

High Tang Poetry

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The forty-odd years from the Tang emperor Xuan-zong's enthronement (712) to his abdication after fleeing the capital ahead of An Lu-shan's rebel army (755) is known as the "High Tang." This period has been, correctly or incorrectly, considered the apogee of Tang culture and military power. In the popular imagination it came to be regarded as the high point of classical poetry (*shi*), before which all was anticipation, and after which all was falling off or distant echo.

A period such as the High Tang becomes interesting not by a single characteristic but by a variety of very different concerns occurring together. The poets of the High Tang present us with remarkable variety, becoming much like characters in a novel, setting each other off. Here we will concentrate on the three most famous: Wang Wei, Meng Hao-ran, and Li Bo. Du Fu deserves separate consideration.

An Example of Verse Form

Chinese poetic meter was primarily "syllabic," based on the number of syllables in a line. Lines of five or seven syllables were the most common, with lines of three, four, and six syllables appearing less frequently. Neither quantitative meters (based on variations in syllable length) nor qualitative meters (based on variation in syllable stress) were possible in classical Chinese, in which words have only one or two syllables.

In addition to the number of syllables, the patterning of tones in the language came to form an important part of metrics during the Tang. Recent scholarship has suggested that an awareness of the possibility of tonal patterning came from the attempt to translate Buddhist religious verse and the elaborate quantitative meters of Sanskrit during the Southern Dynasties. Somewhat less than half of the syllables in medieval Chinese were in the "level tone" (*ping-sheng*), with the other three tones grouped together as "deflected tones" (*ze-sheng*). In the late fifth century, poets began the practice of alternating level and deflected tones between key positions within a line and between corresponding positions in the two lines of a couplet. This metrical practice gradually led to verse forms that were called, in the Tang, the "recent style" (*jin-ti*).

Tang poems were divided between those in the "recent style" and those in the "old style." "Recent style" poems required tonal balancing, the use of parallel couplets in all but the first and final couplets of the verse, and a rhyme in a level tone. "Old style" poems did not require tonal balancing or parallel couplets and could rhyme in a deflected tone. Quatrains (*jue-ju*) might be in the "recent style" or in the "old style." The following is a regulated verse (*lü-shi*) in five-syllable lines by Wang Wei, entitled "Stopping By the Temple of Incense Massed." First we will give an English translation, then a word-for-word gloss of the Chinese. Note that the Chinese poetic language rarely uses tense markers, pronouns, or prepositions. There is, moreover, no distinction between singular and plural. The translator supplies these by context.

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CHNS120

Chinese Literature

Week 03-01

Poetry: The High Tang Poem

Introduction

From: Stephen Owen (trans. and ed.). *An Anthology of Chinese Literature: Beginnings to 1911* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1999), 385, 383.

Wang Wei (ca. 699–761)

Many people have tried to define the genius of Wang Wei's poetry. He was a poet who often used the simplest language for a vision of the world that was uniquely his own. Consider a single line from "Written on Climbing the Small Terrace of Pei Di":

The setting sun goes down beside a bird.

It is a line that could not have been written before Wang Wei: no earlier poet would have defined the motion of a large, regular, and slow thing like the sun in relation to so small and volatile a creature as a bird. Wang Wei is, moreover, concerned with perspective and the illusions of the senses, related to his Buddhist convictions that the world of human experience is only sensuous illusion. We know that the sun is not "beside" the bird, but only seems so from a particular distant perspective, a "point of view," that can shift as quickly as the bird. Yet in the line the only thing that moves is the sun.

Wang Wei came from one of the most distinguished families of the period, and from early in his life he moved with ease in the highest circles of Tang society. The simplicity and restraint of his voice as a poet should be understood against that background, as a personal choice. Although he could write the highly stylized social poetry that was common in upper-class gatherings, Wang Wei was profoundly drawn to various forms of a private, contemplative life: Buddhism, landscape, and the poetry of Tao Qian.

Stopping By the Temple of Incense Massed

I knew not of the Temple of Incense Massed,
I went several miles into cloudy peaks.

Ancient trees, trails with no one there,
deep in hills, a bell from I knew not where.

A stream's sounds choked on steep-pitched stones,
and hues of sunlight were chilled by green pines.

Towards dusk at the bend of a deserted pool,
in meditation's calm I mastered passion's dragon.

不	知	香	積	寺
not	know	Incense	Heap-Up	Temple
數	里	入	雲	峰
several	li (miles)	enter	cloud(y)	peak(s)

I knew not of the Temple of Incense Massed,
I went several miles into cloudy peaks.

古	樹	無	人	徑
ancient	tree(s)	is-no	person	path
深	山	何	處	鐘
deep	mountain	what	place	bell?

Ancient trees, trails with no one there,
deep in hills, a bell from I knew not where.

泉	聲	咽	危	石
stream	sound	choke	sheer	stone(s)
日	色	冷	青	松
sun	color	cold (by)	green	pine(s)

A stream's sounds choked on steep-pitched stones,
and hues of sunlight were chilled by green pines.

薄	暮	空	潭	曲
towards-dusk		empty/deserted	pool	bend
安	禪	制	毒	龍
stillness	Chan	control	poison	dragon

Towards dusk at the bend of a deserted pool,
in meditation's calm I mastered passion's dragon.

Text 1

From: Owen, *Anthology*, 385,

392.
384

Meng Hao-ran (ca. 689–740)

Display of scorn for the compromises that must be made in public life was one of the most attractive poetic gestures for eighth-century poets and readers alike. The Tang elite admired free spirits, and Meng Hao-ran made a name for himself as a free spirit. Meng was a provincial who went to the capital of Chang-an in hopes of gaining a post in the central government; although he did eventually serve briefly on the

staff of a provincial governor, he did not succeed in his political ambitions. Nevertheless, he won the admiration of a wide range of writers and intellectuals.

Early Cold on the River: Something on My Mind

Trees shed their leaves, the geese cross south,
and the north winds bring cold to the river.

My home is where the Xiang's waters bend,
I am blocked from it far by Chu's clouds' edge.

Tears for home have been spent in travels,
I watch a lone sail at the margin of sky.

Having missed the ford, if you should ask—
level lake and vast floods in the evening.

Text 2

From: Owen, *Anthology*, 395-96,

Text 3

From: Owen, *Anthology*, 404.

Li Bo (701–762)

Getting Out What I Feel

I face my wine, unaware of darkness growing,
the falling flowers cover my clothes.
Drunk, I rise, tread moonlight in creek—
the birds turn back, men too grow fewer.

Du Fu (712–770)

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唐

Text 4

From: Owen, *Anthology*, 413,
439.

Ever since the importance of Du Fu's poetry first came to be recognized early in the ninth century, readers of many different periods and types have considered Du Fu to be the greatest poet of the Chinese tradition. Such general (though not universal) consensus can partially be explained by the immense variety of Du Fu's work, which sustained quite different tastes and historical changes in fashion. In part, that consensus was also a consequence of the inertia of "canon"; like Shakespeare in the English tradition, Du Fu's poetry came to be so deeply bound up with the constitution of literary value that generation after generation of poets and critics rediscovered themselves and their interests in some aspect of the poet's work. Consequently, when challenges were posed to the tradition of classical poetry as a whole—as occurred in the late Ming—Du Fu bore the brunt of the critique.

Chinese critics from the Song Dynasty on often referred to Du Fu as the "poet-historian"; and indeed, if a reader is interested in the particular details of the period of the An Lu-shan Rebellion, he or she will find in Du Fu comments on current events and powerful images of the historical moment eliciting an immediacy that always eluded the historian proper. The Confucian interpretation of the *Classic of Poetry* as bearing witness to the history of the Zhou Dynasty lent authority to such a use of poetry; Du Fu saw himself in the role of the engaged witness of a general political and social situation that reveals itself in particulars. In a larger sense, Du Fu was the historian of himself, creating in his responses to particular situations a coherent life story.

It was perhaps this sense of the poet's life that made Du Fu one of the first to have his poems arranged chronologically in early editions, a practice that continued in most later editions of his work. For this reason, Du Fu's poems have been traditionally read in the context of the stages of his life. Though much in his poetry transcends a purely biographical reading, this remains a convenient way to first approach it.

End of Spring: On My Newly Rented Thatched Cottage at Rang-xi III

Clouds brightly colored, now shadowed, now white,
trees of brocade, green with the dawn.

Myself and this age: a pair of tangled tresses;
Earth and Heaven: a single thatched pavilion.

With sad songs, sometimes self-pity;
drunken dancer—for whom should I care to be sober?

In fine rain I stand with my hoe on my shoulder
as river gibbons hum on the azure cliffs.