

Chairman Mao's Letter to Comrade Chen Yi Discussing Poetry

Comrade Chen Yi,

You asked me to polish your poems, but I am unable to as I have never learnt how to write *lu shih* in five-character lines and have never published any in that form. Your poems have power and range. Only I feel that in form, or metrically, they are not quite *lu shih*.¹ For it has strict tonal patterns, without which a poem cannot be called *lu shih*. In this respect, I think, both of us are still beginners. I have occasionally written a few seven-character *lu shih*, but none of them satisfies me. Just as you are good at writing unorthodox verse, I know a little about *tzu*² with lines of different lengths. Chien-ying [Yeh Chien-ying—Tr.] is good at seven-character *lu shih*, and old Comrade Tung [Tung Pi-wu—Tr.] at five-character *lu shih*. If you want to write in these forms, you can ask for their advice.

Journeying Westward

*I speed westward ten thousand li,
Riding the wind over infinite space;
Had not this giant roc spread its wings,
How could man traverse this void cross-
ed only by birds?
The sea below ferments a thousand
goblets of wine,
And mountains tower to great heights
with onion spires.
Everywhere we find good friends,
As wind and thunder sweep the world.*

I made changes in this poem and am still far from satisfied with the result. I am afraid I cannot do the rest.

Another thing is that poetry uses images to convey ideas and should not communicate plainly as in prose. So we cannot dispense with *pi* (similes and metaphors) or with *hsing* (association). We may also use the technique of *fu* (direct statement) as in Tu Fu's³ *Northern Journey*, which may be said to "state in plain terms," but here too he used *pi* and *hsing*. "*Pi* means comparing one object to another," and "*hsing* means speaking first of something else to lead up to the main theme." Han Yu⁴ used prose techniques in poetry, and some people said he knew nothing at all about poetry, but that was going too far, as some of his poems like *The Rocks, Mount Hengshan* and *To Prefectural Official Chang on the Fifteenth Day of the Eighth Moon* are really not bad. We can see, therefore, it is not easy to write poetry. Most Sung poets did not understand that poetry must convey ideas by means of images, and they disregarded the tradition of Tang poetry, with the result that what they wrote was quite flat. These random remarks all refer to classical poetry. To write modern poetry, we must use the method of conveying ideas through images in reflecting class struggle and the struggle for production, and must definitely not go in for classicism. But for the last few decades, poetry in the vernacular has not been successful. There have been some good folk songs, however. It is very likely that the future trend will be to draw nourishment and adopt forms from the folk song and

陈毅同志：
 你原半改诗，我不能改。因我对
 五言律，原半改诗，也情有可原。
 你如大作，大气磅礴。
 只是学而不(用)感觉律诗请体会。
 因律诗安平仄，不讲究，即律诗。
 我原你于此道，同我样，还入门。我原
 写七律，原一是我自己满意。
 如同你写自由诗一样，我对律诗
 稍懂一点。剑侠善七律，善在五律。
 河安子律诗，可向他们请教。

西行
 策马西行急，
 乘风御太空。
 不因鹏翼展，
 那得鸟途通。
 海西塞千期程，
 山截东川葱。
 风雷驱大地，
 是处尽亲朋。
 只给你改一首，不满意，其余不改。

First part of the letter in Chairman Mao's own handwriting.

develop a new type of poetry which will appeal to the general reading public. Incidentally, Li Po⁵ wrote very few *lu shih*, and Li Ho,⁶ apart from a few five-character *lu shih*, never wrote any in seven-character lines. Li Ho is well worth reading. I don't know if you are interested.

With best wishes,

Mao Tsetung

July 21, 1965

Translator's Notes

1) *Lu shih* is a traditional form of classical Chinese poetry. With a strict tonal pattern and rhyme scheme, it has eight lines with five or

seven characters in each. It was very popular during the Tang Dynasty (618-907).

- 2) *Tzu* is a verse form which originated in the Tang Dynasty. It is sung to certain tunes each of which prescribes a fixed number of lines of a standardized varying length. Of the 39 published poems of Chairman Mao's, 25 are *tzu*.
- 3) *Tu Fu* (712—770) was a great poet in ancient China. Characterized by realism, his poems reflect the age in which he lived.
- 4) *Han Yu* (768—824), a noted prose writer and poet of the Tang Dynasty.
- 5) *Li Po* (701—762) was another great poet in ancient China. Highly critical in content, his poems are brimful of patriotism and romanticism.
- 6) *Li Ho* (790—816) was a poet who lived in the middle period of the Tang Dynasty.