Chairman Mao's Letter to Comrade Chen Yi Discussing Poetry

Comrade Chen Yi,

You asked me to polish your poems, but I am unable to as I have never learnt how to write lu shih in five-character lines and have never published any in that form. Your poems have power and range. Only I feel that in form, or metrically, they are not quite lu shih.1 For it has strict tonal patterns, without which a poem cannot be called lu shih. In this respect, I think, both of us are still beginners. I have occasionally written a few seven-character lu shih, but none of them satisfies me. Just as you are good at writing unorthodox verse, I know a little about tzu2 with lines of different lengths. Chien-ying [Yeh Chien-ying - Tr.] is good at seven-character lu shih, and old Comrade Tung [Tung Pi-wu-Tr.] at five-character lu shih. If you want to write in these forms, you can ask for their advice.

Journeying Westward

I speed westward ten thousand li,
Riding the wind over infinite space;
Had not this giant roc spread its wings,

How could man traverse this void crossed only by birds?

The sea below ferments a thousand goblets of wine,

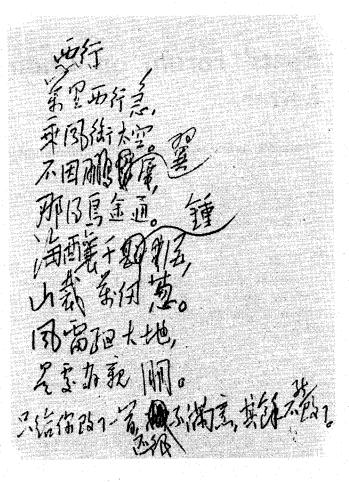
And mountains tower to great heights with onion spires.

Everywhere we find good friends,

As wind and thunder sweep the world.

I made changes in this poem and am still far from satisfied with the result. I am afraid I cannot do the rest.

Another thing is that poetry uses images to convey ideas and should not communicate plainly as in prose. So we cannot dispense with pi (similes and metaphors) or with hsing (association). We may also use the technique of fu (direct statement) as in Tu Fu's3 Northern Journey, which may be said to "state in plain terms," but here too he used pi and hsing. "Pi means comparing one object to another," and "hsing means speaking first of something else to lead up to the main theme." Han Yu4 used prose techniques in poetry, and some people said he knew nothing at all about poetry, but that was going too far, as some of his poems like The Rocks, Mount Hengshan and To Prefectural Official Chang on the Fifteenth Day of the Eighth Moon are really not bad. We can see, therefore, it is not easy to write poetry. Most Sung poets did not understand that poetry must convey ideas by means of images, and they disregarded the tradition of Tang poetry, with the result that what they wrote was quite flat. These random remarks all refer to classical poetry. To write modern poetry, we must use the method of conveying ideas through images in reflecting class struggle and the struggle for production, and must definitely not go in for classicism. But for the last few decades, poetry in the vernacular has not been successful. There have been some good folk songs, however. It is very likely that the future trend will be to draw nourishment and adopt forms from the folk song and



First part of the letter in Chairman Mao's own handwriting.

develop a new type of poetry which will appeal to the general reading public. Incidentally, Li Po⁵ wrote very few *lu shih*, and Li Ho,⁶ apart from a few five-character *lu shih*, never wrote any in seven-character lines. Li Ho is well worth reading. I don't know if you are interested.

With best wishes,

Mao Tsetung July 21, 1965

Translator's Notes

Lu shih is a traditional form of classical Chinese poetry. With a strict tonal pattern and rhyme scheme, it has eight lines with five or

- seven characters in each. It was very popular during the Tang Dynasty (618-907).
- 2) Tzu is a verse form which originated in the Tang Dynasty. It is sung to certain tunes each of which prescribes a fixed number of lines of a standardized varying length. Of the 39 published poems of Chairman Mao's, 25 are tzu.
- Tu Fu (712-770) was a great poet in ancient China. Characterized by realism, his poems reflect the age in which he lived.
- 4) Han Yu (768 824), a noted prose writer and poet of the Tang Dynasty.
- 5) Li Po (701 762) was another great poet in ancient China. Highly critical in content, his poems are brimful of patriotism and romanticism.
- 6) Li Ho (790 816) was a poet who lived in the middle period of the Tang Dynasty.