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### Softness

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## Softness

### Abstract

Which is a two-character combination with a radical meaning...

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## OUYANG YU

*Softness*

is pronounced “rou”, or “ro” as in “rose” or “romance”  
and written in the form of “柔”<sup>1</sup>

- 1 Which is a two-character combination with a radical meaning “lance” on top and the other meaning “wood” below. Although its origins are hard to trace now, at least not the job to be executed in this poem, “ro” is a quite interesting word to go with other words to form, for example, a place name, in “huai rou”. This afternoon when the author taught the translation class in which he showed examples of how to directly render place names so that people familiar with those names are de-familiarized he said “Northern Capital, Southern Capital, Eastern Capital as well as Combined Fat”, to the amusement of his students, one of whom was intelligent enough to cite “huai rou”, sort of as a test on him as a teacher and sort of out of curiosity to see how one could stretch the meaning a bit. Immediately, his teacher keyed in these words, “Bosom Soft”, then “Bosom Softness”, in his word document that was projected onto the wall by the overhead projector for everyone to see. The collective memory was reminded of a political term, “huai rou zheng ce”, which could be roughly rendered as a “Policy that bosoms softness”. According to *Ocean of Words* (904), it’s a political measure designed to gather people around you, as stated in *Zuo Zhuan*: Even when he (the Emperor) bosom-softened the under-heaven, he was still fearful of foreign insolence.” From this it is obvious that ancient words that meant do not mean these days unless you apply your contemporary logic, which you are sure that one day will also become obsolete or semi-obsolete. Apart from the many and varied meanings of “ro”, or “rou” if you insist, this

“rouyuan” should make one take note, if only for its quaintness. Literally, it is a word that combines two concepts of “soft” and “far”, “soft” used as a verb as in the sense of “appease” or “make peaceful” and “far” used as a noun to refer to people from afar or in remote regions. If you “soft” “far” people, then you bring peace to them, but of course you can add “en” to “soft” if you are *that* grammatically minded. There is a quality that people who speak or write that language admire in one, which is “gang rou xiang ji”, that sounds very much like saying coupling hardness and softness. Indeed, that is one of the explanations given in a dictionary published by Shanghai Communications University. Not to make it sound lurid, it quickly gave another definition to it by calling it “a combination of inflexibility and yielding” or “temper[ing] force with mercy”. Fine, that is fine, as long as you do not read anything extra into it in an age obsessed with things that less than a century ago were feared and concealed, practised solely for the purpose of procreation or reproduction or propagation. Before I say so much for “ro” now, I must go on to say that “ro” sounds exactly the same as “ro” except on the last tone, whatever that means to a lay person, and the “ro” on the last tone is “meat” or “flesh” that you either eat after cooking or touch after communicating well enough to access it. As there does not seem to be any point in going further let’s call it a poem.