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978-0-521-41782-2 - Stone Lake: The Poetry of Fan Chengda (1126-1193)

J. D. Schmidt

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Stone Lake is the first translation and study in a Western language of the poetry of Fan Chengda, one of the most famous Chinese poets of the twelfth century. For the nonspecialist reader the main attraction of the book will be the translations of Fan Chengda's poetry, which make up almost half of the text and include poems on such familiar themes as the Chinese countryside, peasant life, Buddhism, and growing old. The more technical part of the book contains a biography of the poet, a discussion of his affiliation with poets of the generation before him, a detailed analysis of his style, and discussion of the major themes of his work.

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*To Mei-hui, Erika,
and the entire Bakongo Family*

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Preface

In the twelfth century Chinese civilization under the Song dynasty (960–1280) attained a ripeness that it rarely if ever equaled in later ages. The thinker Zhu Xi (1130–1200) put the finishing touches on his great synthesis of neo-Confucian thought; Chinese science and mathematics reached the apex of their development; artists of the Southern Song Academy created landscapes and bird and flower paintings of unparalleled refinement, and although the northern half of China was occupied by foreigners, the Chinese capital at Hangzhou was the largest and most cultured city in the world.

It is no wonder then that poetry in the classical language, the favorite literary art of the upper classes, rose to one of the highest levels ever witnessed. *Ci* verse, which had first come into prominence during the waning decades of the Tang dynasty (618–907), reached its climax with authors such as Xin Qiji (1140–1207) and Jiang Kui (ca. 1155–1221), while *shi* poetry, the form that survives in the greatest quantity and that was most highly regarded by Song intellectuals, explored a host of new themes and perfected the many innovations of earlier Song dynasty poets.

Fan Chengda (1126–1193) was one of the three most outstanding *shi* poets of his generation, and although today he is chiefly remembered for one series of bucolic poems that he wrote on the countryside near his home not far from the modern city of Shanghai, the main purpose of this book is to demonstrate how he excelled in practically every type of poetry known to the Song dynasty literary tradition. Since no representative sample of Fan Chengda's poetry has been translated into a Western language before, the original intent of this book was to provide enjoyable translations of some of Fan Chengda's more outstanding poems, but I soon discovered that the translations would be more easily appreciated if they were prefaced by a short biography of Fan Chengda and a critical examination of his literary style. Nonspecialist readers may wish to read

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the translations first, but even if they have an aversion to literary criticism, they still are encouraged to examine the discussion of Fan Chengda's poetry because they will find quite a number of other poems translated there.

Although it is hoped that the critical section of this book will contribute to our overall understanding of Chinese poetry during the Song dynasty, the translations are obviously of primary importance for this study, and it seems useful to comment briefly about the method of translation adopted. Translation is an art that few scholars of Chinese literature have mastered (to the great loss of nonspecialist readers), and although these translations are certainly not superior to the work of others, every effort has been expended to make them enjoyable for even the nonspecialist reader. Thus, in some cases specialists may complain that they are a bit too free, although, in fact, all of them follow the Chinese originals quite closely line by line, departing from the originals only in certain details such as word order or the translation of a Song colloquialism by an equivalent English expression. Generally speaking, where the translations deviate enough from the literal meaning of the originals to cause confusion for scholars reading the poems in Chinese, the notes provide a more literal translation. In the interest of readability, all the footnotes have been kept short; important literary and historical allusions necessary for the understanding of poems have all been identified, but some allusions that merely involve the echoing of an earlier author have been excluded, particularly when it was felt that their explanation was not necessary for an intelligent reading of a work. In line with most recently published translations, few place names have been identified, and the names of persons have been identified only when deemed essential.

Although many scholars of classical Chinese literature still retain the Wade-Giles system of romanization for Chinese names, it seems peculiar to use one system for books on contemporary topics and another for ancient ones, and, hence, this book adopts the modern *pinyin* system, which is official in China now and used in practically all Western-language newspapers and periodicals. Where confusion is likely to occur, as in the citation of earlier works in Western languages, the older Wade-Giles system is quoted in parentheses. Except where indicated, all dates have been expressed in the Chinese lunar calendar. Although this may seem strange to nonspecialist readers, Chinese poetry is too closely linked to the cycle of seasons and the traditional festivals of the lunar calendar to make conversion desirable.

Finally, the debt of this work to Zhou Ruchang's pioneering anthology of Fan Chengda's poetry, the first annotated selection of his verse,

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should be obvious to anyone familiar with Zhou's work. Although I have frequently disagreed with Zhou's interpretations of Fan Chengda's poetry, no one can study Fan without referring to Zhou's excellent scholarship. It is hoped that Zhou's detailed annotations of Fan's poems have prevented the translations from erring too grievously, but if any mistakes have crept in, I will be grateful to any critics who point them out graciously.

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