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# PIETAS

A Journal of Tradition, Place, and Things Divine

## The Declaration of Independence at 250

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## Feature Articles



## Book Reviews

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## Feature Articles



## Book Reviews

# Armies on the March: two poems
# (while following the imperial army at Phoenix Flight[1])

Cen Shen

## 1

With sorrow I reflect upon my life,
Though forty years of age is yet not old.
The moment chaos comes with morning light
The setting sun cannot bring safety back.
Now foreign armies occupy Chang An[2],
Wild grasses grow in empty palaces,
Felled trees ‘round royal tombs aggrieve my heart[3].
The road from Luo Yang to Chang An is gone[4].

My sovereign now leads armies on the march[5],
Sprawled out before him, army men and mounts.
Invading foreign beasts still roam the land[6],
The generals beg to drive them out again.

Just yesterday came news of Xian yang’s fall[7];
The killing swept the city clean of life,
New mountains made of corpses piled high,
The bloodshed swells the rivers ‘round Chang An.

The conflict rages through the countrysides,
The cities filled with greedy, vicious beasts.
The villages are empty, no one left,
They leave deserted groves of fruiting trees.

Confucian scholars make their long-term plans,
Yet find no place to bring such dreams to life[8].
Alone, I grieve the plight of modern men.
I raise my head and weep unto the sky.

## 2

If early I'd known troubled times await,
In youth I would have set aside my books.
If only I had learned to bend a bow,
I'd shoot the wild invaders in the east!

By chance I joined the royal magistrates,
Not worthy to tread crimson palace steps!
Unable to assist my king in need,
In vain these years have I been called a man!

Hand on my sword, I grieve the way of things,
Through tears lament my unused stratagems.
For battle glory now's too late to hope,
I mourn at whiskers white seen in the mirror.
Thus far I've led a righteous, loyal life,
I dare not shrink away from danger now!

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[1] Located in Shaanxi province in northwestern China, near Xi An, it's often written as Feng xiang, but translates to "phoenix flight."

[2] Chang An, today's Xi An, was the capital city at the time of the revolt.

[3] The line refers to five tombs of former emperors that are all located near Chang An. A line from a poem by Li Bai also discusses this, mentioning sadness for the once-beautiful pine and cedar trees surrounding the tombs.

[4] Luo Yang is another major city in Chinese history, itself having been a capital city at varying points in history, and thus was sometimes referred to as the "eastern capital."

[5] Refers to Li Heng (titled Tang Su Zong), who is described in The Comprehensive Mirror (資治通鑒) as having seen the revolt coming while he was crown prince, but ultimately unable to stop it. After tactical failures on the part of his father Li Longji (titled Tang Xuan Zong), a year into the revolt, Li Heng took the throne. He reigned from 756-762 A.D.

[6] The An Shi Revolt was led primarily by the general An Lushan, who was what was then referred to as a "胡人" or foreigner, from areas to the north and west of traditionally "Han" areas.

[7] The fall of Xian Yang here refers to a failed attempt to retake the capital of Chang An that is said to have cost the lives of more than forty thousand soldiers.

[8] At this time, the poet, Cen Shen, had a low-ranking position in the royal court where he could make suggestions and offer strategic advice, but these lines show that his suggestions were not accepted, leaving him once again only able to mourn in private.

Original Poem

# 行軍詩（時扈從在鳳翔）

岑參

1

吾竊悲此生，四十幸未老。

一朝逢世亂，終日不自保。

胡兵奪長安，宮殿生野草。

傷心五陵樹，不見二京道。

我皇在行軍，兵馬日浩浩。

胡雛尚未滅，諸將懇征討。

昨聞咸陽敗，殺戮淨如掃。

積屍若丘山，流血漲澧鎬。

干戈礙鄉國，豺虎滿城堡。

村落皆無人，蕭條空桑棗。

儒生有長策，無處豁懷抱。

塊然傷時人，舉首哭蒼昊。

2

早知逢世亂，少小謾讀書。

悔不學彎弓，向東射狂胡。

偶從諫官列，謬向丹墀趨。

未能匡吾君，虛作一丈夫。

撫劍傷世路，哀歌泣良圖。

功業今已遲，覽鏡悲白鬚。

平生抱忠義，不敢私微軀。

# "Armies on the March": Introduction and Commentary

Miriam J. Dawson

## THE POET, CEN SHEN

The two poems of Armies on the March were composed by the Tang dynasty poet Cen Shen (岑參) sometimes also referred to in Chinese sources by his title, Cen Jiazhou (岑嘉州)[1]. Cen Shen's grandfather and uncle both reached high office in the Tang court, but before his birth, his family fell from grace and was banished from the capital.[2] Cen Shen successfully passed the imperial examination and held various lower level political offices, as was the ambition of learned men of the era, but he was not a significant political figure.[3]

Cen Shen is best known for his "frontier poems" about life on the frontier and the realities of war.[4] Cen Shen himself travelled out to the western frontier to serve as an official at military outposts twice, first from the winter of 749 A.D. to the spring of 751 A.D., and the second time from the summer of 754 A.D. to the spring 757 A.D.[5] These two poems were written in the summer of 757 A.D.[6], after Cen Shen was granted permission to leave his post on the western border to join the efforts to subdue the ongoing rebellion in the east. Thanks to the recommendation of another famous Tang dynasty poet and official, Du Fu, Cen Shen was granted a mid-level position in the court.[7]

## HISTORICAL BACKGROUND: THE TURNING POINT OF THE TANG DYNASTY

The An Shi Rebellion from 755 A.D. to 763 A.D. was a massive revolt that ended the glory days of the Tang dynasty empire. Though the Tang dynasty continued to limp on until 907,

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[1] In some scholarship that uses the Wade-Giles romanization system (such as Stephen Owen's *The Great Age of Chinese Poetry: the High Tang*), Cen Shen may also be referred to with an alternate spelling: Ts'en Shen. Both refer to the same characters of 岑參 and are pronounced the same, as the "c" in pinyin is used to represent a "ts" sound like that of the original Russian pronunciation of "tsar". As for the vowel sounds, both "Cen" and "Shen" should rhyme with "Ken".

[2] 岑參, 陳鐵民, 侯忠義《岑参集校注》 五卷 / (唐)岑参著 ; 陳鐵民,侯忠義校注 ; 陳鐵民修訂. 第1版. 上海: 上海古籍, 2004.

[3] 劉學銚〈從岑參的邊塞詩看唐代的邊疆觀〉. 中國邊政 93 (2013): 1-32.

[4] 陳濟安〈由高適, 岑參作品探析盛唐邊塞詩中天朝意識與華夷觀念〉 東吳中文線上學術論文 8 (2019): 1-25.

[5] 岑參, 陳鐵民, 侯忠義《岑参集校注》 2004.

[6] 聞一多〈岑嘉州繫年考證〉(《清華學報》第8卷第2期, 1933年6月)。

[7] 岑參, 陳鐵民, 侯忠義《岑参集校注》 2004.

the power and influence of the court was greatly reduced after the rebellion. The Li family that founded the Tang dynasty was at least partially a mix of Han and other northern ethnic minorities such as the Xianbei. Thus, though often taken to be the ideal representative of the "central florescence" (中華) of typically Han Chinese culture, the Tang dynasty at its height was an expansive multi-ethnic empire.[8] It readily subsumed and worked with the non-Han tribes at its northern and western borders. Towards the end of the reign of Li Longji (titled Tang Xuan Zong), the original military system that incorporated more ethnic Han troops was falling apart, and increasingly the court relied on foreigners and the troops they recruited to guard the borders of the Empire.[9] The An Shi Rebellion was led by one such famous example, An Lushan, a foreign general that rose to prominence in the Tang court and found favor in the eyes of Tang Xuan Zong even as he plotted his rebellion.

The An Shi Rebellion was a great tragedy. It was eight years of death and destruction wrought upon the central plains of China. The chaos destroyed the lives of the people and shattered the peace and prosperity that the centralized imperial court of the Tang Dynasty Empire had created. The achievements of the court, whether political, literary, military, or economic, were all stopped in their tracks. The people who survived witnessed a palpable shift from an era of hope, cultural confidence, and great flourishing, into one of decline, which successive emperors managed with varying degrees of success. After the rebellion, for most of remainder of the Tang Dynasty, the central court's power was largely limited to the areas immediately surrounding the two capitals of Chang An and Luo Yang and some of the relatively undeveloped south, while warlords obedient only in name ruled the rest of the territory, paying taxes (or not) as they saw fit.[10] The sharp contrast between the carnage described in the poem and the cultural and political flourishing just prior to the revolt is part of what makes Cen Shen's lament so poignant.

[8] 陳濟安〈由高適, 岑參作品探析盛唐邊塞詩中天朝意識與華夷觀念〉

[9] The lead-up to the rebellion is described in the Song Dynasty historical work The Comprehensive Mirror, primarily in scrolls 215–17.

[10] For more on this in English, see Mark Edward Lewis, *China's Cosmopolitan Empire: The Tang Dynasty* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2009).

## SIGNIFICANT THEMES

These two poems capture the poet's complicated reflection on a national tragedy. Cen Shen's shock and disbelief at what his country has become is implied in his descriptions of once-bustling cities being "swept clean of life," once-peaceful villages now desolate and abandoned, and the desecration of the sacred tombs of former emperors. Like any well-bred, educated man of his era, he saw the maintenance of the moral order as his life's purpose, which was to be achieved through participation in politics as a civil official. Yet it was this ambition and the choice of scholarship as his path to pursue it that rendered him unable to assist militarily when the political infighting and negligence of the court led to a bloody rebellion. Additionally, the rebellion would not have been seen only as a political challenge to the state apparatus, but as a threat to the cosmic moral order as upheld by the emperor. Cen Shen's grief was for the death and destruction he witnessed as much as for the loss of moral order that these macabre scenes represented.

Throughout the poem, Cen Shen portrays his life as situated in the larger context of historical realities, and his ambitions as part of a greater civilizational project. Though still deeply personal, the two poems are not expressions of an atomized individual drowning in emotion, but careful considerations informed by the poet's awareness of his specific social status. The frustration and helplessness he feels that his advice is being ignored are more than the dashed hopes of a naive ideologue. His inability to help build a better world is a failure to properly fulfill the social role for which he was raised and educated.

Cen Shen was likely acutely aware that his participation in politics often offered a front-row seat to the making of bad decisions, instead of opportunities for change. From his vantage point of having spent time around the military and in the court, he would have known that it was imperial mismanagement that had sowed the seeds for the rebellion and prolonged the conflict once it broke out. However, even as he laments the myriad of ways things had gone wrong, in Armies on the March, Cen Shen does not fall into despair but chooses to remain loyal and devoted to his nation and his emperor. He holds on to his ambitions and remains determined to work to bring moral order to his world in whatever ways he can. His description of carrying a sword demonstrates his recognition of the existential, violent nature of the conflict he faces and his determination to meet it with appropriate force. Hence Cen

Shen's expressions of grief, rage, and disappointment are also a motivational call to take action, ending in his own resolve to continue no matter the costs or results.

## POETRY, FORM, AND TRANSLATION

The poems themselves are written in Tang dynasty era Classical Chinese, composed of lines of two five-syllable couplets. It does not adhere to the famously complex rules about tones that characterize the "new-style" poetry that the Tang dynasty is usually remembered for. The two poems are distinguished through a switch in the rhyme scheme, a feature that I unfortunately could not replicate in this version. Aside from the distinction between the first and second poems, all other paragraph breaks and punctuation are my additions, purely for ease of reading.

Translation is a delicate art in which some aspects are emphasized, others are downplayed, and something is inevitably lost. This was no exception; not every line is a complete rendering of the original wording. This was necessary to stay true to the purpose of the poem as a work of art. As Susanne Langer so beautifully explains in *Problems of Art*, poetry is not a collection of factual statements or a report, but the artistic use of language to create an expressive image. The form of a poem shapes its composition, from the imagery to the sentiments within.[11] Any translation that focused on complete, technical linguistic accuracy (if that were possible) would lose the poetic qualities that informed the composition of the original, and thus also the meaning and significance of the original as a work of art, and not a discursive argument. Therefore, in this translation I focused on conveying as much of the core sentiments of the text as possible while keeping with its specifically poetic form and character. To this end, I chose blank verse: the even, ten syllables per line format reflects the original's regulated style, while iambic meter honors English poetic conventions.

So long as the poet's sentiments are intelligible and poetic, this translation will have achieved its end. As the classic work on literature *The Literary Mind and the Carving of Dragons* (文心雕龍) by Liu Xie emphasizes, the purpose of literature is to convey virtue in a way that is beautiful and moving.[12] Later on, poetry is further described as the art of giving

[11] Susanne K. Langer, *Problems of Art: Ten Philosophical Lectures* (Charles Scribner's Sons, 1957), Ch. 10: "Poetic Creation."

[12] 《文心雕龍：原道第一》"文之為德也，大矣...": "Literature that is virtuous is great..." and "辭之所以能鼓天下者，乃道之文也。": "The literature that can encourage [literally: drum up] the nations is the literature that contains

voice to one's ambitions and natural sentiments.[13] This rendition of "Armies on the March" aims to invite the modern English reader to reflect on Cen Shen's response to the tragedy of his time; and to relate to his complex mixture of grief, anger, helplessness, ambition, and final determination to dedicate himself to the cause of restoring moral and political order to his nation.

撫劍傷世路

"Hand on my sword, I grieve the way of things"

the way [of virtue]." Translations are the author's. See Liu Xie, "The Literary Mind and the Carving of Dragons 文心雕龍 原道第一 Volume 1: The Way Is the Source," *Chinese Notes*.

[13] 《文心雕龍：明詩第六》："是以"在心為志，發言為詩"...詩者，持也，持人情性...": Thus, 'the ambitions in your heart are spoken into poetry,' ...poetry is a medium for one' sentiments and character..." Translations are the author's. See Liu Xie, "The Literary Mind and the Carving of Dragons 文心雕龍 明詩第六 Volume 6: Clarifying Shi Poetry," *Chinese Notes*.

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