

BOOKS

CHINESE POETRY

THE WHITE PONY, an anthology of Chinese poetry from the earliest times to the present day. Edited by Robert Payne. Allen and Unwin, London. English price, 16/-.
(Reviewed by James Bertram)

"THE Chinese," the English editor of this anthology reminds us, "... have always regarded poetry as the finest flower of their culture." But Chinese poetry, until this century, has not been very accessible to the Western reader; most of us still have a clearer notion of Chinese painting or ceramics or even of Chinese calligraphy, than of what is traditionally the highest function to which that beautifully decorative writing can be put. And if indeed poetry is by its very nature untranslatable, then the best efforts of sinologues, it might seem, cannot help us much.

But they can: the sensitive yet robust work of Arthur Waley is one proof of it. And for those who felt the danger of getting to know Chinese poetry solely through the mind and metrics of one translator of genius, a growing body of American, German and French versions might always be called in to redress the balance. Robert Payne is the latest interpreter in the field, and he attempts a wider range of representation than any of his predecessors. The earliest poems in *The White Pony* (like its charming title-piece) are from *The Book of Songs*, and probably three thousand years old; the latest poem is by Mao Tse-tung, leader of the Chinese Communists to-day. The poems are grouped under dynasties, with notes before each section: the editor's introductory essay is an enthusiastic and disarming appreciation of Chinese poetry in general; and the whole book is generously planned and clearly printed. For range, quantity and readability—the bread and butter virtues of any anthology—this book may be recommended without reserve.

And quality? Here, perhaps, some reservations must be made. Mr. Payne had the enormous advantage of working on this book in company with a number of Chinese scholars over the war years. He identifies himself with the Chinese point of view; the choice of poets represented is a Chinese choice, and the book reflects this in every page. Mr. Waley, by contrast, is a fastidious amateur—he translates much of Po Chu-i, little of Li Po or Su Tung-p'o, because he was not satisfied with his trial versions of these very characteristic poets. But Mr. Waley is a poet himself.

Mr. Payne is bolder, or more confident: fortified by the support of his Chinese colleagues, he has left few notable gaps in his pantheon. His level of accuracy is probably very high: he translates literally, and wisely avoids rime. The result is an English style that is fluent, clear, and curiously di-

luted—a style not badly adapted to the early Chou pieces, but less satisfactory with the more complex harmonies of T'ang and Sung.

Here, for example, is Dr. Lin Yutang's version of the ending of a celebrated poem by Su Tung-p'o, written on the anniversary of the death of his first wife:

Last night
I dreamed I had suddenly returned to our
old home
And saw you sitting there before the
familiar dressing-table,
We looked at each other in silence,
With misty eyes beneath the candle-light.
May we year after year
In heartbreak meet,
On the pine-crest,
In the moonlight!

This, in English, is sentimental and bad. Here is Mr. Payne:

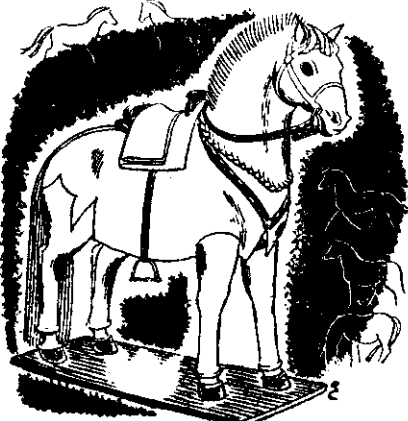
To-night when I came home,
In my melancholy dream,
I saw her dressing her hair
Under the small window,
We looked at each other in silence.
Tears overflowed down our cheeks.
It seems to me that the place
Where my heart breaks each year
Is the pine-ridge
On a moonlight night.

This is romantic, and not positively bad: but you can hardly call it poetry. Neither version, alas, seems Chinese.

But if Mr. Payne has not always succeeded in that act of re-creation that is necessary to make any verse translation live, he has certainly given us an unrivalled panorama of Chinese poetry across the centuries. The usefulness of this book, to the serious student, can hardly be exaggerated. And the enthusiasm with which it has been carried out (in the excruciatingly uncomfortable conditions of wartime Chinese universities) will at least suggest to many readers why a few young Englishmen in every generation, having through choice or duty made the initial plunge into one of the subtlest and most experienced of languages, have longed to spend the rest of their days beneath a white pine in the courtyard of a Peking temple, with a stack of T'ang poets by their side.

MUSIC-ROOM BOOKSHELF

CHOP! MUSICIANS — THEIR MUSIC, POETRY AND INSTRUMENTS. By Hugh Tracey. Geoffrey Cumberlege, Oxford University Press, for the International African Institute. English price, 16/-.
AUSTRALIA MAKES MUSIC. By Isabelle Moresby. Longmans, Green and Co. Price, 15/-.
HUGH TRACEY of the South African Broadcasting Corporation in his book on the music, poetry and instruments of the Chopi people of Portuguese East Africa, lays before us an interesting story. The Chopis are renowned for their large xylophone orchestras. Mr. Tracey tells us how these *timbila* are made and played. The way in which this highly individual racial group combines traditional poetry, musical composition, and the dance, for ritual and entertainment purposes makes a fascinating study, and the author must be praised for his



(continued on next page)

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