

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.