

TURTLE POETRY

Editorial Introduction. — This section is devoted to poetry involving turtles, representing either reprinted previously published or new unpublished material. We encourage our readers to submit poetry or songs for consideration, either their own material or work by other authors. Poems may be submitted to Wallace J. Nichols, School of Renewable Natural Resources, Wildlife Ecology, University of Arizona, Tucson, AZ 85721 or Anders G.J. Rhodin, Chelonian Research Foundation, 168 Goodrich Street, Lunenburg, MA 01462.

Our desire is to share with our readers the beauty and wonder of turtles as expressed through the art of the poem or song. In the sense that the relationship between man and turtles is multifaceted, so too is turtle poetry. The poems we publish here will reflect that complexity, from poems of pure admiration for the creatures themselves to others reflecting the utilization of turtles and their products. Some poems will reflect man's use of the turtle for sustenance, others will stress man's need to preserve and protect turtles. Some will deal with our emotional interactions with turtles, others will treat turtles light-heartedly or with seeming disrespect, but all will hopefully help us to better understand both the human and the chelonian condition, and remind us that the turtle holds a sacred place in all our hearts.

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Turtle Soup

MARILYN CHIN¹

You go home one evening tired from work,
and your mother boils you turtle soup.
Twelve hours hunched over the hearth
(who knows what else is in that cauldron).

You say, "Ma, you've poached the symbol of long life;
that turtle lived four thousand years, swam
the Wei, up the Yellow, over the Yangtze.
Witnessed the Bronze Age, the High Tang,
grazed on splendid sericulture."
(So, she boils the life out of him.)

"All our ancestors have been fools.
Remember Uncle Wu who rode ten thousand miles
to kill a famous Manchu and ended up
with his head on a pole? Eat, child,
its liver will make you strong."

"Sometimes you're the life, sometimes the sacrifice."
Her sobbing is inconsolable.
So, you spread that gentle napkin
over your lap in decorous Pasadena.

Baby, some high priestess has got it wrong.
The golden decal on the green underbelly
says "Made in Hong Kong."

Is there nothing left but the shell
and humanity's strange inscriptions,
the songs, the rites, the oracles?

Editorial Comment. — This poem about turtle soup reflects the ancient Chinese tradition of eating turtles as interpreted by a first-generation Chinese-American poet (born in Hong Kong and raised in western USA) who tries to remind her mother of what should still be sacred from the old country. For the poet, the turtle represents a revered Chinese mythological symbol — a symbol of longevity, patience, grandeur, and antiquity — but the irony is that it ends up in a swirling soup far from its ancestral home, poached by her mother, who has no interest in the turtle as a cultural symbol, only as a consumable resource (Chin *in* Moyers, 1995). If we are to protect and save our world's dwindling populations of turtles, especially those in China where they are being unsustainably overexploited and consumed, then we need to recapture some of the ancient reverence once held for these unique and marvelous creatures. If not, we may lose those populations forever and be left alone at last to ask Marilyn Chin's haunting question: "Is there nothing left but the shell?"

¹ Copyright © 1993 by Marilyn Chin

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Reprinted from: Moyers, Bill. 1995. *The Language of Life: A Festival of Poets*. New York: Doubleday, pp. 75-76.

Submitted by Carol Rehm Conroy