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Cultural Sensibilities to Violence in Chinese Premodern War Poetry

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Abstract

This study presents an overview and analysis of the characteristics of pre-modern Chinese cultural sensibilities to war violence as portrayed in ancient poetry. Full poems and excerpts of poems are presented as examples of the themes of empathy and lament, as well as the ways time, location and voice are descriptively used to convey the tragedy of violent conflict on individuals, families and society. The poems were written by a variety of people, both men and women, from soldiers, to generals and regional magistrates to common witnesses. The paper illustrates and offers commentary on a sociological poetic focus of long continuity spanning centuries of literary endeavor and preservation.

Keywords

Chinese Poetry, War Poetry, Pre-Modern, Ancient, War, Violence

1. A Word about the Translations

The poems here were selected by the author to illustrate the points of discussion, namely the poetic tradition of voicing strong empathy for those experiencing war violence, as well as characteristics demonstrating a wide range of voice, class, military rank, and specific locations over a temporospatial canvas of two millenniums. They are not meant to represent the best works of a poet or period. Translation of any literary work of any culture or period is fraught with decisions of faithfulness to the original and conveying the meaning and intent of the work in a contemporary sensibility that fits the ear and culture of the reader. There are disadvantages, if not impossibilities, in forced adherence to Chinese poetic structures and literal word translations. Bringing Chinese characters into an English poetic form presents difficulty related to rhyme scheme, tonal patterns, line length and character number—forms that are important to the elements of distinct styles of Chinese

poetry. For those unfamiliar with written Chinese, one character does not always translate to one word, so the five- or seven-character line cannot easily become a five- or seven-word line. Nor is there always an equivalent rhyming English meaning. Also, rhyme schemes in Chinese poetry are of no resemblance to rhyme in English poetry, so to force rhyme line endings would not in any way authenticate the poems. For these reasons Chinese poetic forms are not strictly followed in the translations and so beat and rhyme are generally lost, thus becoming free verse.

2. Introduction

The history of China can seem a history of unending conflict between regions, between clans, between the settled and the nomadic. There are official chronicles and histories describing these conflicts, but more empathetic voices, ones of emotion and compassion, perhaps relate to the stories more literally. Depictions of suffering caused by war and social strife span the most ancient literary annals of China through the end of dynasty cycles and into contemporary China today. Throughout this history the voices of Chinese poets were male and female, soldiers, civil servants and generals, literary lights and common people, often caught up in chaos of conflict. Although some are anonymous, most names are well known among Chinese with many poems quoted to this day.

Within the war poetry genre, a dominant vein in pre-modern Chinese poems is that of lament. As throughout the world, the horror of war turned soldiers into poets, then and today. Perhaps there is the need to express one's humanity when an unwilling participant in war, or sorrow for one's own loss of innocence, of an acceptance of death and brutality. Primarily there is a need to tell of the horrors to those who did not witness them that compels the voice and imagery still impactful, and still relevant, today. In our time of volatile international relations, it is of value to understand the other as not so other after all, but people with similar hopes and anxieties for their future. The aim of this study is to illustrate and enhance mindfulness of this human affinity across culture and time through a selection of writings from periods of conflict over the long arc of Chinese history.

The literature dates from songs found in the earliest poetry collection, the *Book of Odes* (*Shijing*) compiled in the 11th-7th centuries BCE. The *Book of Odes* states the Confucian belief, as also expressed in the *Analects*, that poetry is to learn of life, to communicate and express our discontents, to regulate our family and public relationships, and to learn of nature. Though to ascribe this strictly to every poem may be overdone, there is a great humaneness to be found in them. The ancient thoughts we read evoke a sense of purpose, of social consequence, as if the poems are repositories of knowledge and the poets' role models who offer lessons for us to absorb. This aspect, as revealed in poetic response to social and political conflict, is the underlying theme of this study as other characteristics are also discussed.

Chinese war poetry can be categorized and analyzed in many ways, such as centering on military events or other causes within certain Chinese historical periods

which inspired poets. For example, Wang (2012) in the study entitled *Songs That Touch Our Soul—A Comparative Study of Folk Songs in Two Chinese Classics: Shijing and Han Yuefu* shows that folksongs in two collections of early poems in the *Book of Odes* and *Han Yuefu* (*Yuefu* is a poetic genre) capture the social chaos and suffering caused by ancient wars of that time. Hu (2010) in his book *Weapons and Horses of the Poetic World: The Study of War Poems Written in Han, Wei, Jin, and Southern and Northern Dynasties* elaborates on the effects of war on society, individuals, the land and the poets themselves in different Chinese dynasties. In the article "Chinese War Poetry of the Tang Dynasty: A Discursive Study", Tangyuenyong (2015) interprets three discursive practices related to war including nationalism, social class and gender. The author identifies the close connection between language and ideology concluding that the imperial examination system of the Tang Dynasty gelled social structure in ways natural to the Chinese people. This formalization of social mobility through the exams, along with the importance of frontier poetry, helped to shape a proud Chinese political identity. This practice is still seen today in military literature including military poets, from the late Li Ying (1926-2019) whose poetry reflects his military career, to Zhou Tao (1946-) whose poetry depicts the northwest frontier where he was stationed, to the female poet Xin Ru (1965-) whose more recent poem "Stele of Rocket Power" captures the formation and establishment of the Chinese People's Liberation Army Space Force.

Chinese war poetry research sometimes examines specific geographic areas as shown by Hu & Wang (1998) in their article "A Comprehensive Discussion of Frontier Poems about Dunhuan". The study analyzes wars that occurred in the Dunhuan desert region where thousands of caves were carved out and adorned for merchants travelling the Silk Road and for worshipers who kept their religious practices while far from home. It is also the area where numerous wars were fought among various groups in guarding their territory and treasure from regional enemies.

Chinese war poetry can also be approached through the study of certain influential poets, especially the frontier poets who lived in different eras of the Tang Dynasty (618-907). Beginning from the founding father of frontier poetry, Luo Binwang (626-687?), these frontier poets adeptly captured the rise and decline of the Tang through literary documentation. According to Lei (2019), Luo Binwang of the early Tang is the first who traveled and wrote about the road west of Mountain Long in modern day Shanxi province, which established the foundation of Tang frontier poetry from which a group of poets emerged. Among them, Cen Shen (715?-770) is perhaps the most studied due to his large volume of frontier poetry and his own military service experience there.

From the *Book of Odes* through the large collections officially compiled within each dynasty, such as the well-known *Complete Tang Poems* of the Tang Dynasty (618-907), Chinese poetry and song were considered important literature from very early and were preserved by officialdom as decisively as were official histori-

cal chronicles. A review of this poetry reveals a few general characteristics. Rather than metaphorical representations of war it has a strong temporospatial nature in which many poems are explicit of historically specific times and locations; present overt disclosure of people by titles, rank and sometimes name; and have a range of authorship from ranks within the military and civil service (sometimes at their risk), to scholars and others, and by men and women. Another aspect is that, unlike much of Western war poetry, the poets' perspectives are generally less of their individual interiors and more as witnesses to broken families, destroyed villages, orphaned children, family members and lovers lost, that is, of an external view of the horrors and damage done to others—the catalyst for poems of empathy and lament.

Chinese war poets were primarily men who either directly participated in wars (e.g. the Tang frontier poets) or witnessed the impact of war (e.g. Shi Runzhang of the Qing Dynasty), however there are women's voices as well. The poet Cai Wenji (177?-250?) of the Han Dynasty captured the brutality of war she personally experienced in "The Eighteen Beats Played in the Tone of Hu Flute"[1], which stands apart in its own voice and imagery of war from a female perspective. It is through that subdued voice and the image of a victimized woman, who persevered in a difficult life in an alien land, that makes the poem unforgettable to this day.

Many poems highlight time and location, such as those that depict battles between the agriculturally centered ancient Han Chinese and their nomadic neighbors found in all four directions including the peoples of Yi, Rong, Man, Di, Hu, Fan, Qiang, Xianbei and Xiongnu in the ancient era. These reveal war and peace through regionally entwined co-existence throughout a long history. Other classical war poems depict location overtly in titles. For example, the decisive battle between Chu and Han forces that took place in Gaixia was captured in the famous poem "The Song of Gaixia" by Xiang Yü (232 BCE-202 BCE) the commander-in-chief of the Chu force. Titles such as "The Battle Fought in the South Part of Town", "Evening Rest at Pulei Ferry Port", "Song of Liangzhou", "Departure for Outside Fortress", "Returning from the North Part of Ji", "A December Night in Guizhou, Listening to Flute at the Surrenders' Wall"[2], "Passing by Fort Juyong", and "Climb up to Hongbo Platform in Handan to Observe the Troops Sent Out with Wine" all clearly displayed the location of specific military activities. Besides the frequently encountered motif of Liangzhou, located in modern day Gansu Province and "Outside Fortress" which could be anywhere outside the Great Wall, locations such as Gaixia in modern day Lingbi County of central Anhui Province, Guizhou in modern day Guilin of Guangxi Zhuang Autonomous Region in the south, Handan of modern day Hebei Province in the north and Pulei Ferry Port located in the modern day Xinjiang Autonomous Region in the northwest unmistakably show that war was conducted throughout ancient China.

[1]All translations of titles and poetry in this paper are by the author.

[2]There are others, but this "Surrenders' Wall" was constructed in the Han Dynasty for taking surrendered nobility of the Xiongnu.

The characteristic of giving names, ages and status of those spoken of in poetry is clear in titles as "March with the Troops since Age Fifteen", "A Poem Presented to a Soldier Guarding the Boarder", "A Poem Presented to a General Guarding the Boarder", "A Sorrowful Chanting over Spring by a Boarder Guard", "Encountering a Sick Soldier", "Sending off Envoy Yan Zhenqing to Helong in the Music of Hu Flute", "Seeing Off Gentleman Tang to Guanshan Region to Join Military", "A Veteran". The information given indicates the poets' knowledge of military service (as many of them were among the ranks) and its hardships, lending expressive power to detailed observations and graphic depictions.

Such references to known places and individuals strengthen the imagery of hardship, lending it currency to this day, and are heard in eternalized expressions commonly used in the Chinese language now. Just as one might hear in English a quote or reference to Shakespeare or Robert Frost (such as "a road not taken" at a missed opportunity) so echoes from China's past are also heard living through poetry in the language today.

3. A Soldier's Life

For today's youth, age fifteen is an age filled with life's dreams. In China's past the age of fifteen signaled the time for boys to shoulder military duty, a repeated motif in Chinese war poems. The famous Tang frontier poet Wang Changling (698-757) in his poem "On Behalf of My Host in Fufeng" captured the hardship of his host who served in the military all his life. He told the poet that "at age fifteen I was stationed on the boarder/launching attacks to Loulan many times; I couldn't remove my armor for years/often I had nothing to eat…I left with three hundred thousand recruits/but returned myself alone to Chang'an; see my scars from knives and arrows/if you don't believe the hardship of battlefields".

The widely renowned Tang Dynasty poet Du Fu (712-770), in his "Song of the Conscripted", also depicted the soldier's life stating "at age fifteen some may be drafted to guard the Hexi corridor in the north/at age forty they return to plough the frontier military-agricultural colonies; the village chief had to wrap their heads with headscarves before they left/after returning from the corridor with hair turning white they still must stay to guard the frontier". However, it is from the third century *Yuefu* poem "March with the Troops Since Age Fifteen" that we come to understand the genuine meaning of dedication and sacrifice of a lifelong soldier:

Joined the troops at fifteen but couldn't return home until eighty.
Travelling home I met someone from my village,
I asked who is still at my house?
Pointing to the distance he said the house is buried in thick evergreens.
Rabbits came out of their holes and roosters flew from the beams.
Wild grain grew in the yard and wild vegetables on the well.
I thrash some grain to cook and pick some vegetables for a stew.
Yet I know not who to feed when it is done.
Stepping from the door I look eastward, tears fall and soak my clothes.

The sad account is of an aging serviceman remembering his youth upon returning without greeting to a deserted house and a meal gleaned from encroaching nature. There is no welcoming banquet for this veteran, not even a soul to share his modest meal with as his tears fall. He pains from being unfilial as the long absence prevented him from caring for his now deceased parents, a deeply regrettable fate for an old Chinese man, and worse, that he was unable to continue his family line.

Thoughts of family are again present in Du Fu's "Hope for Spring" in the line "the battle has been endless for three months, which makes a letter from home worth thousands of gold pieces". And, with "it is from tonight when the dew becomes white, it is in my hometown where the moon shines best" in his "Thinking About My Younger Brother Under the Moonlit Night", that depicts the deep concern of the older brother for the younger and envisions their closeness now separated by war. The fighting Du Fu refers to be The Rebellion of An Lushan and Shi Siming that lasting for eight years not only destroyed innumerable common families like the poet's but also sent the once powerful Tang Dynasty to its decline.

Such evocative descriptions from soldiers can be traced back to the earliest poetry in the *Book of Odes*, as exemplified by East Mountain. Through the moment of changing into civilian clothes from his military uniform, viewing the deserted house, seeing the split gourd that he and his bride were presented at marriage now discarded among the firewood, and through wondering what his bride would look like after years of waiting, the poem East Mountain captures the essence of inner turmoil of an old solider hoping for family reunion, or at least a welcome by a surviving wife. We hear thoughts of a younger man with the words "the moment when I took your hand in mine, I knew I would grow old together with you" in "Hitting the Battle Drum" from the *Book of Odes*, revealing the devotion and sadness of a departing soldier.

We feel the courage and sacrifice in their lives in many lines such as "while wind roaring over the chilly cold Yi River/the warrior leaves for his mission without plans to return" in "Song of Yi River" prior to Qin Dynasty (221 BCE-207 BCE); and "a general who climbed out of death pits hundreds of times/a warrior didn't return home until ten years passed" in "Ballad of MuLan" of Southern and Northern Dynasties (420-589); and "please don't laugh at me should I lay drunk on the battle ground/how many soldiers have ever returned from wars since ancient times?" in "Song of Liangzhou" by Tang frontier poet Wang Han (687?-726?); and "please do not talk about promotion of ranks/a general emerges from hundreds and thousands of bones" in "Two Poems Written in the Year of Ji Hai" by Tang poet Cao Song (828?-903); and "who can never die in this life/all is worth it should I leave my loyal heart behind in history books" in "Crossing Lingding Ocean" by Song Dynasty poet Wen Tianxiang (1236-1283).

The experience of lifelong soldiering is also echoed by Pan Yuankai (dates unknown) of the early Ming Dynasty in his "Nine Songs of Helan". The poet originally from the south had served for more than thirty years in the north of China

when he wrote this poem. Through his detailed description of the harsh environment, the longing for returning to his hometown, the constant battles with harassing nomads, the torn overcoat that couldn't stanch the cold winter wind[3], the worries about his aged parents that he felt were only metaphorically relayed by geese flying southward as his official duty would not release him, the poet shared the internal struggle between service to his country and an ordinary son who was eager to serve his parents yet could not. Related to physical hardships there is also the mental distress of service men as captured by Tang Dynasty poet Dai Shulun (732-789) in his short poem "Frontier Grass". Such tenderness often goes unnoticed or is deeply buried in the strength expected of soldiers:

Frontier grass, oh, frontier grass,
The soldiers become old when the frontier grasses are dried.
The south side, the north, both mountain sides are clear after snow,
Over hundreds and thousands of miles, the moon shines its bright light.
The bright moon, oh, the bright moon,
The sound of Hu flute makes the soldiers' sorrow unbearable.

Physical and psychological hardships of service frequently brought sad endings, as the frontier poet Lu Lun (737?-798?) captured in his poem "Meeting A Sick Soldier":

I'm sick if I walk too much but have nothing to eat if I stay,
Still haven't reached my hometown after traveling from thousands of miles.
Must lay down by the old city wall with my uncut hair and beard,
For I can no longer bear more autumn chill penetrating old battle wounds.

Lifelong service far from family, battle wounds and lean provisions were the backdrop as Han soldiers lived in proximity to and fought against the 'others' in alien lands seemingly to guard their distant homes. Many classical war poems captured the ancient Han Chinese battles with their nomadic neighbors from north to south and from east to west. The frontier poet Gao Shi (700-765) in his "Song of Yingzhou" wrote "one won't get drunk even on a thousand cups of locally brewed wine/the boys of Hu people can ride horses at age ten". Apparently, the skill of local youth impressed him, but the wine did not. The same poet in a different poem "Song of Jimen" questioned "if there's no end to fight with Qiang and Hu people/how many soldiers could return after war?". The famous frontier poet Cen Shen in his "Sending off Envoy Yan Zhenqing to Helong in the Music of Hu Flute"[4] described the Hu people more poetically with the opening line: "have you not heard the saddest tone from the Hu flute/played by Hu people who have purple beards and green eyes; one song after another/the sadness can kill the warriors who are guarding at Fort Loulan".

The forever wars between Han Chinese and their nomadic neighbors are a theme repeated as much as the homesickness of Han soldiers. Another Tang poet

[3]According to Qiu (2019), due to Ming court corruption, it was common for Ming soldiers to endure hardship due to the shortage of supplies and necessities, a shortcoming emphasized by poets.

[4]The envoy Yan Zhenqing (709-785), a renowned Tang politician and general, is remembered as one of the most famous calligraphers in Chinese history known for the "Yan style" named after him.

Qu Tongxian (dates unknown) in his "Song of Yan" bemoaned: "can't you see the grass has already dried in Yuyang yet it's still August/the soldiers face each other thinking about returning to their hometowns…Zhaojun has been married off far away to keep peace years ago/yet Rong and Di people are greedy without will to resume the peace…Han soldiers guard the frontline under the autumn moon/for Hu people will cross the icy river at night; thousands of miles on both east and west river banks/nowhere looks like our hometown".

The poem refers to the arranged marriage between Han princess Wang Zhaojun and the Xiongnu chieftain that was a bid to end wars between the Han court and its nomadic neighbor, and also to the reality of continually broken treaties. No wonder the late Tang poet Wei Zhuang (836-910) expressed his deep concern and longing for peace through the lengthy poem title "Took A Break from My Travel at Yongxi, I Saw A Boy Play A Game with Bamboo Guns and Paper Flags Building Military Formations, My Host Said: Three Generations of This Boy Died in War and He Wants Revenge, Which Unsettles My Feelings". The bamboo guns and the paper flags remind the poet of war that he himself survived, which he graphically captured in his famous long poem "Laments of A Qin Woman". While the poet wondered if peace would ever come, he was not consoled by the boy thinking of revenge when he wrote:

I know three generations of your family died in war,
Now I see you learn how to play at battle.
It makes me want to cry when I hear what you say,
And wonder when peace will come to stay.

4. Impact on Women, Families and Society

The toll taken on women and children swept up in hostilities was also well documented throughout ancient poetry. Their roles, though proscribed paternalistically by Confucian mores, were not marginalized but revealed through their portrayed suffering. The famous Tang Dynasty female poet Xue Tao (768?-832), a well-known entertaining courtesan, wrote of her experience of being sent to the frontier as a punishment for a minor mistake. With first-hand experience, she contrasted the life of frontier soldiers and that of court officials with sincere care in one of "Two Poems Presented to Master Wei during My Exile". The poet's father was an official who had been exiled to rural Sichuan from the then capital of Chang'an (modern day Xi'an) when she was young. When she was fourteen years old, her father died of disease contracted during an official trip to Nanzhao, then an ancient country in modern day Yunnan province neighboring Sichuan. Living with her widowed mother with no financial means, at age sixteen Xue Tao was recruited into the regional entertainment corps to serve as a *yueji* (performing courtesans with musical or literary talent) and thereafter used these talents to support herself. Although Master Wei, the regional commander to whom she presented the poems, appreciated her, her status meant an easier association with frontier soldiers who, like her, had no control of their destiny. The license, and

risk, the poet takes is Confucian in her understanding of her social position as is her mode of social regulation through expressing empathy with the suffering of lower ranks, and thus a subtle challenge to those higher. Poetry may instruct how to serve your lord publicly, as well as how to properly reveal your complaints. Although without power to change the situation, she was unafraid of using literary license to express her feelings. With her deep compassion she bravely wrote, ostensibly to the commander:

I've heard of the hardships of frontier service,
Yet, I didn't understand until now that I see.
I wish to present my songs that entertain the officials at banquets
To all the soldiers guarding the frontier.

The struggle of non-combatants is also revealed through the imagery of suffering children, from babies born to deceased fathers to abandoned children or children traumatized by separation from parents in war. We feel the consequences just as we would today when reading "my husband has died but our baby is still inside me/my life now is like a burning candle in daylight though my body still exists" in "Laments of A Soldier's Wife" by Tang poet Zhang Ji (766?-830?). The early Tang poet Chen Ziang (661-702) in the third piece of his *Thirty-Eight Lamenting Poems* wrote "Three hundred thousand Han soldiers were once sent to the border to fight with Xiongnu; People see the death on the battle fields, but who thinks of the orphans left behind". Such lines are the origin of commonly used expressions in the Chinese lexicon today such as "orphaned child and widowed mother" and occasionally "orphans of Yulin camp". The online *Dictionary of Chinese Words* shows that the *Record of Han Dynasty* recorded then: "Emperor Wu established the Yulin cavalry that recruited the sons and grandsons of the dead soldiers. They were taught how to use the five weapons and were named as "orphans of Yulin cavalry". Since that time the term Yulin cavalry primarily referred to the emperor's royal troops.

The early Tang poet Wang Wei (693?-761) vividly captured a Yulin soldier's family life in his poem "The Wife of Yulin Soldier", describing "the wife sitting in the hall waiting for her husband is in torment while the young children play in front of the hallway steps". After leaving so many times to find her husband, she saw "all the returning pass by, yet her husband still hasn't returned. Looking at each other all become quiet and the mother with her children begin dropping tears together". We feel the woman's anxiety turn to fear and remorse for her family. Not only is the pain of loss deeply personal, but it also means loss of the filial duties he would have shown to his line, nor will her own children have a father's grave to attend. Her role will become that of both, but cannot compensate the loss.

The situation of a sole surviving mother could be even worse. The poet Wang Can (177-217) in one of his "Three Poems Dedicated to Many Sorrows" documented what he witnessed escaping war writing "a starving woman by the roadside placing her child among the grasses; heard her child's cry yet doesn't turn back as she wipes her tears; How can I take him with me since I don't know where

I go to die? I fly on my horse for I can't bear what I hear". The despondent mother's hope for her child's survival without her is horrifying through her tears, her resistance to the crying of the child, and her deep despair. Such scenes are repeated in poems of other periods, such as depicted by the Tang poet Wei Zhuang (836-?). His long poem "Laments of A Qin Woman" reiterates the experience of a woman escaping war saying "people call out loud trying to hold the weak ones and drag the young ones along with them, doing whatever they can/climbing up to the roof or over the wall…infants and baby girls are abandoned alive".

In "Travel to Pengya", Du Fu recalled his own journey escaping with his family telling us "my innocent little girl bites me because she is so hungry/but we dare not let her cry for fear of attracting wolves and tigers in the mountains; Trying to press her mouth against my chest/I make her angrier and cry louder; my young boys try to show their understanding of the hardship/diligently collecting sour plums for food without knowing they are inedible". It is through the vulnerable young and old that the poet instills the bitterness of war, making it palpable for readers then and now.

Du Fu again depicts the brutality of war for common families in "The Official from Shihao Village"[5]. The poem recounts the pressure on a family of whose three conscripted sons one has been killed and two remain in the battlefield leaving the elderly parents, a wife and an infant behind. He records the words of the elderly woman when an official again comes to the home looking for men… "nobody in the house but an infant boy/the mother stayed because of him, but she can't leave the house in her ragged dress/although I'm old and weak I'll go with you as I can still respond to the urgent call of the Heyang battle by preparing breakfast for our soldiers". We cannot but wonder if those in power were aware of the decimation of common people, and that was Du Fu's point. Such lines reveal more than empathy, they subtly, and carefully, challenge. We find here again the Confucian allowance for poetry to express discontent.

5. Of Those Who Died

Confucian culture views death and burial, or lack of it, far from home as a fate worse than the death itself as the spirit cannot find rest, nor can the man perform his filial duty as he ages—a fundamental responsibility. Between the Tang Dynasty (618-907) and Qing Dynasty (1636-1912), over a thousand-year period, the distant dead continued to surface in poetry. Tang poet Li Xin (690-751) in his "Ancient Song of Marching with the Army" carefully criticized the then ruler by contrasting the multitude of bones to luxury as he saw "every year white bones of war are buried in the wildness/all one can see are the grapes pouring into the royal households". To protect himself from his criticism of the eminent ruler Tang

[5]Among Du Fu's many war poems, the six famous poems collectively called Sanli Sanbie (i.e. Three Officials and Three Farewells) in which he captured what he witnessed during the war are perhaps the most widely revered. The Three Officials include The Official from Xin'an, The Official from Shihao Village and The Official from Tongguan. Three Farewells include Farewell to My Newly Wedded Bride, Farewell to My Destroyed Home and Farewell to My Old Age.

Xuanzong (685-762), the poet altered the original title by adding the character for ancient, to creatively suggest that his criticism was aimed at the rulers long past. The famous Tang frontier poet Chang Jian also told us in one of his "Four Songs Inside a Fort" that "all these bones were once the soldiers guarding the Great Wall/now the dusts from the old battlegrounds rise at dusk". Zhang Ji (766?-830?) in his "Resentment of a Soldier's Wife" recorded "nobody collects the white bones that stretch out thousands of miles/every family calls the spirit to return to be buried under the city wall".

Bleached bones continue surfacing in poems of later dynasties as well. The Song poet Zhang Shunmin (dates unknown) in his "Two Poems Written on the Way of Return from the West" told us "nine of ten never returned from his military service/bones piled up like sand dunes looking like snow". The Yuan poet Sa Duci (1272-1355?) in his "Passing by Fort Juyong" told us what an eighty-year-old local farmer discovered after ploughing his field "discarded bones tangled with the grass roots/which make the mountain ghosts cry in chilly rains and shadowed mountains…The indigo blue on the irons buried in the field/looks like the general's blood stains remain".

6. Conclusion

From this small selection of poems, we discern that a strong humane sensibility pervades over two thousand years of Chinese literary descriptions of war and immeasurable social suffering. There is a core principle revealed—that war is never desirable nor always glorious, and when it is thrust upon the common people it is catastrophic to all sides involved. There is also ancient Chinese poetry that depicts the exploits of great generals and battles of glory, but it is the poetry revealing empathy that resonates most in the Chinese literary canon, and it is these revered poets whose volumes are still regularly published after centuries.

Chinese poetry chronologically reaches back in the consciousness of war since the 11th century BCE depicting similar experiences via the voices of widowed mothers and orphaned children, fathers and neighbors, farmers and officials, as well as the men swept up in the fighting themselves, many, or most, who never returned to their homes. Both male and female poets captured these experiences from the perspectives of direct victims, participants or witnesses to war. They enriched poetic depictions with personalized voices and graphic imagery of the recurrent themes of suffering, victimization and sacrifice much more so than the official histories could. The depiction of battles from south to north, from east to west, between ancient Han Chinese and their nomadic neighbors to contemporary times breaks and blends spatiotemporal boundaries through China's long history with the same images of horror and lament. It is gloomily true that this human world may always provide fodder for war poetry. What differs between ancient and contemporary wars may only be found in better care for the orphaned, widowed, and the damaged veterans. Nonetheless, needless suffering continues, as should the search for answers and peaceful means of confronting conflict.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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