

EXCERPTS FROM "ENCOUNTERING SORROW" (LI SAO)
By Qu Yuan

Introduction

"Encountering Sorrow" is the most famous example of the poetry of the state of Chu. Chu was one of the many feudal states of the Zhou dynasty. Chu's location in the Yangzi valley, however, put it on the southern frontiers of the Zhou world. Thus Chu poetry and culture share both in the mainstream culture of the North China plain — the Zhou heartland — and the culture of the ethnic groups of the south. As a result, the moral concerns and language of Confucianism are combined with a strong shamanist tradition, and the poetry of Chu is replete with images drawn from the plants and landscape of the south. Qu Yuan, the author of "Encountering Sorrow," is a shadowy figure. He is thought to have been a minister in the court of King Huai (r. 328-299 BCE) of Chu. His poem, "Encountering Sorrow," tells the story of an honest official who has been driven out of court by the machinations of his dishonest colleagues. The traditional account of Qu Yuan's life is that he then went into exile in the wilderness and eventually committed suicide by drowning himself in the Miluo River. The longer selection below includes the beginning stanzas of the poem followed by the poem's four-line conclusion.

Selected Document Excerpts with Questions (Longer selection follows this section)

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Excerpts from "Encountering Sorrow" (Li Sao)
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...

"The three kings of old were most pure and perfect:
Then indeed fragrant flowers had their proper place.
They brought together pepper and cinnamon;
All the most prized blossoms were woven in their garlands.
Glorious and great were those two, Yao and Shun,
Because they had kept their feet on the right path.
And how great was the folly of Chieh and Chou,
Who hastened by crooked paths, and so came to grief.

"The fools enjoy their careless pleasure,
But their way is dark and leads to danger.
I have no fear for the peril of my own person,

**Primary Source Document, with Questions (DBQs) on
EXCERPTS FROM "ENCOUNTERING SORROW" (LI SAO), BY QU YUAN**

But only lest the chariot of my lord should be dashed.
I hurried about your chariot in attendance,
Leading you in the tracks of the kings of old."
But the Fragrant One refused to examine my true feelings:
He lent ear, instead, to slander, and raged against me.

[Translated by David Hawkes]

Questions:

1. What is the author's point of view?
2. Who is the "Fragrant One" and what is that person's relationship with the author?
3. What evidence is there in the text that the author shares the same culture as Confucius?
4. What elements in the text seem very different from what one sees in the speech of Confucius, as recorded in the Analects?

Longer Selection

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Scion of the High Lord Kao Yang,
Po Yung was my father's name.
When She T'i pointed to the first month of the year,
On the day *keng yin*, I passed from the womb.
My father, seeing the aspect of my nativity,
Took omens to give me an auspicious name.
The name he gave me was True Exemplar;
The title he gave me was Divine Balance.

Having from birth this inward beauty,
I added to it fair outward adornment:
I dressed in selinea and shady angelica,
And twined autumn orchids to make a garland.
Swiftly I sped, as in fearful pursuit,
Afraid Time would race on and leave me behind.

**Primary Source Document, with Questions (DBQs) on
EXCERPTS FROM "ENCOUNTERING SORROW" (LI SAO), BY QU YUAN**

In the morning I gathered the angelica on the mountains;
In the evening I plucked the sedges of the islets.

The days and months hurried on, never delaying;
Springs and autumns sped by in endless alternation:
And I thought how the trees and flowers were fading and falling,
And feared that my Fairest's beauty would fade too.
"Gather the flower of youth and cast out the impure!
Why will you not change the error of your ways?
I have harnessed brave coursers for you to gallop forth with:
Come, let me go before and show you the way!

"The three kings of old were most pure and perfect:
Then indeed fragrant flowers had their proper place.
They brought together pepper and cinnamon;
All the most prized blossoms were woven in their garlands.
Glorious and great were those two, Yao and Shun,
Because they had kept their feet on the right path.
And how great was the folly of Chieh and Chou,
Who hastened by crooked paths, and so came to grief.

"The fools enjoy their careless pleasure,
But their way is dark and leads to danger.
I have no fear for the peril of my own person,
But only lest the chariot of my lord should be dashed.
I hurried about your chariot in attendance,
Leading you in the tracks of the kings of old."
But the Fragrant One refused to examine my true feelings:
He lent ear, instead, to slander, and raged against me.

How well I know that loyalty brings disaster;
Yet I will endure: I cannot give it up.
I called on the ninefold heaven to be my witness,
And all for the sake of the Fair One, and no other.
There once was a time when he spoke with me in frankness;
But then he repented and was of another mind.
I do not care, on my own count, about this divorcement,
But it grieves me to find the Fair One so inconstant.

I had tended many an acre of orchids,
And planted a hundred rods of melilotus;
I had raised sweet lichens and the cart-halting flower,

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EXCERPTS FROM "ENCOUNTERING SORROW" (LI SAO), BY QU YUAN**

And asarums mingled with fragrant angelica,
And hoped that when leaf and stem were in fullest bloom,
When the time had come, I could reap a fine harvest.
Though famine should pinch me, it is small matter:
But I grieve that all my blossoms should waste in rank weeds.

All others press forward in greed and gluttony,
No surfeit satiating their demands:
Forgiving themselves, but harshly judging others;
Each fretting his heart away in envy and malice.
Madly they rush in the covetous chase,
But not after that which my heart sets store by.
For old age comes creeping and soon will be upon me,
And I fear I shall not leave behind an enduring name.

In the mornings I drank the dew that fell from the magnolia:
At evening ate the petals that dropped from chrysanthemums.
If only my mind can be truly beautiful,
It matters nothing that I often faint for famine.
I pulled up roots to bind the valerian
And thread the fallen clusters of the castor plant;
I trimmed sprays of cassia for plaiting melilotus,
And knotted the lithe, light trails of ivy.

I take my fashion from the good men of old:
A garb unlike that which the rude world cares for:
Though it may not accord with present-day manners,
I will follow the pattern that P'eng Hsien has left.
Heaving a long sigh, I brush away my tears,
Grieving for man's life, so beset with hardships.
I have always loved pretty things to bind myself about with,
And so mornings I plaited and evenings I twined.

When I had finished twining my girdle of orchids,
I plucked some angelica to add to its beauty.
It is this that my heart takes most delight in,
And though I died nine times, I should not regret it.
What I do resent is the Fair One's waywardness:
Because he will never look to see what is in men's hearts.
All your ladies were jealous of my delicate beauty;
They chattered spitefully, saying I loved wantonness.

**Primary Source Document, with Questions (DBQs) on
EXCERPTS FROM "ENCOUNTERING SORROW" (LI SAO), BY QU YUAN**

Truly, this generation are cunning artificers!
From square and compass they turn their eyes and change the true measurement,
They disregard the ruled line to follow their crooked fancies:
To emulate in flattery is their only rule.
But I am sick and sad at heart and stand irresolute:
I alone am at a loss in this generation.

...

Enough! There are no true men in the state: no one to understand me.
Why should I cleave to the city of my birth?
Since none is worthy to work with in making good government,
I will go and join P'eng Hsien in the place where he abides.

[Translated by David Hawkes]