

A Collection of Chinese Poetry

Compiled by Andrius Kulikauskas, Vilnius Gediminas Technical University, without permission, for teaching and learning. 2016.10.06

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
床前明月光
疑是地上霜
举头望明月
低头思故乡

Jìng Yè Sī
Chuáng qián míng yuè guāng
Yí shì dì shàng shuāng
Jǔ tóu wàng míng yuè
Dī tóu sī gù xiāng

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.
4. Self-named Lo-fu.
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

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.

FOUR EXAMPLES FROM THE POEMS OF RIVER WANG DEER ENCLOSURE Wang Wei

1.	empty	mountain	not	see	man
2.	but	hear	man/'s	voice	sound
3.	reflecting	shadow	enter	deep	forest
	(i.e., sun's reflection)				
4.	again and	shine	green	moss	upon

- 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

獨坐幽篁裡
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.

辛夷塢

王維

木末芙蓉花
山中發紅萼
澗戶寂無人
紛紛開且落

HSIN-I VILLAGE Wang Wei

1.	tree	tip	hibiscus	—	flower
2.	mountain	middle	set-forth	red	calyx
3.	stream	hut; home	still; silent	no	man
4.	profuse-	profuse	open	and	fall

- 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.***

春曉

孟浩然

春眠不覺曉
處處聞啼鳥
夜來風雨聲
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?

宿建德江

孟浩然

移舟泊烟渚
日暮客愁新
野曠天低樹
江清月近人

STAYOVER AT CHIEN-TEH RIVER Meng Hao-jan

1.	move	boat	moor	smoke	shore
2.	sun	dusk	traveler	grief	new
3.	wilds (vast wilderness)	far-reaching	sky	low/er	tree
4.	river	clear	moon	near/s	man

- 1. A boat slows, moors by beach-run in smoke.***
- 2. Sun fades: a traveler's sorrow freshens.***
- 3. Open wilderness. Wide sky. A stretch of low trees.***
- 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.***

絕句二首

杜甫

遲日江山麗
春風花草香
泥融飛燕子
沙暖睡鴛鴦

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.
4. On the warm sand sleeping, drake-and-duck.

江碧鳥逾白
山青花欲燃
今春看又過
何日是歸年

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?

登鶴雀樓

王之渙

白日依山盡
黃河入海流
欲窮千里目
更上一層樓

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.

秋夜寄丘二十二員外 韋應物

懷君屬秋夜
散步詠涼天
山空松子落
幽人應未眠

AUTUMN NIGHT: A LETTER SENT TO CH'IU
Wei Ying-wu (773–828)

1.	think-of	you	belong	autumn	night
2.	stroll	—	chant	cool	sky
3.	empty	mountain	pine	cone/s	fall
4.	secluded	man	must	not-yet	sleep

- 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 李白
 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

1.	old	friend	west		depart*	Yellow	Crane	Tower
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2.	smoke	flower	third		month	down	Yang	Chou
3.	lone	sail	distant		shade	blue	sky	end (v.)
4.	only	see	long (the Yangtze)	river	sky	end	flow	

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 李白

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

HEARING THE FLUTE IN THE CITY OF LOYANG IN A SPRING NIGHT *Li Po*

1. whose	house	jade	flute	dark invisible subdued	flying fleeting	sound
2. scatter	enter	spring	wind/s	fill	Lo	City
3. this	night	tune	middle	hear	break (name of a tune)	willow*
4. what	man	not	arouse move stir	old-(home)	garden	thought feeling

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?

聞 怨

王 昌 齡

聞中少婦不知怨
春日凝妝上翠樓
忽見陌頭楊柳色
悔教夫婿覓封侯

COMPLAINT FROM A LADY'S CHAMBER

Wang Ch'ang-ling (698–765?)

1.	lady's-chamber	midst	young	lady	not	know	sadness
2.	spring	day	full	makeup	ascend	jade green	tower
3.	suddenly	see	field	head	willow	—	color
4.	regret	to-have-advised	husband	—	seek	high-tiles-such-as-lord, duke, etc.	

- 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

杜牧

烟籠寒水月籠沙
夜泊秦淮近酒家
商女不知亡國恨
隔江猶唱後庭花

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
			(River Chin-huai)				
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. Gay girls know no lost kingdom's sadness.

4. Still sing across the river "Jade Flowers in Rear Court."*

夜雨寄北 李商隐

君問歸期未有期
巴山夜雨漲秋池
何當共翦西窗燭
却話巴山夜雨時

NIGHT RAINS: A LETTER TO GO NORTH *Li Shang-yin*

1.	you	ask	return	date	not-yet	have	date
2.	Pa	Shan Mountain	night	rain	swell	autumn	pool
3.	(when	can)	together	trim	west	window	candle

4.	but	talk	Pa	Shan	night	rain	time
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1. You ask: when to return? Don't know when.

2. 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 Tu Fu

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

1. Li Po's poetry: no match anywhere.
2. Soaring, his imagination always above others.
3. Clear, fresh like Yü Hsin.
4. Vigorous, free-flowing like Pao Chao.
5. North of River Wei: trees of spring.
6. East of the Yangtze: clouds of sundown.
7. When can we talk about literature again
8. Over a bottle of wine?

秦州雜詩

杜甫

莽莽萬重山
孤城山谷間
無風雲出塞
不夜月臨關
不屬國歸何晚
樓蘭斬未還
煙塵一長望
衰颯正摧顏

FROM MISCELLANEOUS POEMS OF CH'IN-CHOU Tu Fu

1. vast (disorder)	—	ten-thousand	layer/s	mountain/s
2. lone	city	mountain	valley	middle
	castle			
3. no	wind	cloud	emerge	fortress
4. not	night	moon	hover-over	pass
			arrive-at	
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 Chieh-tzu, who has the king of Lou			
	Lan beheaded for allying with the Huns)			
7. smoke	dust	alone	long-time	watch
	(i.e., bonfire)			
8. spent	wind	now	destroy	face
	decaying		ravage	

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.
-

春望

杜甫

國破山河在
城春草木深
感時花濺淚
恨別鳥驚心
烽火連三月
家書抵萬金
白頭搔更短
渾欲不勝簪

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
			hold	

1. All ruins, the empire; mountains and rivers in view.
2. To the city, spring: grass and trees so thick.
3. The times strike. Before flowers, tears break loose.
4. Separation cuts. Birds startle our heart.
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.

C8.1**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 taels of gold
 My white hairs, as I scratch them, grow more sparse,
 8 Simply becoming unable to hold hairpins.

[QTS 7:224.2404]

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:

Disyllabic unit			Trisyllabic unit					
country	broken	⋮	mountain	river	◦	remain	國破山河在	(guó pò shān hé zài)
city	spring	⋮	grass	wood	◦	thick	城春草木深	(chéng chūn cǎo mù shēn)
feel	time	⋮	flower	shed	◦	tear	感時花灺淚	(gǎn shí huā jiàn lèi)
hate	separation	⋮	bird	startle	◦	heart	恨別鳥驚心	(hèn bié niǎo jīng xīn)

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 heptasyllabic song:

C9.4 Dreaming Heaven

- Old hare and cold toad weep sky's sheen;
2 a cloud-enfurled 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.

夢天 (mèng tiān)

old	hare	cold	toad	weep	heaven	color	老兔寒蟾泣天色 (lǎo tù hán chán qì tiān sè)
cloud	tower	half	open	wall	slant	white	雲樓半開壁斜白 (yún lóu bàn kāi bì xié bái)
jade	wheel	roll/press	dew	wet	ball/round	light	玉輪軋露濕團光 (yù lún yàn lù shī tuán guāng)
simurgh	pendant	each other	meet	cassia	fragrance	path	鸞鵲相逢桂香陌 (luán pèi xiāng féng guì xiāng mò)
yellow	dust	clear	water	three	mountain	(-beneath)	黃塵清水三山下 (huáng chén qīng shuǐ sān shān xià)
switch	change	thousand	years	like	running	horse	更變千年如走馬 (gēng biàn qiān nián rú zǒu mǎ)
distant(ly) gaze	Qi	region/island	nine	spots	smoke/mist		遙望齊州九點煙 (yáo wàng qí zhōu jiǔ diǎn yān)
one	clear/deep	ocean	water	cup	(-inside)	drain	一泓海水杯中瀉 (yī hóng hǎi shuǐ bēi zhōng xiè)

One perceptive critic has noted that in “Dreaming Heaven” we cannot tell whether the dream is in heaven or heaven in the dream.⁵ 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;
2 the tower is cold, the courtyard chill, all the way to daybreak.
Beneath layered quilts, in far-off dream, another year breaks off;
4 on a lonely tree, a wandering bird last night cried out in fear.
By the moonlit gazebo a familiar scent, after rain, wafts out;
6 in the windblown curtain a dwindling candle, through the frost, burns clearly.
No need to think wild thoughts of ascending from Mount Gou;
8 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	悵望銀河吹玉笙 (chàng wàng yín hé chuī yù shēng)
tower	cold	courtyard	frigid	touch/connect	daybreak	樓寒院冷接平明 (lóu hán yuàn lěng jiē píng míng)
double	quilt	remote	dream	other	year	broken 重衾幽夢他年斷 (chóng qīn yōu mèng tā nián duàn)
separate	tree	wandering	female bird	yesterday	night	startled 別樹羈雌昨夜驚 (bié shù jī cí 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)
wind	curtain	leftover	candle	across	frost	clear 風簾殘燭隔霜清 (fēng lián cán zhú gé shuāng qīng)
not	need	wildly/in vain	make	Gou	mountain	thought 不須浪作鰲山意 (bù xū làng zuò gōu shān yì)
Xiang	zither	Qin	panpipe	self	have	feeling 湘瑟秦簫自有情 (xiāng sè qín xiāo zì yǒu qíng)

- Purple Spring palace halls lay locked in mist and haze;
 2 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,
 4 brocade sails: they would have arrived at heaven’s bounds.
 To this day, the rotting grass is without fireflies’ flash;
 6 through all time, the drooping willows have sundown crows.
 Beneath the earth, if he should meet the Latter Lord of Chen,
 8 would it be fitting to ask again to hear “Flowers in the Rear Courtyard”?

[QTS 16:539.6161; 8]

							隋宮 (suí gōng)
purple	spring	palace	hall	lock	mist	haze	紫泉宮殿鎖煙霞 (zǐ quán gōng diàn suǒ yān xiá)
want	take	overgrown/waste	city	make	emperor	household	欲取蕪城作帝家 (yù qǔ wú chéng zuò dì jiā)
jade	seal	not	because of	return	sun	corner/horn	玉璽不緣歸日角 (yù xǐ bù yuán guī rì jiǎo)
brocade	sail	ought	to be	arrive at	sky	boundary/end	錦帆應是到天涯 (jǐn fān yīng shì dào tiān yá)
at	present	rotten	grass	lack	firefly	fire	於今腐草無螢火 (yú jīn fǔ cǎo wú yíng huǒ)
end	antiquity	hanging	willow	have	sunset	crow	終古垂楊有暮鴉 (zhōng gǔ chuí yáng yǒu mù yā)
earth	(-below)	if	meet	Chen	latter	lord	地下若逢陳後主 (dì xià ruò féng chén hòu zhǔ)
[question word]	fitting	again	ask	rear	courtyard	flower	豈宜重問後庭花 (qǐ yí chóng wèn hòu 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 *chuanqi*) 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.⁶ 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 northern and southern 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 layer 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, Ziquan. 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 levied, 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 himself 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:

C9.7 Untitled

- Rustling, whistling, the east wind and the fine rain come;
- 2 beyond the lotus pool there is faint thunder.
- Gold toad gnaws 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]

		無題 (wú tí)	
rustling/whistling —	east wind fine rain come	颼颼東風細雨來 (sà sà dōng fēng xì yǔ lái)	
lotus —	pool (outside) there is light thunder	芙蓉塘外有輕雷 (fú róng táng wài yǒu qīng léi)	
golden toad	gnaw lock burn incense enter	金蟾齧鎖燒香入 (jīn chán niè suǒ shāo xiāng rù)	
jade tiger	tug silk draw water well turn	玉虎牽絲汲井迴 (yù hǔ qiān sī jí jǐng huí)	
Jia (-clan)	peep curtain Han clerk young	賈氏窺簾韓掾少 (jiǎ shì kuī lián hán yuàn shǎo)	
Fu (-empress)	leave pillow Wei prince talented	宓妃留枕魏王才 (fú fēi liú zhěn wèi wáng cái)	
spring heart	do not with flowers strive bloom	春心莫共花爭發 (chūn xīn mò gòng huā zhēng fā)	
one inch	mutual longing one inch ash	一寸相思一寸灰 (yī cùn xiāng sī yī cùn huī)	

[Tonal pattern IIa, see p. 172]

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 *Chuci*, particularly “Shan gui” (Mountain Spirit), depicting a thwarted tryst 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 figuration 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 tryst. 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.

C9.8

Brocade Zither

- The brocade zither without reason has fifty strings;
 2 each string has its bridge; one longs for the flowering years.
 Master Zhuang, in dawn dream, is lost in a butterfly;
 4 Emperor Wang’s springtime heart is entrusted to the cuckoo.
 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;

8 only at the time it was already bewildering.

[QTS 16:539.6144]

							錦瑟 (jīn sè)
brocade	zither	without	point/reason	fifty	—	strings	錦瑟無端五十絃 (jīn sè wú duān wú shí xián)
one	string	one	bridge	ponder	flowery	years	一絃一柱思華年 (yī xián yī zhù sī huá nián)
Zhuang	scholar	dawn	dream	be lost	butterfly	—	莊生曉夢迷蝴蝶 (zhuāng shēng xiǎo mèng mí hú dié)
Wang	emperor	spring	heart/mind	entrust	cuckoo	—	望帝春心託杜鵑 (wàng dì chūn xīn tuō dù juān)
gray	sea	moon	bright	pearl	have	tear	蒼海月明珠有淚 (cāng hǎi yuè míng zhū yǒu lèi)
indigo	field	sun	warm	jade	emit	smoke	藍田日暖玉生煙 (lán tián rì nuǎn yù shēng yān)
this	feeling	may	await	become	recall	memory	此情可待成追憶 (cǐ qíng kě dài chéng zhuī yì)
only	is	at that	time	already	at a loss	—	只是當時已惘然 (zhǐ shí dāng shí yǐ wǎng rán)

[Tonal pattern IIa, see p. 172]

“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 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 *yongwu* 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 Fuxi, and the sound was unbearably mournful. To find relief from this sound, Fuxi 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 overwhelm 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 *tuo* (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 (732–789) 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.

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