

Qu Yuan

The Warring States Period

The Zhou royal court's decline led to increasing competition between vassal states. Between the 5th century BCE and 221 BCE, intensive warfare occurred between seven major states in China, and thus this



period is known as the "Warring States Period". Each state was centralizing power in the hands of its king, developing a complex bureaucracy, and building a large infantry army in preparation for "unifying" all under Heaven. The result was the fading of the old feudal system marked by aristocratic rule, and the rise of centralized states featuring supreme power in the hands of the king.

Political Career

In 339 BCE, Qu Yuan was born a member of the royal clan of Chu, one of Warring States controlling the valley of the Yangtze River. He was appointed a major counselor of his kinsman, King Huai, the ruler of Chu. Factional struggles at the Chu court alienated Qu Yuan from the King. King Huai banished Qu Yuan to the

region north of the Han River, a tributary of the Yangtze River. Although Qu Yuan was reinstated and appointed as a diplomat to improve relations between Chu and Qi, he eventually lost the king's favor for advocating the unpopular policy of



resistance to Qin, the most powerful of the Warring States. Slandered by other ministers at the court, Qu Yuan was again exiled to south of the Yangtze River by King Huai's successor, King Qingxiang.

During his exile, Qu Yuan wandered about the countryside of southern Chu, composing poetry and verses. He exposed himself to the shamanistic folk rites and legends popular in the region, which influenced his works. In 278 BCE, the capital of Chu, Ying, was captured by the army of Qin, Chu's major rival. It is reported that Qu Yuan suffered from depression and committed suicide by drowning himself in the Miluo River, a tributary of the Yangtze River located in today's Hubei Province.



Qu Yuan as a Poet

Qu Yuan is regarded as one of the greatest poets of ancient China and the earliest author known by name, while earlier Chinese poetic works are not associated with any specific authorship. The anthology attributed to Qu Yuan, entitled the *Chuzi* (translated into English as either the *Elegies of Chu* or the



Songs of the South), was compiled centuries later around 200 CE. Part of the anthology is believed to have been composed by later poets inspired by the legendary life of Qu Yuan. The most famous of the poems was "Lisao" (Encountering Sorrow), in which Qu Yuan expressed deep concern for the decline of his native state and his melancholic love for Chu culture. Other works in the



collection include "Tian Wen" (Questioning Heaven), "Jiu Ge" (the Nine Songs), and "Huai Sha" (Embracing Sand). "Tian Wen" is characterized by 172 questions directed to Heaven regarding nature, history, and human nature.

Dragon Boat Festival

Legend has it that local villagers rushed to the Miluo River to rescue Qu Yuan after his suicide. They threw rice and dumplings from the boat and beat drums and splashed the water with paddles to keep the fish and evil spirits away from his body. This initiated a tradition of dragon boat racing on the fifth day of the fifth month of the Chinese lunar calendar to commemorate the poet. Popular in China up to today, the Dragon Boat Festival was named a national holiday in China in 2005. This custom also spread to Vietnam and Korea, both of which also share this cultural heritage.



Legacy

Qu Yuan was considered “China’s first patriotic poet” during World War II, when China’s nationalism was in full swing. Parallels were drawn between Qu Yuan and Hamlet and King Lear. Qu Yuan’s works, full of imagination and creativity, are believed to have initiated traditions of romanticism and patriotism in Chinese literature, leaving an enduring impact on later Chinese poetic traditions.