

Chinese Tang Poetry

The greatest Chinese poetry was written during the Tang dynasty (AD 618-906), a period of general peace and prosperity regarded by historians as a high point in Chinese civilisation and a golden age of cosmopolitan culture. This period produced China's two greatest poets: Li Bai (AD 701-762) and Du Fu (AD 712-770) who together cover the whole spectrum of human life and feeling.

Li Bai (李白)

Approximately 1,100 of Li Bai's poems remain today. His poems represent his unusual imagination and his free and direct expression of feelings. He is often associated with Daoism and there is a strong element of striking Daoist imagery in his works.

Quiet Night Thoughts (靜夜思)

床前明月光。 Before my bed there is bright moonlight,
疑是地上霜。 So that it seems like frost on the ground:
舉頭望明月。 Lifting my head I watch the bright moon,
低頭思故鄉。 Lowering my head I dream that I'm home.

Li Po and Tu Fu trans. Arthur Cooper, London: Penguin Books, 1973.

Drinking Alone by Moonlight (月下獨酌)

花間一壺酒。 A cup of wine, under the flowering trees;
獨酌無相親。 I drink alone, for no friend is near.
舉杯邀明月。 Raising my cup I beckon the bright moon,
對影成三人。 For her, with my shadow, will make three people.
月既不解飲。 The moon, alas, is no drinker of wine;
影徒隨我身。 Listless, my shadow creeps about at my side.
暫伴月將影。 Yet with the moon as friend and the shadow as slave
行樂須及春。 I must make merry before the Spring is spent.
我歌月徘徊。 To the songs I sing the moon flickers her beams;
我舞影零亂。 In the dance I weave my shadow tangles and breaks.

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醒時同交歡。 While we were sober, three shared the fun;
醉後各分散。 Now we are drunk, each goes their way.
永結無情遊。 May we long share our eternal friendship,
相期邈雲漢。 And meet at last on the Cloudy River of the sky.
trans. Arthur Waley

Du Fu (杜甫)

Du Fu's poems have been described as 'poetic history' since most of his characteristic poems are historical, political and autobiographical. The turning points in Du Fu's life were his friendship with Li Bai and the civil war, which opened his eyes to the sufferings of the common people.

A Fine Lady (佳人)

絕代有佳人， There is a fine lady of matchless beauty,
幽居在空谷。 Who lives obscurely in a lonely valley.
自云良家子， She says she is the daughter of a good family,
零落依草木。 Driven by misfortunes into the wilds.
關中昔喪亂， When of late the heartlands were convulsed with disorder,
兄弟遭殺戮。 Her brothers met their deaths at the hands of the rebels.
官高何足論， The high rank they had held was
不得收骨肉。 all unavailing: She could not entreat their dead bodies for burial.
世情惡衰歇， The way of the world is to hate what has had its day;
萬事隨轉燭。 And fortune is as fickle as a lamp-flame.
夫婿輕薄兒， Her husband is not faithful to her,
新人美如玉。 His new woman is as lovely as a jewel.
合昏尚知時， Even the vetch-tree knows when it is evening;
鴛鴦不獨宿。 And the mandarin ducks do not sleep alone
但見新人笑， Yet he has only for the smiles of the new woman,
那聞舊人哭。 No ear for the sobbing of the old.

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在山泉水清， In the mountain the waters of the stream are clear,
出山泉水濁。 But once they have left the mountain they are muddy.
侍婢賣珠迴， When her servant-girl back from selling her pearls,
牽蘿補茅屋。 She has to pull creepers to cover the holes in the thatched roof with.
摘花不插髮， The flowers which the lady picks are not for wearing in her hair;
采柏動盈掬。 Of bitter cypress she plucks many a handful.
天寒翠袖薄， Her gay blue sleeves are thin against the cold,
日暮倚修竹。 As evening falls she rests by the tall bamboos.

A little Primer of Tu Fu. Trans. David Hawkes, Oxford: the Claredon Press, 1967

Dreaming of Li Bai (1) (夢李白二首之一)

死別已吞聲， After the separation of death one can eventually swallow back one's grief,
生別常惻惻。 but the separation of the living is an endless, unappeasable anxiety
江南瘴癘地， From pestilent Jiangnan,
逐客無消息。 no news arrives of the poor exile.
故人入我夢， That my old should come into my dream shows
明我長相憶。 how constantly he is in my thoughts.
君今在羅網， Lying now enmeshed in the net of the law,
何以有羽翼。 how did you find wings with which to fly here?
恐非平生魂， I fear that this is not the soul of the living man,
路遠不可測。 The journey is so immediately far.
魂來楓林青， when your soul left, the maple woods were green,
魂返關塞黑。 On its return the passes were black with night.
落月滿屋梁， The light of the sinking moon illumines every beam and rather my chamber,
猶疑照顏色。 and I half expect it to light up your face.
水深波浪闊， The water is deep, the waves are wide:
無使蛟龍得。 don't let the water-dragons get you!

A little Primer of Tu Fu. Trans. David Hawkes, Oxford: the Claredon Press, 1967.

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