, it is actually quite necessary. Zhang Ji writes in imitation of popular ballads. This "(new) music bureau poetry" comes along with a plainer style and more direct diction than the earlier poets with whom American readers are more familiar. There are no clever turns of phrase, just honest human emotion, which perhaps explains why the translator is being attacked for what is, ultimately, stylistic accuracy.

This book belongs on the shelf of every serious reader of Chinese literature, and every serious student of the art of translation. Really a very fine book, it does for us two things: it brings to life a major Tang dynasty (618-907) poet hitherto virtually unstudied, and certainly unread, in the West; and it makes an important statement about the art of translation from Classical Chinese to English. The book begins with a provocative essay on the art of translation the purpose of which is to explain and justify the unorthodox decision to render Zhang Ji's (766-830) poetry into metered and rhyming English verse rather than American style free verse. The debate this decision has provoked has begun to work itself out in these little reviews. I would here refer readers to the other contributions to this site, and point out that Chaves' discussion raises key questions about how we want to understand the writers we translate. The standard practice is to seek a contemporary idiom and sound. Chaves reacts against that practice. He seeks to revive the sound, sense, and flavor of the language and cultural world of Zhang Ji's original works in older modes of English and American poetry that approximate the Classical Chinese in interesting ways. He wants to sound not like an American poet writing today, but as much like the Zhang Ji of the eighth and ninth centuries as

possible, much of whose poetry was written in highly regulated forms. This is a worthy enterprise that amounts to a restoration of the diversity that used to reign in the field of translation in decades past.

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