

# After 3,000 Years

## —A Scene from An Ancient Classic Comes to Life

By William A. Roulston

THE MOUNTAINS OF THE Shansi Plateau on the western horizon, the green fields of wheat spreading around mud-walled villages and bamboo groves, the variety of trees and the sprawling Ch'in River were possibly just as they might have been three thousand years ago. But what spirited me back to live again in that distant past was a pair of water-fowl nestled together on a sand-bar near the river's bank where I was standing. These water-fowl were, I was sure, the key to the interpretation of a familiar but misunderstood passage in the opening line of the Chinese classic, the *Shih Ching*.

The *Shih Ching*, often called in English *The Book of Odes* or *The Book of Songs*, contains some of the oldest remains of Chinese literature. Confucius made frequent quotations from it, and there is a later tradition that he selected the three hundred poems or songs in the collection from some three thousand then extant. The truth seems to be that the book which has come down to us is substantially the same as that known to him and by his time had attained the authority of a classic. The first poem has five stanzas, each containing four lines of four monosyllabic characters, which is the usual verse form:

關	關	雝	鳩
<i>Kuan</i>	<i>kuan</i>	<i>chü</i>	<i>chiu</i>
(a bird's call)		(the bird's name)	
在	河	之	洲
<i>Tsai</i>	<i>ho</i>	<i>chih</i>	<i>chou</i>
On	the river	's	small island
窈	窕	淑	女
<i>Yao</i>	<i>t'iao</i>	<i>shu</i>	<i>nü</i>
The serene, beautiful, virtuous			maiden
君	子	好	逑
<i>Chün</i>	<i>tzu</i>	<i>hao</i>	<i>ch'iu</i>
The princely man	rightly		seeks to wed.

James Legge, in his standard edition of the Chinese Classics (1876), gives us this English version:

*Hark! from the islet in the stream the voice  
Of the fish-hawks that o'er their nest rejoice!  
From them our thoughts to that young lady go,  
Modest and virtuous, loth herself to show.  
Where could be found to share our prince's state  
So fair, so virtuous, and so fit a mate?*

He also gives a more literal rendering:

*Kuan-kuan go the ospreys  
On the islet in the river.  
The modest, retiring, virtuous young lady:—  
For our prince a good mate she.*

The flaw in this translation is the choice of the osprey as the equivalent of "chü chiu". This term is not used in modern nomenclature and in extant Chinese literature is apparently found only here and in allusions to this passage.<sup>1</sup> Taking the characters separately, *chü* is an obsolete word, probably referring to a gull or skua and seldom used as an independent proper name, while *chiu* is the common word for dove. Dr. Legge's thirty years in China (1843-1873) were spent in the Crown Colony of Hong Kong so he had no opportunity to become familiar with bird life in the interior. His choice of the osprey must be put down as an unhappy choice. The strident shriek of the fish-hawk would be a jarring note in what appears to be a wedding song.

The Chinese Classics are usually edited with traditional commentaries but the commentators were more interested in political and moral allegory than in ornithology. Some say, simply, "a bird's name"; others "a water bird". The authoritative Chu Hsi commentary 朱子集注 calls it, "a bird similar to the Mallard Duck". Foreign language dictionaries of Chinese, in general, adopt traditional definitions; but Herbert A. Giles, in his Chinese-English Dictionary (1892, 2nd edition 1912), attempted to supply scientific terms wherever possible. He defined *chü chiu* as the Ruddy Sheldrake, *Casarca rutila*, also called the Brahminy Duck. He does not record his reasons for this selection but when the meagre evidence available is reviewed this designation must be considered more acceptable.<sup>2</sup> In Mongolia the Ruddy Sheldrake, according to the *Encyclopaedia Sinica*, is still an object of religious veneration; a fact which might have some relation to its prominent place in the *Shih Ching*.

<sup>1</sup>All the quotations recorded in the *P'ei Wen Yün Fu* 佩文韻府 (an exhaustive concordance of Chinese literature), and in the *K'ang Hsi Dictionary* 康熙字典 are allusions to or interpretations of this passage in the *Shih Ching*.

<sup>2</sup>The Chu Hsi commentary reads: "*Chü Chiu*, a water bird, also called *Wang* 王 (i.e. 'king') *Chü* 雉, resembling the *Fu I* 鳧鷖." Chu Hsi defines the characters separately. *Fu*, a water bird, like a duck, of "ch'ing" color (which ranges from sky-blue, through green to black); while *I* is said to be a kind of gull.

*Fu* is the *Erh Ya* 爾雅 term for Mallard, the most common of wild ducks in the area, and is used in combination with other characters for a

My term of missionary service was spent mostly in a part of North China where many of the songs of the *Shih Ching* had their origin and I was able to test the theory of Herbert Giles by seeing these birds in a natural setting. For it was a pair of Ruddy Sheldrakes I saw as they sat side by side at the water's edge not far from where I was standing on the Ch'in River dike. They are like Mallards in size and form—the commentary indicated as much—but their color is a golden orange, paler about the heads, and with some dark green markings on the wings. The male has a narrow black collar. I was only a dozen yards from them and in the brilliant sunshine they made a beautiful picture, reminding me of golden birds we used to read about in fairy tales. They seemed unaware of my presence and as though in conversation, making low honking sounds. As already mentioned, one of the characters in the bird's name is the word for "dove", and there was something very dove-like in their quietness and repose. It struck me that you could not find a more appropriate name than the original—"gull-doves". With the thrill of discovery I also realized that it was these scarcely heard honkings that the poet meant by *kuan kuan*. Listening intently I could hear that ageless sound in rather jerky doubles—"kuan kuan".<sup>3</sup> It was as though time had stood still for thirty centuries.

The water-fowl in the song were said to be "on a little island in the river". Was it possible to be more definite or even as definite? There is no adjective for "little" in the line and the character *chou* is sometimes used for large islands, especially on the South China coast. By a curious development in modern terminology this character is now the word for "continent", the largest of all islands. But what did it imply when the song was written? S. Wells Williams, in his *Syllabic Dictionary of the Chinese Language* (1874), defines it as "an island small enough to be seen at once". This is probably a literal translation of a description given him by some Chinese scholar and it is obvious that what was intended was a sand-bar, a common sight in all North China rivers at low water, and the very place where I saw the pair of Ruddy Sheldrakes. The parts of this Chinese puzzle were put together and the ancient scene was enacted before my eyes.

Any light thrown on the meaning of a phrase in a classic has intrinsic value and interest. In this case, however, there is something more at stake than the clarification of a few details. When the Ruddy Sheldrake is understood to be the bird mentioned here we have an example of that sure and sensitive feeling for nature which is the characteristic of great literature. How appropriate the setting is to the theme of the song! It was written

number of duck-like birds. *Fu I* is a ducklike bird, probably the Mallard; and *Chu Chiu* is a bird which resembles it. This would limit our choice to one of about a dozen species and when probabilities are considered, the number would be reduced to less than half, of which the Ruddy Sheldrake is one of the most likely. I have shown how aptly it fits the part.

The question is: How reliable is Chu Hsi? He lived 800 years ago, but some 1600 years after Confucius, when the term was in general use. All we can say is that Chu Hsi was a careful scholar and no doubt recorded an ancient tradition. The results are, admittedly, tentative; but not more so than many other views on ancient China. This interpretation has, at least, the merit of probability.

<sup>3</sup>Of course, we cannot be sure how the character here romanized *kuan* was pronounced in ancient times. However, the position taken does not depend on the exact pronunciation of the Chinese character. The point is that it was the quiet cooing sounds of the birds in repose which were meant, rather than the louder calls when they are startled or in flight. Almost any non-sibilant Chinese character softly pronounced would have conveyed the same impression.

in praise of that demure and comely maiden—the ideal bride for the princely man. The “gull-doves” sitting and chatting together, unconcerned with all around, perfectly symbolized happy married companionship. On the other hand, if the “osprey” is the correct rendering there would be no vital connection in meaning and the verse would appear to be more doggerel.

This interpretation of Herbert Giles seems to have been buried in his dictionary and we find that the authority of James Legge, after seventy-five years, is accepted without question. Arthur Waley, in *The Book of Songs* (1936), and Bernhard Karlgren, in *The Book of Odes* (1950), both translate “chü chiu” as the “osprey”. Why these eminent scholars reject the later verdict of Herbert Giles they do not say; nor do they explain how the character for “dove” should be in the term for a fish-hawk. While they might have Chinese commentators to back their preference, the use of fish-hawk instead of dove is out of place in the context of the entire poem.

It must be noted that the other four stanzas of the song take us to smaller and quieter streams and use, by way of analogy, the duckweed: small floating plants which were gathered by women to flavor food and wine. The allusion is to the way these plants escape the hand reaching for them in water and recalls the doubts and anxieties of courtship. But the elusive duckweed was gathered and the coy maiden was finally wed. The song ends with the joyful beating of drums and timbrels as the bride is welcomed on her wedding day.

之然爲相之水	反。	關	風故
地也。	淑	關	也。鵲
也。河	女	雎	巢繫
窈窕	君	反。	之周
幽閒	子	余	公。南
之意	好	鳩	言化
淑善	述	在	自北
也。水	雄	河	而南
中可	相	之	也。先
居性	應	洲	
	之	窈	
	興	反。	
	也。	窈	
	關	了	
	雎	窈	
	也。	了	
	徒	窈	
	了	窈	
	徒	窈	

THIS PAGE of the poem “Kuan chü” is reproduced from Shih chi chuan 詩集傳, a Sung edition of Shih Ching compiled by Chu Hsi, reprinted by Wen-hsüeh Ku-chi K'an-hsing-she 文學古籍刊行社, Peking, 1955.