

# Wine-Cup Immortal

Li Bai (701-762 CE), also known as Li Po, was one of the famous Tang dynasty poets who called themselves the *Eight Immortals of the Wine Cup* (an irreverent allusion to the Eight Immortals of Taoism). Li Bai wrote prolifically, and over 1000 of his poems survive. Much of his life is mythical, the stuff of novels rather than of history (Elegant, 1997). He was a devotee of Taoism, a fine swordsman, and a great lover of wine. In his youth he served the emperor. After becoming involved in one of the rebellions, however, he was exiled from the court. He then spent much of his later life wandering “beyond the gorges” in the hinterland of Imperial China. Legend has it that he died drunkenly trying to embrace the moon’s reflection in the Yangtze River, but his death was perhaps a suicide. The illustrated portrait (from the Tokyo National Museum) was painted by Liang Kai










in the early 13<sup>th</sup> century. The seal in the upper right corner signals that the painting was owned by Anigo, an important official in the Imperial court of the Yuan dynasty.

Appreciating Chinese poetry requires seeing as well as hearing. The beauty of the calligraphy is as important to the

poetry as the music of the words. The poems are therefore difficult to assess without some feeling for the characters in which they are written, since these allude to meanings beyond those directly expressed by the spoken words. This post therefore begins with a few notes on Chinese characters.

Some Chinese characters derive from pictograms (simplified images):

Pictogram	Character	Sound	Meaning
	日	rì	sun
	月	yuè	moon
	山	shān	mountain
	水	shuǐ	water
	雨	yǔ	rain
	目	mù	eye
	人	rén	person
	木	mù	tree

Other characters derive from ideograms (graphic representations of an idea):

上	shàng	above	下	xià	below
中	zhōng	middle	不	bù	not
一	yī	one	二	èr	two
三	sān	three	五	wǔ	five

Most characters are formed by combining other characters. Some

of the combinations are based on the meaning of the components; others are based on their sound:

木 (mù, tree)	+	木 (mù, tree)	=	林	lín	forest
口 (kǒu, mouth)	+	“away”	=	言	yán	words
日 (rì, sun)	+	月 (yuè, moon)	=	明	míng	bright
女 (nǚ, woman)	+	子 (zǐ, child)	=	好	hǎo	good



In Li Bai's name, the character Li means "Plum" – a tree on top with many children (blossoms) below. The character Bai means "white" – it originally comes from a pictogram of an acorn (which is white inside).

Chinese poetry has a long history. *The Book of Poetry* was compiled around 600 BCE. Confucius (551-479 BCE) made it an essential part of the education of a scholar or statesman. By the time of Li Bai court poetry had become quite regular – common forms were an octet or a quatrain of five-syllable lines, with every second line rhyming. The following quatrain is one of Li Bai's most famous poems. The English translation is by Arthur Cooper and the Chinese calligraphy is by Shui Chien-Tung (Cooper 1973):

靜夜思  
牀前明月光  
疑是地上霜  
舉頭望明月  
低頭思故鄉

## Quiet Night Thoughts

Before my bed there is bright moonlight  
So that it seems like frost on the ground;  
Lifting my head I watch the bright moon,  
Lowering my head I dream that I'm home.

Chinese poetry is generally written from top to bottom and from right to left. For simplicity, the following representation of the poem together with the word for word translation presents the characters from left to right to facilitate listening to the sound and following the translations.

靜夜思	Quiet Night Thoughts					jìng yè sī				
床前明月光	bed	front	bright	moon	shine	chuáng	qián	míng	yuè	guāng
疑是地上霜	suspect	is	ground	top	frost	yí	shì	dì	shàng	shuāng
舉頭望明月	raise	head	gaze	bright	moon	jǔ	tóu	wàng	míng	yuè
低頭思故鄉	lower	head	think	old	home	dī	tóu	sī	gù	xiāng

The original Chinese for Quiet Night Thoughts is from Zong-Qi Cai's anthology (2008). The reading of the poem in Chinese (by an unknown reader) is from the [sound files](http://creatureandcreator.ca/wp-content/uploads/2014/03/lipo_quiet-night-thoughts.mp3) associated with the anthology:

[http://creatureandcreator.ca/wp-content/uploads/2014/03/lipo\\_quiet-night-thoughts.mp3](http://creatureandcreator.ca/wp-content/uploads/2014/03/lipo_quiet-night-thoughts.mp3)

The following is an octet of Li Bai that celebrates the joys of drinking by moonlight:

花間一壺酒	flowers	among	one	pot	wine	huā jiān yī hú jiǔ
獨酌無相親	alone	drink	no	mutual	dear	dú zhuó wú xiāng qīn
舉杯邀明月	lift	cup	invite	bright	moon	jǔ bēi yāo míng yuè
對影成三人	face	shadow	become	three	men	duì yǐng chéng sān rén
月既不解飲	moon	not	not	understand	drink	yuè jì bù jiě yǐn
影徒隨我身	shadow	vainly	follow	my	body	yǐng tú suí wǒ shēn
暫伴月將影	temporary	with	moon	with	shadow	zàn bàn yuè jiāng yǐng
行樂須及春	practise	pleasure	must	catch	spring	xíng lè xū jí chūn
我歌月徘徊	I	sing	moon	linger	to-and-fro	wǒ gē yuè pái huí
我舞影零亂	I	dance	shadow	scatter	disorderly	wǒ wǔ yǐng líng luàn
醒時同交歡	wake	time	together	exchange	joy	xǐng shí tóng jiāo huān
醉後各分散	rapt	after	each	separate	disperse	zuì hòu gè fēn sǎn
永結無情遊	always	tie	no	passion	friendship	yǒng jiē wú qíng yóu
相期邈雲漢	mutual	expect	distant	cloud	river	xiāng qī miǎo yún hàn

A translation of the poem by Arthur Waley (1919) reads

### Drinking Alone by Moonlight

A cup of wine, under the flowering trees;  
 Raising my cup I beckon the bright moon,  
 For he, with my shadow, will make three men.

The moon, alas, is no drinker of wine;  
Listless, my shadow creeps about at my side.  
Yet with the moon as friend and the shadow as slave  
I must make merry before the Spring is spent.  
To the songs I sing the moon flickers her beams;  
In the dance I weave my shadow tangles and breaks.  
While we were sober, three shared the fun;  
Now we are drunk, each goes their way.  
May we long share our odd, inanimate feast,  
And meet at last on the Cloudy River of the sky.

Chinese poetry has both rhyme and rhythm (Liu, 1962; Cai, 2008). The rhymes often come at the end of every second line (e.g. in *Drinking Alone by Moonlight*). Rhymes are mainly determined by the vowels, and less related to the attendant consonants. However, many of the rhymes depend on pronunciation that was current in the time that the poem was written, and may not always be apparent in the way the poem sounds nowadays. Chinese is a tonal language with the vowels showing unchanging, descending, descending-ascending, and ascending pitches. These changes are represented in the accents above the pinyin transliterations. The first type of vowel has a longer duration than the others. The rhythm of the poetry depends on both the duration of the vowel and the different changes in pitch.

Recitations of the poem *Drinking Alone by Moonlight* are available in both English and Chinese at [Librivox](#).

Li Bai also invented new poetic forms. The following poem has lines of three, five and seven words (translation and calligraphy in Cooper, 1973).

三五七言  
秋風清秋月明落葉聚還散  
空鵝棲復驚相思相見知何日  
此時此夜難為情

### Three five seven words

The autumn wind is light,  
The autumn moon is bright;

Fallen leaves gather but then disperse,  
A cold crow roosts but again he stirs.

I think of you, and wonder when I'll see you again?  
At such an hour, on such a night, cruel is love's pain!

The translation of Chinese poetry is difficult. The first translations of Chinese poetry into a European language were in French by Judith Gautier and the Marquis d'Hervey Saint-

Denis in the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century. These were further translated from French into German by Hans Bethge, who published *Die Chinese Flöte* (Chinese Flute) in 1907.

Gustav Mahler adapted seven of the Bethge poems for his 1911 song cycle *Das Lied von der Erde*. The following are excerpts from the beginning of two of the songs, translated from the German to English. The tenor is Fritz Wunderlich; Otto Klemperer conducts the New Philharmonia Orchestra; the recording is by EMI in 1967.

**Trinklied vom Jammer der Erde** (Drinking Song of the Earth's Sorrow)

The wine already beckons from the golden goblet,  
but don't drink just yet – first, I'll sing you a song!  
The song of sorrow shall sound out  
in laughter in your soul. When sorrow draws near,  
the gardens of the soul lie wasted,>  
both joy and song wilt and die.>  
Dark is life, dark is death.

[http://creatureandcreator.ca/wp-content/uploads/2014/03/mahler\\_wunderlich\\_trinklied\\_beginning.mp3](http://creatureandcreator.ca/wp-content/uploads/2014/03/mahler_wunderlich_trinklied_beginning.mp3)

**Von der Jugend** (Of Youth)

In the middle of the little lake  
stands a pavilion made of green  
and white porcelain.  
Like a tiger's back  
the bridge of jade arches  
across to the pavilion.  
Friends sit in the little house,  
beautifully dressed, drinking, chatting;  
some are writing down verses.

[http://creatureandcreator.ca/wp-content/uploads/2014/03/mahler\\_wunderlich\\_jugend-beginning.mp3](http://creatureandcreator.ca/wp-content/uploads/2014/03/mahler_wunderlich_jugend-beginning.mp3)



The “translations” are full of mistakes. The line “Dark is Life, dark is Death” (Dunkel ist das Leben, ist der Tod) is an interpolation that fits with the idea of Li Bai’s poem but is not so directly stated in the original Chinese. The porcelain pavilion is actually the pavilion owned by someone named Tao (which can also mean “porcelain”). Bethge called his poems *Nachdichtungen* (recreations). The [Mahler Archives](#) has a wonderful website that describes the changes in the translations leading to *Das Lied von der Erde*.

The first major translations of Chinese poetry into English were by Ezra Pound (1885-1972) in his 1915 book *Cathay*. At the time, Pound knew no Chinese, and his translations were based on the notes that Ernest Fenellosa, an American art historian working in Tokyo, had made from discussions with two Japanese professors (Mori and Ariga). These notes were given posthumously to Pound by Fenellosa’s widow. Despite his lack of any understanding of the originals, Pound’s translations are true and forceful (Yip, 1969). Most of the poems in *Cathay* are by Rihaku – the way that the characters of Li Bai’s name are pronounced in Japanese. As well as the *hiragana* and *katakana* symbols (*hiragana* and *katakana*), Japanese writing also uses many Chinese characters (*kanji*), but these are pronounced differently from the Chinese.

The following is one of Li Bai’s poems that became famous with the Pound translation. Pound combined the poem with a summary of Fenellosa’s notes that has its own cryptic beauty

### **The Jewelled Stair Grievance**

The jewelled steps are already quite white with dew,  
It is so late that the dew soaks my gauze stockings,  
And I let down the crystal curtain  
And watch the moon through the clear autumn.

NOTE: Jewel stairs, therefore a palace. Grievance, therefore there is something to complain of. Gauze stockings, therefore

a court lady, not a servant who complains. Clear autumn, therefore he has no excuse on account of the weather. Also she has come early, for the dew has not merely whitened the stairs, but has soaked her stockings. The poem is especially prized because she utters no direct reproach.

More recent translations are by David Hinton (1996):

Night long on the jade staircase, white  
dew appears, soaks through gauze stockings.  
She lets down crystalline blinds, gazes out  
through jewel lacework at the autumn moon.

and by Charles Egan (in Z-Q Cai, 2008);

On jade stairs, the rising white dew  
Through the long night pierces silken hose  
Retreating inside, she lowers crystal shades  
And stares at the glimmering autumn moon.

The story behind the poem is only hinted at. A lady at the palace in love with the emperor finds herself no longer in his fancy. The autumn moon suggests the cooling of their summer passion. The crystal curtains suggest that the scene is viewed through tears. Pound puts the poem into the first person. Though not indicated in the original, this personal point of view accentuates the longing and the regret. Another translation that follows Pound's use of the first person is available on [Mark Alexander's webpage](#) which provides translations for many different Chinese poems.

Discerning the true meaning of a poem through different translations is a little like looking for the numinous through different scriptures.

Another of Pound's translations records the story of a young woman, married in youth and innocence, learning to love her husband and finding out that love can bring sorrow as well as happiness.

## The River Merchant's Wife

While my hair was still cut straight across my  
forehead  
I played about the front gate, pulling flowers.  
You came by on bamboo stilts, playing horse;  
You walked about my seat, playing with blue plums.  
And we went on living in the village of Chokan:  
Two small people, without dislike or suspicion.

At fourteen I married My Lord you.  
I never laughed, being bashful.  
Lowering my head, I looked at the wall.  
Called to, a thousand times, I never looked back.

At fifteen I stopped scowling,  
I desired my dust to be mingled with yours  
Forever and forever and forever.  
Why should I climb the lookout?

At sixteen you departed,  
You went into far Ku-to-en, by the river of swirling  
eddies,  
And you have been gone five months.  
The monkeys make sorrowful noise overhead.

You dragged your feet when you went out.  
By the gate now, the moss is grown, the different  
mosses,  
Too deep to clear them away!  
The leaves fall early this autumn, in wind.  
The paired butterflies are already yellow with August  
Over the grass in the West garden –  
They hurt me. I grow older.  
If you are coming down through the narrows of the  
river Kiang,  
Please let me know beforehand,  
And I will come out to meet you

As far as Cho-fo-Sa.

Li Bai was very musical and many of his poems deal with the sounds of the lyre or the flute. Harry Partch composed *17 lyrics of Li Po* in the early 1930s using the translations of Shigeyoshi Obata (1928). He tried to remove the music from the tonality conventions of the Western traditions. The following is one of the lyrics. It is intoned by Stephan Kalm (who provides the flute sounds as well as the words) with accompaniment on tenor violin by Ted Mook. The recording is by Tzadik, 1995.

Whence comes this voice of sweet bamboo?  
Flying in the dark?  
It flies with the spring wind,  
Hovering over the city of Lo.  
How memories of home come back tonight!  
Hark! the plaintive tune of "Willow Breaking",p>

[http://creatureandcreator.ca/wp-content/uploads/2014/03/partch\\_lipo\\_flute.mp3](http://creatureandcreator.ca/wp-content/uploads/2014/03/partch_lipo_flute.mp3)

("Willow-Breaking" is the name of a sad folk song.)

Li Bai spent some time in the monasteries that were scattered through the hills of China, and became adept at meditation, or *zazen*. One of his poems (translated by [Sam Hamill](#), 2000) gives the essence of this process. Jing Ting mountain is near Xuancheng city in the Anhui province of China. Further notes on the poem and a version of the poem in song are available on the webpage of [Shirley Yiping Zhang](#).

### **Zazen on Ching-t'ing Mountain**

The birds have vanished down the sky.  
Now the last cloud drains away.  
We sit together, the mountain and me,  
until only the mountain remains.

独坐敬亭山

dú zuò jìng tíng shān    alone sit Jing Ting mountain

众鸟高飞尽

zhòng niǎo gāo fēi jìn    many birds high fly end

孤云独去闲

gū yún dú qù xián    solitary cloud alone go free

相看两不厌

xiàng kàn liǎng bú yàn    each-other watch two not tired

只有敬亭山

zhǐ yǒu jìng tíng shān    nothing-but is Jing Ting mountain

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