

A SHORT SELECTION OF TANG POEMS

The high value placed on artistic accomplishment during the Tang transformed poetry into a cultural industry. Although poetry remained important to the ideal of the complete *literatus* in later dynasties, Tang poetry stands out in Chinese cultural history, and is often spoken of as China's greatest contribution to world literature.

One of the remarkable features of Tang poetry, which appears in many ways to express a Neo-Daoist celebration of freedom from human constraints and high valuation of Nature and spontaneity, is the overwhelming strictness of form to which poets were required to conform. Unlike traditional English language poetic constraints, which are generally confined to rhyme, meter, and genre type, Tang poets always composed within grids that dictated a set word-syllable count (generally either five or seven per line all words were of one syllable), the allowable number of lines, the required rhyme scheme, and for almost every character, "tonal" constraints.

Ancient Chinese, like modern Chinese, was a tone language: every word/character, when pronounced, was spoken with one of four possible intonations which never varied for that word. In ancient Chinese, these tones included: 1) a high flat pronunciation; 2) a high and rising pronunciation; 3) a low pronunciation; 4) a clipped pronunciation, which ended in an unvoiced consonant. In poetry, classes 1 and 2 were combined into a category called "level tone," and 3 and 4 comprised the category of "slant tone" words.

Below is a chart showing rules that govern a typical Tang poem, written in a genre called "Seven Character Regulated Verse." This form requires eight lines, seven characters each, with the meaning matched to a rhythmic structure of 2-2-3 in each line. The poem's main rhyme is set in the first line, and echoed in lines 2, 4, 6, and 8. Every line must conform to a prescribed "level/slant" tone scheme, and every pair of lines must, in the original Chinese, also be symmetrical in grammar and general meaning. The chart shows the required form of a poem in this form: L stands for "level tone," S stands for "slant tone," and R indicates a rhyming line. Each L or S represents one character.

SS/LL/SSL (R)
LL/SS/SLL (R)
LL/SS/LLS
SS/LL/SSL (R)
SS/LL/LSS
LL/SS/SLL (R)
LL/SS/LLS
SS/LL/SSL (R)

Bear in mind that in many cases, poems with such schemes were composed on a set theme, on the spur of the moment, at banquets where the poets had already drunk several pots of wine (or in a tiny examination booth a thousand miles from home, with one's entire future riding on the quality of one's composition), and you can get an idea of the poetic mastery of the Tang literatus!

An example of Tang poetry. Because when Tang poems are rendered into English, so many features of their aesthetics is lost, it may be useful to illustrate the way one gets to an English translation – filled with multisyllabic words in syncopated meter – from a Chinese original. Below is an example that should help convey both how a poem “worked” in its original Chinese – illustrating the compression of language and constancy of meter that are characteristic of much of Tang and later poetry – and the changes that must be made to get the poem into English. As you will see, much of the work of translation involves supplying words and ideas that are only implicit in the original, since the audience for these poems shared so much in terms of education, social background, and poetic training, that much could be understood, although left unsaid.

The poem appearing on the following page is by an early Tang poet named Meng Haoran, who is known for his skill in crafting scenes of lush imagery with relatively straightforward themes. In this poem, Meng is celebrating the social process of poetic creation itself. The description is of a poetry banquet at the home of a close friend of Meng's.

In the presentation of the poem, the last characters of even numbered lines have been given their approximate pronunciation values during the Tang, so that the rhyming nature of the poem becomes clear – modern Mandarin pronunciation often has strayed very far from the norms of a thousand years ago. In comparing poem and translation, you should notice how the figure of the woman musician that appears in the translation seems completely absent in the poem itself, which only speaks of “beautiful strings [of a lute]” and a “jade finger.” Because the word for “beautiful” is tied to the image of a woman (the left-hand side of the character, taken independently, means “woman”), and because jade is a regular metaphor for the texture of a woman's skin, Meng Haoran had no need to refer to the woman lutenist directly. His audience would see her there without fail.

More of Meng Haoran's verse, together with poems by other great Tang masters, appears in a series of poems in translation on the following pages.

A Cold Evening's Feast at Zhang Mingfu's 寒食張明府宅宴
Meng Haoran 孟浩然

瑞 <i>rui</i> lucky	雪 <i>xue</i> snow	初 <i>chu</i> first	盈 <i>ying</i> fill	尺 <i>chi</i> foot-length
閑 <i>xian</i> ease	霄 <i>xiao</i> midnight	始 <i>shi</i> begin	半 <i>ban</i> half	更 <i>jing / kyaeng</i> hour measure
列 <i>lie</i> array	筵 <i>yan</i> mat	邀 <i>yao</i> invite	酒 <i>jiu</i> wine	伴 <i>ban</i> companion
刻 <i>ke</i> cut	燭 <i>zhu</i> candle	限 <i>xian</i> limit	詩 <i>shi</i> poem	成 <i>cheng / dzyeng</i> complete
香 <i>xiang</i> fragrant	灰 <i>hui</i> ashes	金 <i>jin</i> gold	爐 <i>lu</i> stove	暖 <i>nuan</i> warm
嬌 <i>jiao</i> beautiful	絃 <i>xian</i> string	玉 <i>yu</i> jade	指 <i>zhi</i> finger	清 <i>qing / tsyeng</i> clear
醉 <i>zui</i> drunk	來 <i>lai</i> come	方 <i>fang</i> just then	欲 <i>yu</i> wish	臥 <i>wo</i> recline
不 <i>bu</i> not	覺 <i>jue</i> aware	曉 <i>xiao</i> bright	雞 <i>ji</i> rooster	鳴 <i>ming / myaeng</i> call

Translation:

A lucky snow first falling a full foot,
Evening ease, just at midnight's cry.
Mats aligned, we wine companions ask
To trim the wick-length to a verse's measure.
Warm by the fragrant ashes of the stove,
Her jade fingers ring the lute-strings clear,
And drunk at last I feel the lure of sleep,
Surprised awake by the cock's cry.

Selected Translations of Tang Poetry

The poems that follow are intended to give you a taste of some of the finest literature ever produced in China (unfortunately much adulterated by translation) and to set up some themes that we will explore in class. Two of these are most important: the complex balance of “Confucian” and “Neo-Daoist” personas that lay behind the Tang social ideal of the literatus, and the dramatic shift that resulted from the traumatic An Lushan Rebellion of 755, which crippled the confident cosmopolitan culture of the Early Tang and led to the increasingly rigid Confucianism of the Late Tang.

Early Tang Poetry

Meng Haoran (689-740)

Meng Haoran lived till the age of forty in obscurity, but when he finally traveled to the capital to seek his fortune, his poetic talents so astonished his contemporaries that they recommended him directly to Emperor Xuanzong for appointment, on the basis of his poetry alone. Unfortunately, one of the poems forwarded to Xuanzong included a phrase so deeply expressive alienation from official life that the emperor decided Meng would be best left to his own devices!

The first of the poems below celebrates a famous tidal bore – a great wave that travels up the Qiantang River at the coastal city of Hangzhou twice a month. Zhang Qiantang’s name reflects the fact that he was magistrate of the city, his virtue was sometimes compared to a legendary Confucian who governed the people merely by expressing his virtue in the song of his lute.

Watching the Tidal Bore at Zhang Tower with Zhang Qiantang

Thunder heard a hundred miles,
The song of the lute falls still.
Horsemen stream from the compound gate
And riverside watch for the tide.
The sun hangs far in the autumn air,
Clouds float on the vastness of sea –
Then an egret wave like a surge of snow
All at once, a frost-born chill.

For Master Yi at the Temple of Yu the Great

There where Master Yi practices zen,
A thatched frame by an empty wood.
Outside his door one lone peak looms,
Beyond his steps ravines range deep,
Evening rays in rain filled prints,
Jade air drops to the courtyard dim.
Lotus petals pure within his sight,
No recognition of them stains his mind.

Li Bo (701-762)

Li Bo was deeply immersed in Daoist practices and resolutely devoted to maintaining a safe distance from the entanglements of official life. He was a brilliant and talented man who could easily have risen high in Tang society had he so wished, but his temperament, much akin to those of the earlier “Seven Sages of the Bamboo Grove,” led him to use his prodigious poetic talents only to receive enough patronage from powerful men to ensure that he could sustain the pursuits that truly attracted him: chiefly, drinking wine, writing poetry, and imbibing the various potions for immortality that later Daoist religion prescribed (and which probably led to his early death). Li Bo symbolizes the endurance of the Neo-Daoist persona in the early Tang Dynasty.

The two poems below only hint at the range of Li Bo’s poetry. The first is a lighthearted jab at the officials of the Tang, a brief and simple coda to the Han poem “Mulberries by the Path,” which we encountered earlier, underscoring its sour view of government officers and expressing Li Bo’s own wish that to stay distant from them. The second poem is, perhaps, Li Bo’s most famous lyric of self-expression.

Spring Song

Lo Fu, the girl from Qin,
Plucks mulberry leaves by the stream.
Her hand bare on the green stems,
Red jacket and white sungleam.
I must hurry, the grubs should be fed –
Please don’t prance your five steeds by again!

Drinking Alone Beneath the Moon

In the flowers with a jug of wine,
 Drinking alone, no companions near,
I raise the cup and ask the moon to join,
 Turn round to my shadow – and we are three.
Now, moon doesn't know how to drink,
 And shadow only follows my form,
But, for the moment, moon and shadow friends,
 Life's joy an instant springlike blooms.
I sing. Moon starts to sway,
 I dance. Shadow reels and rolls.
Wine wakened, we join in delight –
 Drunk, we scatter on our ways.
Let's be ever bound in journeys passion free,
 And pledge to meet beyond the Milky Way.

Du Fu (712-770)

Du Fu, whose biography we will consider in detail in class, was the epitome of the Tang literatus, and perhaps the greatest poet in China's history. Despite his brilliant mastery of the Confucian classics, Du Fu did not have the type of scholastic drive to be successful in the Confucian exam system. His career failed to advance during his youth, and eventually he fell in with Li Bo, dissipating his early political promise in a dissolute, Daoist life style. Later, Du Fu returned to his Confucian family roots and for many years sought an official position by courting potential patrons with his poems. Eventually, he secured a position, but not until the eve of the great rebellion of 755, which threw his life into chaos. In the end, Du Fu's many adventures in poetry, politics, and the retirement of a hermit produced a deep and mature synthesis of Confucian, Daoist, and Buddhist perspectives in his poetry. In the three poems that follow, you can track his progression from friend of the Daoist Li Bo, to pacifist Confucian, to disillusioned hermit.

To Li Bo

Two years a sojourner in the Eastern Capital
 I saw enough of plotting and intrigue.
 Coming from the wilds my taste for greens
 Has left me hungry at the meat-filled meals.
 Can there truly be no vital grain
 To bring the glow of health back to my face?
 I am too poor for fine medicinal herbs
 And lose my way searching the mountain woods.

Lord Li, an elder of the Golden Court
 Has now withdrawn to seek in darkened dales;
 He wanders in the lands of Liang and Song,
 I pray he'll gather up the jadelike herbs.

Song of the Army Carts

Rattling carts and
 Whinnying steeds,
 Marching, bows slung by their sides;
 Their fathers and mothers and children and wives
 run by their ranks –
 The Bridge of Xianyang all lost
 in the dust –
 And catch at their clothes and clutch at their feet,
 and stand in the roadway and cry:
 Their cries go rising up to strike the clouds.

By the roadside, a passerby questions the
 marching men,
 Who can only reply, "They call us often now:
 Some were called at fifteen to guard the River north,
 At forty still they tilled the fortress fields,
 Sent off so young the village headmen had to wrap
 the cloths about the heads
 That came home white, only to return again
 to the garrison frontier.
 At border posts the flowing blood is like the sea--
 Yet the Martial Emperor does not cease
 to press the borders back.

"Haven't you heard of the two hundred counties
 east of the mountains in Han
 Where the thorns of the briars have overgrown
 the ten thousand hamlets and towns?
 Even where a sturdy wife may ply the hoe and plough,
 The grain lies over patchwork fields
 with borders overgrown.
 Worse still it is for troops from Qin,
 so able in bitter war,
 Driven to and fro, no different than dogs
 or flocks of farmyard fowl.

"You are so good as to ask us, sir,
 Yet how dare we reply?
 In a winter such as this
 When western forces have no rest,
 Desperate magistrates will demand their taxes,
 And where will these come from?
 Yes, we've learned that bearing sons is bad,
 And bearing daughters good:
 Your daughters can marry your neighbors,
 But your sons will lie buried beneath the wild grasses.

"My lord, have you never been to the ends of Qinghai,
 Where none come to gather bleached bones long dead,
 And the fresh spirits fret, and the old spirits weep,
 And the dark rain is full of their twittering cries?"

Leaving Qinzhou

I've grown lazy in my declining years,
 My daily tasks I don't plan for myself.
 When I've no food I look to the next life,
 When I've no clothes I think of southern lands.
 I hear that winters in Hanyuan
 The air is mild like fall;
 The greenery never wilts and dies,
 The hills and streams are fair.
 Liting, they say, is finer still,
 Valleys of fine rich fields.
 You fill your belly full with yams,
 And honey hangs in easy reach,
 You sail your boat on cool clear pools
 By groves of bamboo shoots.
 That journey, long and hard as it may be,
 Could bring my lifelong wandering to a close.
 Here, bustling crossroads everywhere I look,
 How close I feel the crowd of social cares.
 To hob and nob is not my natural self,
 Though I roam the hills my heart is never clear.
 No strange stones grace the valleys in this place,
 Its meager harvest gleaned from frontier fields.
 How could it ever comfort an old man?
 It would be hard to stay adrift here long.

Last sunbeam hidden by a lonely tower,
 Crow cries full above the city wall.
 Midnight: the carts issue forth,
 Horses watering by the cold pool.
 Towering high the stars and moon,
 Endless and dim the clouds of mist.
 So vast, all within heaven and earth!
 My way is long, so long.

Late Tang Poetry

The three Late Tang poets who are represented below express different aspects of the post-rebellion shift in Tang culture.

Bo Juyi (772-846)

Bo Juyi was famous for a combination of socially conscious poems and love poems. The poem represented here, in the persona of the Confucian magistrate, illustrates the tension between the political role that Confucians were expected to play and the urge to abandon themselves to the aesthetic values better associated with the Daoist tradition.

After Collecting the Autumn Taxes

From my high castle I look down below
 Where the natives of Ba cluster like a swarm of flies.
 How can I govern these people and lead them aright?
 I cannot even understand what they say.
 But at least I am glad, now that the taxes are in,
 To learn that in my province there is no discontent.
 I fear its prosperity is not due to me
 And was only caused by the year's abundant crops,
 The papers that lie on my desk are simple and few;
 My house by the moat is leisurely and still.
 In the autumn rain the berries fall from the eaves;
 At the evening bell the birds return to the wood.
 A broken sunlight quavers over the southern porch
 Where I lie on my couch abandoned to idleness.

— translated by Arthur Waley

Han Yu (768-824)

Han Yu was perhaps the most influential Confucian of the Late Tang. He was a rigid and puritan Confucian, who stridently protested official patronage of Buddhism and the high valuation of excessively flowery writing in government examinations. Banished from Chang'an for his intolerant arrogance, he won his way back to power and prestige through impressive feats of administration and military command in distant southern jurisdictions. Paradoxically, in the poem we see here, this Confucian paragon demonstrates his sympathy with the Daoist taste for withdrawal into nature and an almost Buddhistic meditation on the evanescence of life.

Evening: For My Friends Zhang Ji and Zhou Kuang

The sunlight thins, the view empties:
 Back from a walk, I lie under the front eaves.
 Fairweather clouds like torn fluff
 And the new moon like a whetted sickle.
 A zest for the fields and moors stirs in me,
 The ambition for robes of office has long since
 turned to loathing.
 While I live, shall I take your hand again
 Sighing that our years will soon be done?

— translated by A. C. Graham

Li He (791-817)

The last poet represented here, Li He, was an anomaly. A child prodigy as a poet, he was unable to pass the state examinations and wrote increasingly lurid poetry of an almost surreal quality until his early death at the age of twenty-six. The values Li expresses are hard to pin down, but above all they seem to capture an aesthetic voice of protest that pictures society as an almost absurdist play of people caught in forces beyond their moral control – Li He's social vision often comes close to Zhuangzi's, but with a more cynical tone. It is surprising to learn, therefore, that Li He's greatness was recognized by none other than Han Yu, who became his greatest patron and advocate.

Song of the Warden of Goose Gate

Black clouds press on the city walls
 till the walls are ready to fall.
 In the light of the moon the chain mail gleams,
 metal scales agape.
 The call of the horns start to fill the sky,
 all amidst the colors of fall.
 Like rouge painted skin, up over the pass,
 the purpled night congeals.

Our banner withdraws towards the River Yi,
 its crimson folds half furled.
 In the thick frost of dawn, the drums grown cold,
 their roll does not rise in the air.
 We repay now the gold that you hung from the tower
 to bring us to serve you, our lord –
 Dragon swords clutched in our hands raised high,
 now for our lord we shall die.

The Song of the Bronze Immortal Bidding Farewell to the Han

Preface: In the eighth month of the first year of the Qinglong reign period (233) Emperor Ming of Wei ordered his palace officers to drive carts to the west and obtain a statue of an immortal holding a dew basin on its head that had been cast for Emperor Wu of the Han Dynasty. He wished to place it in the anterior pavilion of his palace. After the officers had broken off the dew basin and were preparing to load the immortal into its cart, tears were seen flowing from its eyes. Thus have I, Li Changji [Li He], son of the royal lineage of the Tang, composed “The Song of the Bronze Immortal Bidding Farewell to the Han.”

Young Master Liu of the Maoling tomb,
 the guest of the autumn wind;*
 The neigh of his horse can be heard in the night,
 no trace of its hoofs in the dawn.

Figured balustrades, cassia trees,
 suspended in fragrance of fall;
 Over the thirty-six halls of the Han
 the emerald mosses unfold.

The trailing carts of the guardsmen of Wei,
 winding a thousand leagues,
 The acid winds of the eastern pass
 piercing the pits of their eyes.

Beneath the void where the Han moon hangs
 I am borne through the palace gate.
 Recalling my Lord the clear tears flow
 like lines of liquid lead.

Withering orchids see travelers off
 along the Xianyang road.
 If Heaven could only feel as we feel,
 then Heaven too would grow old.

Carrying my basin I go forth alone,
 cold wilderness under the moon.
 The Wei River city now far off behind,
 rippling waves fading away.

* Maoling was the tumulus of Liu Che, Emperor Wu of the Han, located in Chang'an, by the Wei River, near the old Qin capital of Xianyang. When young, the Emperor composed an ode to the autumn wind.