

**“ ON HIS CHAIR-BEARERS — A CASE OF MISPLACED SYMPATHY ”**  
By Yüan Mei

**Introduction**

Yuan Mei (1716-1798) is one of the most celebrated poets of the Qing dynasty (1644-1912). Yuan received a Confucian education and passed the examinations, but he had a lackluster official career, serving in minor posts and retiring in his mid-thirties. In retirement, Yuan Mei lived in a large and luxurious garden estate in Nanjing, the Sui Garden, and traveled extensively in southern China. His writings include books on how to take the civil service examinations, as well as travel writings and poetry. As a poet, Yuan Mei was unorthodox and creative. His position was that one should write poetry as one pleased, without being captive to traditional thinking, morality, or form. The poem below refers to Yuan's chair-bearers — the men who carried the poet's sedan chair as he travelled from one place to another. The "Owl and the Black" referred to in the poem are the names of two dice-throws.

**Selected Document with Questions**

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**“On His Chair-Bearers — A Case of Misplaced Sympathy”**  
By Yuan Mei

Today my carriers have had a double task;  
We have gone up a mountain and down into a valley.  
For the moment they are through with their hardships and dangers;  
Night is falling, and at last they can rest their feet.  
I was quite certain that directly they put down their burden  
Tired out, they would sink into a heavy sleep.  
To my great surprise they re-trimmed the lamp  
And all night long played at games of chance.  
A quarrel began; feeling ran high.  
One of them absconded; another went in chase.  
All the fuss was about a handful of pence;  
Hardly enough to pay for a cup of gruel.  
Yet they throw down those pence with as high and mighty an air  
As if they were flinging a shower of golden stars.  
Next day when they shouldered their burdens again  
Their strength was greater than that of Pen and Yü.  
The same thing happened five nights on end;

**Primary Source Document with Questions (DBQs) on**

**“ON HIS CHAIR-BEARERS — A CASE OF MISPLACED SYMPATHY,” BY YUAN MEI**

It is almost as if some demon possessed them.  
Can it be, I wonder, that when the dice are thrown  
The Owl and the Black<sup>1</sup> have the power to cure fatigue?  
But different creatures have their different natures;  
What suits the fish will not please the bear.  
The simplest folk and the most learned men  
Cannot possibly be measured by the same rules.  
Rather than sorrow over other people’s sorrows  
It is better, when one can, to enjoy one’s own pleasures.

**Questions:**

1. What can you deduce about Yuan Mei’s social status from the poem?
2. How does Yuan Mei characterize his chair-bearers? What stereotypes of them does he generate or express in the poem?
3. Can you think other examples of literature from China or elsewhere in which the author describes working people or people less wealthy than she or he in similar terms?
4. If they could, what kind of poem might the chair-bearers write about Yuan Mei?

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<sup>1</sup> Names of dice throws.