The overall goal is to try to read and think these poems without completely understanding what they mean! Try to feel the mood they convey. Be ready to discuss them!

Quiet Night Thoughts by Li Bai, translated by Andrius Kulikauskas

Chinese Poetry: An Anthology of Major Modes and Genres, Wai-Lim Yip, Editor and Translator

Ballad of the Mulberry Road (From the Yueh-Fu Collection of Ballad-Songs of the Bureau of Music in the Han Dynasty)

Some short poems from the Tang Dynasty

Poems by the greatest Chinese woman poet, Li Qingzhao, of the Song Dynasty, at famouspoetsandpoems.com
   A Friend Sends Her Perfumed Carriage
   A Morning Dream
   A Song of Departure

How to Read Chinese Poetry: A Guided Anthology, Zong-Qi Cai, Editor

Short poems from the Tang Dynasty
静夜思
Jing Ye Si
床前明月光
Chuang qian ming yue guang
疑是地上霜
Yi shi di shang shuang
举头望明月
Ji tou wang ming yue
低头思故乡
Di tou si gu xiang

Beyond the bed - bright moon shines -
I think on the ground is frost.
I raise my head - see bright moon,
I lower my head - think of home.
BALLAD OF THE MULBERRY ROAD

I
1. The sun rises in the southeast corner.
2. Shining upon the chambers of our Ch’ins.
3. In them a pretty girl.
5. Lo-fu loves silkworms and mulberry trees.
6. She plucks leaves south of the walls.
7. Green silk for her basket trappings.
8. Cassia bough for her basket handle.
9. On her head, a dangling plait.
10. At her ears, bright moon pearls.
11. Yellow satin for her skirt beneath.
12. Purple satin for her short-coat above.
13. Passersby seeing Lo-fu
14. Put down their loads to twirl their mustaches and beard.
15. Young men seeing Lo-fu
16. Take off their hats to redo their head-dresses.
17. Farmers forget their ploughs.
18. Hoemen forget their hoes.
19. When they get home they are all irritated.
20. After having watched Lady Lo-fu.

II
21. From the south comes the Prefect.
22. His five horses falter their pace.
23. The Prefect sends an officer over
24. To ask whose daughter she can be.
25. “In the chamber of Ch’in the pretty girl

III
26. Self-named Lo-fu.”
27. “How old, tell me, is this Lo-fu?”
28. “Not quite twenty
29. But well past her teens.”
30. The Prefect sends words to Lo-fu:
31. “Would you ride together with me?”
32. Lo-fu walks up and to him says:
33. “How unthinking you are!
34. Just as you have your wife,
35. I, too, have my husband.”

III
36. “From the east, a thousand horses.
37. My husband rides at the head.
38. How to tell my husband?
39. White steed followed by black colt,
40. Green silk hangs from its tail,
41. Gold trappings upon its head.
42. At his waist, a windlass sword
43. Worthy of million pieces of gold.
44. At fifteen, he became a page.
45. At twenty, he attended court.
46. At thirty, among the emperor’s council.
47. At forty, assigned to govern a city.
48. He is a man, clean and white
49. With quite some beard.
50. Stately, he walks to the Prefecture.
51. Proudly, he steps back and forth.
52. Seated there, several thousand men.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>1. empty</th>
<th>mountain</th>
<th>not</th>
<th>see</th>
<th>man</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2. but</td>
<td>hear</td>
<td>man's</td>
<td>voice</td>
<td>sound</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. reflecting</td>
<td>shadow</td>
<td>enter</td>
<td>deep</td>
<td>forest</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(i.e., sun's reflection)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. again and</td>
<td>shine</td>
<td>green</td>
<td>moss</td>
<td>upon</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

1. Empty mountain: no man.
2. But voices of men are heard.
3. Sun's reflections reaches into the woods
4. And shines upon the green moss.
竹里館
王維

獨坐幽篁裏
彈琴復長嘯
深林人不知
明月來相照

**BAMBOO GROVE Wang Wei**

1. alone | sit | dark secluded | bamboo/s | among
2. strum | lute | and again | long | whistle
3. deep | forest | man | not | know
4. bright | moon | come | mutual-each-other | shine*

1. I sit alone among dark bamboos.
2. Strum the lute and let loose my voice.
3. Grove so deep, no one knows.
4. The moon visits and shines on me.
**HSIN-I VILLAGE** Wang Wei

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>1. tree</th>
<th>tip</th>
<th>hibiscus</th>
<th>___</th>
<th>flower</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2. mountain</td>
<td>middle</td>
<td>set-forth</td>
<td>red</td>
<td>calyx</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. stream</td>
<td>hut; home</td>
<td>still; silent</td>
<td>no</td>
<td>man</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. profuse-</td>
<td>profuse</td>
<td>open</td>
<td>and</td>
<td>fall</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

1. High on tree-tips, the hibiscus.
2. In the mountain sets forth red calyxes.
3. A home by a stream, quiet. No man.
4. It blooms and falls, blooms and falls.
春晓

孟浩然

春眠不觉晓，
处处闻啼鸟。
夜来风雨声，
花落知多少。

SPRINGTIME SLEEP Meng Hao-jan (699–740)

| 1. spring | sleep | not | aware-of dawn |
| 2. everywhere | -- | hear | singing | bird/s |
| 3. night (since last night) | come | wind | rain | sound |
| 4. flower/s | fall | know | how | many |

1. Springtime sleep: too deep to know dawn.
2. Everywhere, birds sing.
3. Entire last night: winds and rains.
4. Falling flowers: how many?

宿建徳江

孟浩然

移舟泊烟渚，
日暮客愁新。
野旷天低树，
江清月近人。
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>move</th>
<th>boat</th>
<th>moor</th>
<th>smoke</th>
<th>shore</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2.</td>
<td>sun</td>
<td>dusk</td>
<td>traveler</td>
<td>grief</td>
<td>new</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.</td>
<td>wilds (vast wilderness)</td>
<td>far-reaching</td>
<td>sky</td>
<td>low/er</td>
<td>tree</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.</td>
<td>river</td>
<td>clear</td>
<td>moon</td>
<td>near/s</td>
<td>man</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

1. A boat slows, moors by beach-run in smoke.
2. Sun fades: a traveler’s sorrow freshens.
4. Limpid river: clear moon close to man.

Another:
A boat slows,
moors by
beach-run in smoke.
Sun fades:
a traveler’s sorrow
freshens.
Open wilderness.
Wide sky.
A stretch of low trees.
Limpid river:
clear moon
close to
man.
WU-CHÜEH: TWO POEMS Tu Fu

NO. 1

1. late sun river/s mountain/s beautiful
2. spring wind/s flower/s grass fragrant
3. soil thaw fly swallow/s —
4. sand warm sleep drake-and-duck

1. Lingering sun: rivers and mountains brighten.
2. Spring winds: flowers and grass give out scent.
3. Soil thaws and swallows fly.

NO. 2

1. river jade-green bird/s more white
2. mountain/s green flower/s about-to-burn

3. this spring see again pass (-away)
4. which (when) day is return year

1. Jade river: birds are dazzling white and whiter.
2. Green mountains: flowers seem to flame.
3. This spring: look! is going.
4. What day is the day of return?
ASCEND THE HERON TOWER  Wang Chih-huan (695–?)

1. white  sun  follow  mountain  end
2. yellow river enter sea flow
3. to; want exhaust thousand mile eye sight
4. again up one level tower
once more (one more flight of stairs)

1. White sun ends with the mountains.
2. Yellow River flows on into the sea.
3. To widen the ken of a thousand miles,
4. Up, up another flight of stairs.
AUTUMN NIGHT: A LETTER SENT TO CH’IU

Wei Ying-wu (773–828)

1. Thinking of you, in autumn night,
2. Strolling, chanting the cool air.
3. Empty mountain: pine cones fall.
4. Secluded man: staying up, still?

*(1) to keep him company by shining; (2) illumination; (3) the primary meaning of shining.
D. CH'I-CHÜEH
(SEVEN-CHARACTER FOUR-LINE
"CURTAILED" POEMS)

黃鶴樓送孟浩然之廣陵

故人西辭黃鶴樓
煙花三月下揚州
孤帆遠影碧空盡
唯見長江天際流

TO SEE MENG HAO-JAN OFF TO YANG-CHOU Li Po

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>1. old</th>
<th>friend</th>
<th>west</th>
<th>depart</th>
<th>Yellow</th>
<th>Crane</th>
<th>Tower</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2. smoke</td>
<td>flower</td>
<td>third</td>
<td>month</td>
<td>down</td>
<td>Yang</td>
<td>Chou</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. lone</td>
<td>sail</td>
<td>distant</td>
<td>shade</td>
<td>blue</td>
<td>sky</td>
<td>end (v.)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. only</td>
<td>see</td>
<td>long (the Yangtze)</td>
<td>river</td>
<td>sky</td>
<td>end</td>
<td>flow</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

1. My old friend takes off from the Yellow Crane Tower.
2. In smoke-flower third month down to Yangchou.
3. A lone sail, a distant shade, lost in the blue horizon.
4. Only the long Yangtze is seen flowing into the sky.

春夜洛城聞笛

誰家玉笛暗飛聲
散入春風滿洛城
此夜曲中聞折柳
何人不起故園情
1. Whose jade-flute is this, notes flying invisibly
2. Scatter into spring winds, filling City of Loyang?
3. Hearing the “Break-a-Willow-Twig” tonight,
4. Who can withhold the surge of thoughts of home?
**COMPLAINT FROM A LADY’S CHAMBER**

*Wang Ch’ang-ling (698–765?)*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>1. lady’s-chamber</th>
<th>midst</th>
<th>young lady</th>
<th>not know</th>
<th>sadness</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2. spring</td>
<td>day</td>
<td>full makeup</td>
<td>ascend</td>
<td>jade green</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. suddenly</td>
<td>see</td>
<td>field head</td>
<td>willow</td>
<td>—</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. regret</td>
<td>to-have-adviced husband</td>
<td>seek</td>
<td>high-tiles-such-as-lord, duke, etc.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

1. *In the chamber the lady knows no sadness.*
2. *Spring day, dressed up, she climbs a tower of jade.*
3. *She sees suddenly the willow’s green in the fields*
4. *And regrets having sent her husband to seek imperial titles.*
泊秦淮

烟笼寒水月笼沙，
夜泊秦淮近酒家。
商女不知亡国恨，
隔江犹唱后庭花。

MOORING AT RIVER CH’IN-HUAI Tu Mu (803–952)

| 1. smoke | shroud | cold | water | moon | shroud | sand |
| 2. night | moor   | Ch’ in | Huai  | near | wine   | shop |
| 3. merchant | daughter/s not | know | lost | kingdom | grief |
| 4. across | river | still | sing | Rear | Court | Flower/s |

1. Smoke shrouds cold water, moonlight shrouds sand.
2. Night-mooring at Ch’in-huai, close to wineshops.
3. You ask: when to return? Don’t know when.
4. Pa Shan’s night rains swell autumn pools.
3. When can we trim candles together at West Window
4. And talk of Pa Shan, Pa Shan of night rains?
A Friend Sends Her Perfumed Carriage
by Li Qingzhao

A friend sends her perfumed carriage
And high-bred horses to fetch me.
I decline the invitation of
My old poetry and wine companion.

I remember the happy days in the lost capital.
We took our ease in the woman's quarters.
The Feast of Lanterns was elaborately celebrated -
Folded pendants, emerald hairpins, brocaded girdles,
New sashes - we competed
To see who was most smartly dressed.
Now I am withering away,
Wind-blown hair, frost temples.
I prefer to stay beyond the curtains,
And listen to talk and laughter
I can no longer share.

A Morning Dream
by Li Qingzhao

This morning I dreamed I followed
Widely spaced bells, ringing in the wind,
And climbed through mists to rosy clouds.
I realized my destined affinity
With An Ch'i-sheng the ancient sage.
I met unexpectedly O Lu-hua
The heavenly maiden.

Together we saw lotus roots as big as boats.
Together we ate jujubes as huge as melons.
We were the guests of those on swaying lotus seats.
They spoke in splendid language,
Full of subtle meanings.
The argued with sharp words over paradoxes.
We drank tea brewed on living fire.

Although this might not help the Emperor to govern,
It is endless happiness.
The life of men could be like this.

Why did I have to return to my former home,
Wake up, dress, sit in meditation.
Cover my ears to shut out the disgusting racket.
My heart knows I can never see my dream come true.
At least I can remember
That world and sigh.
A Song of Departure
by Li Qingzhao

Warm rain and soft breeze by turns
Have just broken
And driven away the chill.
Moist as the pussy willows,
Light as the plum blossoms,
Already I feel the heart of Spring vibrating.
But now who will share with me
The joys of wine and poetry?
Tears streak my rouge.
My hairpins are too heavy.
I put on my new quilted robe
Sewn with gold thread
And throw myself against a pile of pillows,
Crushing my phoenix hairpins.
Alone, all I can embrace is my endless sorrow.
I know a good dream will never come.
So I stay up till past midnight
Trimming the lamp flower’s smoking wick.
### Spring Day: Thinking of Li Po

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>1. Po</th>
<th>(part.)</th>
<th>poetry</th>
<th>no</th>
<th>match</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2. soaring</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>thought</td>
<td>not</td>
<td>common</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>untrammeled</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. clear</td>
<td>fresh</td>
<td>Yu</td>
<td>K'ai Fu</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(i.e., the official title Yu Hsin holds, referring honorifically to the man himself)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. vigorous</td>
<td>flowing</td>
<td>Pao</td>
<td>T'san</td>
<td>Chün</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>outstanding</td>
<td>(i.e., Pao Chao)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Wei</td>
<td>north</td>
<td>spring</td>
<td>day</td>
<td>tree/s</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(i.e., spring season)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. river</td>
<td>east</td>
<td>day</td>
<td>dusk</td>
<td>cloud/s</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. what</td>
<td>time</td>
<td>one</td>
<td>vessel</td>
<td>wine</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>jar; bottle</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. again</td>
<td>with</td>
<td>closely</td>
<td>discuss</td>
<td>literature</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>to-great-detail belles lettres</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

1. Li Po’s poetry: no match anywhere.
2. Soaring, his imagination always above others.
3. Clear, fresh like Yu Hsin.
4. Vigorous, free-flowing like Pao Chao.
7. When can we talk about literature again
8. Over a bottle of wine?
## FROM MISCELLANEOUS POEMS OF CH'IN-CHOU Tu Fu

| 1. vast (disorder) | — | ten-thousand layer/s | mountain/s |  
| 2. lone | city | mountain | valley | middle |  
| 3. no | wind | cloud | emerge | fortress |  
| 4. not | night | moon | hover-over | pass |  
| 5. Vassal | State | return | how | late |  
| (i.e., Su-wu, the well-known Han envoy's official title) |  
| 6. Lou | Lan | beheading | Not-yet | return |  
| (i.e., Fu Chien-tzu, who has the king of Lou) |  
| Lan beheaded (or allying with the Huns) |  
| 7. smoke | dust | alone | long-time | watch |  
| (i.e., bonfire) |  
| 8. spent | wind | now | destroy | face |  
| decaying |  

1. A chaos of mountains upon mountains.
2. Among them, in a valley, an isolated city.
3. No wind: clouds driven out of the fortress.
4. Not even night: the moon looms over the pass.
5. Why is the envoy so late in his return?
6. To await the killing of the barbarian chief?
7. Smoke-dust across such vast space:
8. Spent wind is ravaging my face.


**SPRING SCENE** Tu Fu (712–770)

1. empire  broken  mountain/s river  exist; remain
2. city  spring  grass  tree/s  thick; deep
3. feel  times  flower/s splash tear/s
4. hate; separation  bird/s startle heart
   distressed by
5. beacon  fire/s continue  three month/s
6. home  letter  equal/s ten-thousand taels
7. white  head  scratch  even  short/er
8. simply  —  not  able-to pin

1. All ruins, the empire; mountains and rivers in view.
2. To the city, spring: grass and trees so thick.
5. Beacon fires continued for three months on end.
6. A letter from home is worth thousands of gold pieces.
7. White hair, scratched, becomes thinner and thinner,
8. So thin it can hardly hold a pin.
Spring Scene

The country is broken, but mountains and rivers remain,
2 The city enters spring, grass and trees have grown thick.
Feeling the time, flowers shed tears,
4 Hating separation, a bird startles the heart.
Beacon fires span over three months,
6 A family letter equals ten thousand tuels of gold
   My white hairs, as I scratch them, grow more sparse,
8 Simply becoming unable to hold hairpins.

[QTS 7:224:2:404]

Reading this translation, an English reader may not find the kind of poetic greatness that he or she has encountered in, say, Shakespeare, Wordsworth, or Keats. There is no profound philosophical or religious contemplation, no astonishing flights of imagination, no dazzling display of poetic diction. Nonetheless, as I shall demonstrate, Du Fu’s “Spring Scene” deserves no less acclaim. The poetic greatness of Du Fu is of an entirely different kind. To appreciate it fully, we must go beyond the English translation and find out how the poem was composed and read in the original.

Word and Image
To begin, let us look at a word-for-word translation of the poem and consider its use of words and images:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Disyllabic unit</th>
<th>Trisyllabic unit</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>country</td>
<td>mountain</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>broken</td>
<td>river</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>remain</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>city</td>
<td>spring</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>grass</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>wood</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>thick</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>feel</td>
<td>time</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>flowers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>shed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>tear</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>hate</td>
<td>separation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>bird</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>startle</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>heart</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>破山河在</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>鞠躬草木深</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>感時花難開</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>恨別鳥驚心</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
One of the pivotal figures in creating a distinctively Late Tang poetic landscape is Li He (791–817). Li He came to be viewed as the very embodiment of many characteristic Late Tang traits: an obsessive, even pathological, fixation on craft; an aesthetic sensibility centered on the fragmentary line or image; and more generally the idea of poetry as difficult, for both the poet and the reader. Li He wrote very little in the regulated forms, but he was a key influence on several important writers who did, so our discussion of Late Tang style will begin with the following example from Li He, an unregulated hexasyllabic song:

**Li He's *Dreaming Heaven***

Old hare and cold toad weep sky’s sheen;  
2 a cloud-enruffled tower half opens: on the walls slants whiteness.  
The jade wheel presses dew: wet balls of light;  
4 simurgh bells and pendants meet on cassia-scented lanes.  
Yellow dust, clear water, beneath the Immortal Mountains,  
6 change in turn, a thousand years like a horse that gallops by.  
Gaze far off on the middle continent, those nine spots of smoke:  
8 a single stream of ocean water poured into a cup.

---

One perceptive critic has noted that in "Dreaming Heaven" we cannot tell whether the dream is in heaven or heaven in the dream. The translation may seem to leave many of the relations between images undetermined, but in fact in many instances it involves a narrowing down of the imaginative possibilities that remain open in the original. In line 2, for example, we do not know whether the cloud tower is a tower veiled wholly or partly in clouds (which would be the normal terrestrial way of construing the phrase), or a tower built on, in, or out of clouds (all of which, for all we know, might well be normal heavenly ways of construing it). "Slanting" is often used in descriptive poetry of oblique rays of light, but in this poem the marked absence of any clear sense of up or down or level makes it anyone’s guess whether it is the light or the wall that “slants.” "Jade wheel" is a familiar kenning for the moon, but the specificity and concreteness of the idea of a jade wheel pressing dew makes it impossible to resolve the image into any single recognizably human perspective on the moon. Here and elsewhere in Li He, we are dealing with a poetic language that creates a remarkably vivid and immediate experience—but in the end leaves us unable to pin down what it is an experience of. For example, synecdoche—the designation of a whole by one of its parts—is a familiar device by which traditional descriptive poetry achieves economy and vividness of expression. In Li He, however, synecdoche is commonly used to defamiliarize the familiar, or to hint cryptically at modes of perception that are beyond ordinary human bounds. When “simurgh bells” (conventionally an ornament found on carriages) and “pendants” meet in the “cassia-scented lanes” (the cassia being the tree traditionally supposed to grow on the moon), we may be dealing with a meeting of carriage riders and pendant wearers, but the predominant impression we retain is of an otherworldly strangeness. Any whole of which these fragmented images might be part remains tantalizingly beyond our grasp.
Milky Way: Syrinx-Playing

Despondent gazing at the Milky Way: a jade syrinx plays;
the tower is cold, the courtyard chill, all the way to daybreak.
Beneath layered quilts, in far-off dream, another year breaks off;
on a lonely tree, a wandering bird last night cried out in fear.
By the moonlit gazebo a familiar scent, after rain, wafts out;
in the windblown curtain a dwindling candle, through the frost, burns clearly.
No need to think wild thoughts of ascending from Mount Gou;
the zither of the Xiang and the panpipe of Qin have feeling all their own.

銀河吹笙  (yín hé chuī shēng)

dejected gaze  silver  river  blow  jade  syrinx  悲望銀河吹玉笙 (chàng wàng yín hé chuī yù shēng)  傷望銀河吹玉笙  (chàng wàng yín hé chuī yù shēng)
tower  cold  courtyard  frigid  touch/connect  daybreak  —  樓寒院接平明 (lóu hán yuàn jiē píng míng)  樓寒院接平明 (lóu hán yuàn jiē píng míng)
double  quilt  remote  dream  other  year  broken  重衾幽夢他年斷 (chóng qín yōu mèng tā nián duàn)  重衾幽夢他年斷 (chóng qín yōu mèng tā nián duàn)
separate  tree  wandering  female bird  yesterday  night  startled  別樹離雉昨夜驚 (bié shù lí zhì zuó yè jīng)  別樹離雉昨夜驚 (bié shù lí zhì zuó yè jīng)
moon  gazebo  former  fragrance  following on  rain  send out  月榭故香因雨發 (yuè xiè gù xiāng yīn yǔ fā)  月榭故香因雨發 (yuè xiè gù xiāng yīn yǔ fā)
wind  curtain  leftover  candle  across  frost  clear  風驅殘燭隔霜清 (fēng qū cán zhú gé shuāng qīng)  風驅殘燭隔霜清 (fēng qū cán zhú gé shuāng qīng)
not  need  wildly/in vain  make  Gou  mountain  thought  不須浪作蛾山意 (bù xū làng zuò é shān yì)  不須浪作蛾山意 (bù xū làng zuò é shān yì)
Xiang  zither  Qin  panpipe  self  have  feeling  湘琴秦箏自有情 (xiāng qín qín zhōng zì yǒu qíng)  湘琴秦箏自有情 (xiāng qín qín zhōng zì yǒu qíng)
Purple Spring palace halls lay locked in mist and haze;  
he wanted to take the “ruined city” as a home of emperors.  
The jade seal: if not because it returned to the sun’s corner,  
brocade sails: they would have arrived at heaven’s bounds.  
To this day, the rotting grass is without fireside’s flash;  
through all time, the drooping willows have sundown crows.  
Beneath the earth, if he should meet the Letter Lord of Chen,  
would it be fitting to ask again to hear “Flowers in the Rear Courtyard”?  

Purple spring palace halls lay locked in mist and haze;  
he wanted to take the “ruined city” as a home of emperors.  
The jade seal: if not because it returned to the sun’s corner,  
brocade sails: they would have arrived at heaven’s bounds.  
To this day, the rotting grass is without fireside’s flash;  
through all time, the drooping willows have sundown crows.  
Beneath the earth, if he should meet the Letter Lord of Chen,  
would it be fitting to ask again to hear “Flowers in the Rear Courtyard”?  

[QTS 16:539.6:161; 

隋宫

(suí gōng)

紫泉宮殿鎖煙霞

(zǐ quán gōng diàn suǒ yān xiá)

欲去無城作客家

(yù qù wú chéng zuò kè jiā)

玉帶不離歸日角

(yù dài bù lí guī rì jiǎo)

錦帆應是到天涯

(jǐn fān yīng shì dào tiān yá)

於今萬里無烽火

(yú jīn wàn lǐ wú fēng huǒ)

此去垂楊有別懷

(cǐ qù chuí yáng yǒu bié huái)

地下若逢陳後主

(dì xià ruò féng chén hòu zhǔ)

別有東閣復庭花

(bié yǒu dōng gé fù tíng huā)


 Ninth-century poetry on historical themes often shows affinities in both choice and handling of its material with works in short narrative fiction (the genre later referred to as chuanyang) from the same period. Whereas historical poetry of earlier eras tends to didacticism, elegy, or veiled allegory on contemporary events, poets in this period often used historical themes as vehicles for daring flights of fancy, or to delight in logical paradoxes of historical causation. This poem meditates on traces of the Sui dynasty, the regime that, in 589, reunified China after the long period of division known as the Southern and Northern Dynasties (420–589), only to be quickly supplanted, in turn, by the Tang in 618. The central figure of this poem is the Sui emperor Yang, who spent huge sums on massive public-works projects and indulged in frequent excursions through the newly conquered south. He ordered the construction of elaborate palace compounds in the southern city of Guangling (present-day Yangzhou), to serve as a temporary capital during these southern sojourns; a newly constructed system of canals linked the Sui’s southern and northern capitals.  

Here, the place-names “Purple Spring palace” and “ruined city” are fraught with irony. The Southern Dynasties poet Bao Zhao (414–466) had written “Wu cheng fu” (Fu on the Ruined City) on the history of Guangling. This piece was commonly read as a veiled commentary on a Southern Dynasties prince who had begun an ill-fated rebellion in the Guangling area during Bao Zhao’s time. Thus to say that Emperor Yang wanted to “take the ‘ruined city’ as a home of emperors” amounts to an implicit criticism of his failure to learn from history. A still more recondite level of ironies in these opening lines relates to the given names of Emperor Yang and the Tang founder who displaced him. Purple Spring was the name of a river in the Chang’an area, so “Purple Spring palace” refers to the Sui palaces at Chang’an, which Emperor Yang left behind, neglected and shrouded in mist, on his southern excursions. During the Sui, the place-name Purple Spring would have been written Ziyuan. But Li Shangyin, writing more than two hundred years later as a Tang subject, was required to observe the taboo on the name of the Tang founder, Li Yuan (r. 618–626), and call it, by a conventional substitution of synonyms, Ziyuan. The city referred to indirectly here by means of the reference to Bao Zhao’s Fu would have been properly called by its ancient name of Guangling during Li Shangyin’s time, but during the Sui it had been renamed Jiangdu (Metropolis on the Yangtze) to avoid violating the taboo on Emperor Yang’s given name, Guang. Through such arcane wordplay, Li Shangyin conveys a vision of history as a disorienting space of ironies and unrealized possibilities.  

The view of history as a chain of cryptic ironies is carried to an extreme pitch in the second couplet. The “jade seal” is the symbol of imperial office, while the “brocade sails” refer to one of numerous fantastic narratives about Emperor Yang’s southern excursions, which describes brocade-sailed boats following one after the other for miles along the newly opened waterways. The couplet initially seems as dense as anything in “Autumn Meditations” and yields its meaning only when we recognize the extreme instance of borrowed parallelism around which it is constructed. In order to understand the couplet, we need to take ri jiao as the term from the art of physiognomy for hornlike protuberances on the forehead indicating a person destined to become emperor—that is, Li Yuan. Thus the couplet yields the sense, “If the seal of office had not been destined for Li Yuan, those chains of boats would have
continued forever, to the very ends of the earth." The riddling and eerily synecdochic quality of the lines presents the workings of history as something just as mysterious as the celestial realm depicted by Li He.

The poem's second half alludes to further anecdotal traditions about the latter years of the Sui. Emperor Yang is supposed to have imposed a levy of fireflies on the populace, solely for the sake of releasing them to provide light during a nighttime excursion (medieval science held that fireflies were generated from rotting grass). Willow trees were also reportedly leveled, to be planted along the banks of the extensive canal system that was to become, for later ages, the Sui's most lasting monument. The surname of the Sui imperial house, Yang, was itself also the name of a kind of willow. The final couplet refers to an episode in an apocryphal tale about Emperor Yang in which he visits the former emperor of the last of the Southern Dynasties, the Chen. In the story, Emperor Yang requests to hear the former emperor's favorite consort sing "Flowers in the Rear Courtyard"—a song that had become associated with the extravagance of the former emperor and, in retrospect, with the Chen's downfall. Li Shangyin suggests that in the afterworld Emperor Yang, having succumbed to a similar fate, might be less quick to mock a defunct emperor.

The mode of poetic writing with which Li Shangyin was to be most closely associated was his distinctive hermetic brand of the poetry of romance:

**Ca. 7**

**Untitled**

Rustling, whistling, the east wind and the fine rain come;  
2 beyond the lotus pool there is faint thunder:  
Gold toad gaaws the lock: burning incense, it enters;  
4 jade tiger pulls silk cord: drawing well water, it turns.  
Miss Jia peers in at the curtain: Secretary Han is young;  
6 Empress Fu leaves behind a headrest: the prince of Wei is gifted.  
Don't let your springtime heart vie with the flowers in blooming;  
8 an inch of love longing, an inch of ash.

[QTS 16:539.6162–6163]

The opening images of the onset of a rainstorm are fresh and vivid, and at the same time erudite: they echo atmospheric passages from the “Jiu ge” (Nine Songs) in the Chu Ci, particularly “Shan gui” (Mountain Spirit), depicting a thwarted yearning between a goddess and her mortal lover. The suggestion of a lovers’ tryst, whether actual or imagined, successful or frustrated, is continued in the sound image of line 2, since the rumble of thunder, in the poetry of romance, is a stock metaphor for the sound of the lover's carriage wheels. But in this poem, while this stock image suggests a possible range of associations, we are never given quite enough context to allow us to determine a definite frame of reference. Thus the “faint thunder” here may be actual thunder or the rumbling carriage wheels of the lover, approaching or receding, in the distance. Li Shangyin seems to delight in creating ambiguous poetic atmospheres such as this one, in which we hear a sound, muffled by an indefinite distance, that might be either.

The second couplet shows us this evocative and atmospheric style at its best. The toad would seem to be part of a metal ornament on a lock, and the tiger a figurative on a well pulley. These zoomorphic ornaments may be read as a scene setting of the interior space in which the lover waits, and they may also suggest enigmatic analogies with the lock. Although the lock is secure, the incense smoke seeps through; although the well is deep, the bucket returns to the surface, bearing water from the depths. More important, again, than reaching a definitive solution is to register the quality of mystery and indeterminacy created in this couplet, where we can see both the fragmentation and the compression of late Du Fu and the brand of synecdochic fantasy pioneered by Li He.

The third couplet hinges on allusions to legends of illicit loves. Line 5 continues the veiled analogy in line 3 between incense smoke, in its ability to penetrate otherwise impermeable barriers, and erotic mingling: Han Shou was a young and handsome clerk in the employ of the Jin dynasty official Jia Chong; Jia Chong's daughter glimpsed Han Shou through a window and began an affair with him; the lovers were found out when Jia Chong, while meeting
with Han, detected the scent of a rare incense from a private Jia family stock. The "headrest" of line 6 is involved in a more complex web of textual references, in which it may stand for either the frustration or the consummation of clandestine desire. The Wei dynasty prince and renowned poet Cao Zhi (192–232) wrote "Luo shen fu" (Fu on the Luo River Goddess), a fu that became one of the most renowned literary depictions of romance between a goddess and a human lover. Later tradition linked this poem with an apocryphal story of star-crossed love between Cao Zhi and Empress Zhen, wife of Cao Zhi's elder brother, Cao Pi (187–226). Emperor Wen of the Wei dynasty, Cao Zhi, the story has it, had unsuccessfully sought the hand of the future Empress Zhen before her betrothal to Cao Pi. Years later—after Empress Zhen had been murdered through the machinations of a rival empress—Cao Zhi made an appearance at Cao Pi's court, and Cao Pi happened to show him an ornately inlaid headrest that had belonged to the late empress. Cao Zhi burst into tears on seeing this object, and Cao Pi, divining the reason, gave him the headrest as a memento. On his journey away from the capital back to his own fiefdom, Cao Zhi paused by the Luo River, musing on Empress Zhen. Her spirit then appeared to him, identified the headrest as part of her dowry, and announced that she was transferring that dowry, and herself, from her former husband to Cao Zhi; their love was at last consummated. Cao Zhi then composed "Gan Zhen fu" (Fu in Response to Zhen's Epiphany). Only afterward, the story goes, was the title altered by Cao Pi's heir to "Fu on the Luo River Goddess," to avoid scandal.

Such elaborate echoes of narrative prose texts remind us again of the close interrelations between the fantasies of storytellers and of poets in this period. Like the elusive and fragmented images, however, the references are used in this poem in such a way as to open up spaces of association while preventing us from being able to settle on a definite version of just what story the poem itself is telling. The observation about passion with which the poem closes could be applied as well to the texture of Li Shangyin's language in this poem: cryptic clues create a tantalizing illusion of an alluring scent and suggest the nearness of a burning heat. When we attempt to gain a firm hold on just where and what it is, it proves as fragile and insubstantial as ash.

Co.8

Brocade Zither

The brocade zither without reason has fifty strings;
2 each string has its bridge; one longs for the flowering years.
3 Master Zhuang, in dawm dream, is lost in a butterfly;
4 Emperor Wang's springtime heart is entrusted to the cuckoo.
5 On the gray sea, the moon shines bright, and the pearl has tears;
6 At Indigo Field, the sun is warm, and jade gives off smoke.

This feeling, one can wait for it to become a recollection;

only at the time it was already bewildering.

Brocade Zither

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>鈴瑟</th>
<th>(fù nà)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>brocade zither without reason has fifty —</td>
<td>(fù nà wú duō rén wù shí yī lín)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>one string one bridge ponder flowery years —</td>
<td>(yī sī yī tiān hóng nián)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>scholar dawm dream be lost butterfly —</td>
<td>(zhēng shēng mèng mèng mì hú di)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wang empress springtime heart entrusted cuckoo —</td>
<td>(王生春心心托付鹄)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>gray sea moon bright pearl have tear —</td>
<td>(yín yíng sì yǒng zhū yuán lèi)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>indigo field sun warm jade emit smoke —</td>
<td>(lán tèn rén mǎn yá shèng yàn)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>this feeling may await become recall memory —</td>
<td>(chū qǐng kě wèi chéng zhù yù)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>only in at that time already at a loss —</td>
<td>(zhǐ shì shí jì bìng zhì yě rǔn tōng)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

[TON 16:539.6144]

"Brocade Zither" is almost certainly Li Shangyin's best-known poem, and it is the poem with which many early editions of his works opened. Depending on how we look at it, it is either a paradoxical or perfectly fitting that it is also surely the one poem in his collection whose precise meaning has been the subject of the greatest controversy. Here we lack even the sort of hint about the poem's mode that we are given in the untitled poem just discussed. Like the poem "Milky Way: Syrinx-Playing," "Brocade Zither" has been read as a jengju poem on a musical instrument, as a lament for the poet's wife, as a veiled comment on an illicit affair, and as a complaint about a patron's neglect. Any reading offered here will necessarily be hypothetical, one possibility among many. I follow the lead of those traditional readers who have read the poem as introducing Li Shangyin's collected poetry and thus more generally as a poem about the poetic art.

Line 1 alludes to an etiological myth (that is, a story purporting to explain the origins of an object or institution) about the zither. In the story, White-Silk Maiden played on a fifty-string zither for the mythic sage-ruler Fu Xi, and the sound was unbearably mournful. To find relief from this sound, Fu Xi broke the zither in half, creating the latter-day twenty-five-string zither. The fifty strings thus suggest a kind of expressive power and complexity that overwhelmed the listener's ability to bear; here, as each zither string is supported by its bridge, each element in that overwhelming mass of sound stirs corresponding tones in memory.
The middle couplets create networks of association within which these correspondences are free to resonate. The images center on mysteries of transformation, and of occult sympathy, that span the gap between human experience and the creatures and objects of the natural world. Zhuangzi dreamed he was a butterfly—so vividly that, on waking, he could no longer feel sure whether he was really Zhuangzi or a butterfly. Emperor Wang, legendary ruler of Shu, sent his minister Bie Ling to work on irrigation and flood control, and in Bie Ling’s absence had an adulterous affair with Bie Ling’s wife. On Bie Ling’s return, Emperor Wang was overcome with shame. He departed, abdicating his throne to his minister, and was transformed into a cuckoo. This bird was then forever linked in memory with Emperor Wang, whose given name, Du Yu, became an alternative name for the species. The verb *tou* (entrust) is also used to describe the use of a figure of speech, so that when we use the image of a cuckoo as a metaphor to express feelings of sadness or regret like those of the legendary Du Yu, we also “entrust the spring heart of Emperor Wang to the cuckoo.” The third couplet alludes to still further myths of sympathy and transformation: line 5 combines the legend that pearls wax and wane in phase with the moon with the legend of ocean-dwelling mermaids (or shark people [jiao ren]) who weep pearl tears. Line 6 draws on a range of possible textual echoes: Lantian (literally, Indigo Fields) was in fact the name of a place renowned for its jade. The story of a hero named Chang Hong tells how, after he was unjustly killed, his blood turned to jade. The tale of a girl named Purple Jade tells how she returned as a spirit after her death to clear the name of her would-be lover, Han Zhong, of a charge of tomb robbery. Moved by Han Zhong’s earnest grief, she appeared to him in spirit and gave him a pearl from her grave hoard. When her mother rushed forward to embrace her, she dissolved like smoke. Another text often cited as a possible point of reference is the comment by Dai Shulun (732–786) that the scenes of poetry are like the mist that rises from the fine jade of Lantian in the warmth of the sun; they can be gazed at from afar but cannot be placed immediately before the eyes.

Li Shangyin seems to admit here that he himself has a difficulty similar to that we face as his readers: while the compression of his poetic language leads us to infer a latent intensity of emotion, that same compression obliterates the particularity of reference, and in the end the exact source and nature of this feeling eludes any attempt—by poet or reader—to pin it down once and for all. The problem of indeterminacy of poetic meaning, in this view, is ultimately a counterpart of the indeterminacy of feeling and memory: the heart, like the poem, is a zither with too many strings. Late Tang writers were indeed drawn to the poetic fragment; what we can see more clearly now is the way they seem haunted as well with a sense of the fragmentation of experience itself.

Robert Ashmore