

Preface to the Calligrams Edition



Reading poetry in translation is an exploration born of restlessness, a search for something that will add new colors to our own experience. Yet the poetry we read and appreciate from outside the comfort zone of our own culture inevitably has a resonance with our own traditions and views. The “world literature” we choose is a reflection of our tastes—one that often does not precisely coincide with the tastes of the readers in the original language.

The translation of classical Chinese poetry in the English-speaking world is intimately connected to the history of modernism (especially through the efforts of Ezra Pound and Kenneth Rexroth as well as the Bloomsbury scholar Arthur Waley). But not only does our enthusiasm for Chinese poetry sometimes emphasize qualities traditionally of lesser interest to Chinese readers—and ignore aspects they would consider quite important—our versions of Chinese poetry do not exhibit merely one form of modernism.

The dean of Chinese translators in America, Burton Watson, operates very much in the tradition of American verse defined by William Carlos Williams—he prefers to work with straightforward, allusion-free poetry that conveys its charms directly, whether it is the flamboyant rhyme-prose of the Han and post-Han eras, or the genial directness of the great Song poet Su Dongpo. Eminent Chinese literature translators who worked in Great Britain or in the Commonwealth have often been attracted by more difficult aspects of modernism; they are the descendants of William Empson,

with his erudite mastery of the English literary tradition and his fascination with the difficult. Although Waley was attracted to the relatively transparent Bai Juyi, A. C. Graham, David Hawkes, and J. D. Frodsham turned to denser and more allusive texts: *The Songs of Chu*, late Tang verse, aristocratic court poetry—and, of course, one of the great eccentrics of the Tang, Li He (790–816).

Many American fans of Chinese poetry first encountered Li He as I did—in the renderings of twenty-two poems by A. C. Graham in his *Poems of the Late T'ang* (1967; republished by NYRB books). Graham, like Frodsham, described Li He as a modern rediscovery, seemingly popular because of his resemblance to the symbolists (Frodsham explicitly terms him a *poète maudit*). He was heady stuff for a college freshman drunk on Rimbaud and Patti Smith: I loved his anguish, his visionary nihilism, and, above all, his tragic early death (probably from that most romantic illness, tuberculosis). Yet Li's poetry, though it does bear some resemblance to the nineteenth-century decadents and to the work of some difficult modernists, deserves appreciation for its own sake. Frodsham's complete translation of the poems first appeared first in 1970, and then in revised form in 1983 (the version reprinted here). It enables us to get a fuller sense of the poet, beyond Graham's immediately accessible selections.

And we gain from having Li He complete, as opposed to the other major Tang poets. For most educated men in the Tang era, verse was a social skill that demanded social response—we have poems requesting patronage, poems praising the emperor or this or that official, casual letter-poems, parting poems written at banquets for people whom the poet barely knew. These are all fairly conventional and not terribly interesting, and even someone as original as Du Fu has dozens of them. This is why Chinese poetry

lovers tend to read anthologies of selected poems, and most translators have followed suit. But Li He was temperamentally unable to write a conventional social poem, and consequently he is very rarely dull. Take, for example, the poem *Song for the Boy Tang Son of Du, Duke of Bin*, a rather fawning effort in praise of the infant son of a powerful aristocrat (and which ends with the cringe-worthy “May he never forget the man called Li / Who wrote this song!”). It begins:

Skull like jade, hard as stone,
 Blue-black eyelashes.
 Master Du has certainly begotten
 A very fine boy.
 Serious of face, pure of spirit,
 A temple-vessel,
 With a pair of eyes that can see through men
 Like autumn water.

This is almost as strange in the Chinese as it is in the English. A precocious toddler has been turned into something from *The Village of the Damned*.

An even better example can be found in *Song of the Old Jade-Hunter*, a rare attempt on Li's part to write the kind of bland political poem known as a “New Ballad” (*xin yuefu*). Here, Li protests government labor in the jade fields in northwest China, where peasants were compelled to leave their crops and engage in the dangerous work of jade extraction. To appreciate the poem's distinctive qualities, it is worthwhile translating an earlier verse on the same theme by the talented but highly conventional Wei Yingwu (737–792):

The government has drafted the common folk
 To go hunting for Indigo River jade.
 On steep peaks they have no homes at night;
 In remote hazel-wood groves they sleep in the rain.
 They return to bring a ration of grain to their lonely wives;
 Their fields desolate—they sob south of their huts.

Li He probably knew Wei's effort and its description of sad workers spending the night in their hazel-wood groves; he adapts it for the anguished middle stanza of his own poem:

On rainy nights, on the ridge of a hill,
 He sups on hazel-nuts,
 Blood that wells from a cuckoo's maw
 The old man's tears.
 The waters of Indigo River are gorged
 With human lives;
 Men dead a thousand years
 Still loathe these torrents.

The poem transforms conventional suffering into something horrific and ghostly; as the jade-miner attempts to nourish himself with paltry nuts, he is surrounded by a landscape inhabited by the spirits of dead workers, whose corpses now replace the jade as the area's distinctive product. The subject is also haunted by another presence as he weeps, one that emerges through allusion. In his notes, Frodsham mentions the folk belief asserting that the cuckoo is the soul of a banished emperor, who would weep blood in his distress. In fact, the ancient emperor mentioned here (an Emperor Wang) abdicated his throne to his chief minister and later died of

shame because he slept with the minister's wife. The cuckoo's cry is said to sound like the phrase "You should go home" (*bu ru gui qu*) and so evokes homesickness in its hearer. All of this is just a passing allusion in Li He's line, which compares the man's bloody tears to that of the cuckoo's; but it creates a certain resonance in the reader's awareness that brings a greater poignancy and clothes the lowly peasant with a classical grandeur. This is different from Eliot's ironic use of allusion; rather, it creates a sort of tragic distancing, as if the phrase "so rudely forc'd" was inserted into a Woody Guthrie song. In this case, I cannot quite agree with Professor Frodsham that "the poem makes its point dramatically and effectively and must certainly be ranked as a ballad of social protest squarely in the tradition." It is too self-consciously gothic.

But if Li He was unconventional by the standards of his own tradition, it is also not quite true that he is a modern rediscovery (*pace* Graham and Frodsham). He may have seemed peculiar to his contemporaries and to later Chinese readers, but he was not without influence. As we learn from the preface (dated 831) by the great late Tang poet Du Mu (803–853), Li He's friend Shen Ziming sat on the sole manuscript of the poems for fifteen years before rediscovering it in one of his trunks. Du Mu's imprimatur likely resulted in the copying and extensive circulation of the poems among the literary community beginning in the 830s (the only way to spread literary fame before the introduction of inexpensive wood-block printing in the eleventh century). Almost immediately his influence can be detected in lines by that generation's major poets (Du Mu himself, Li Shangyin [812–858], Wen Tingyun [c. 801–c.866]), as well as by a host of minor ones. And this influence continued in the centuries that followed, often emerging more strongly in periods of poetic innovation and revolution.

A number of qualities in Li's work struck later poets as fascinating and imitable; and each of these also challenged the traditional aesthetic and moral concerns of mainstream Chinese verse. Professor Frodsham discusses the most important of these: Li's habit of stringing together images in a montage that often cannot be reconstituted into a clear narrative from the perspective of one authorial consciousness. Chinese poetry was made readable through a series of shared assumptions, including the belief in an autobiographical voice: a poem was meant to re-enact lived experience. However, no one could have seen what Li saw—the poetic persona seemed to transcend ordinary boundaries of time and space (as well as the boundaries of the human and spirit world), as if he were not quite mortal. In the very first poem of his collection (*Song: Li Ping at the Vertical Harp*), Li praises the performance of a musician friend. This was a conventional theme. But Li strings together a series of unconnected images that illustrate the cosmic scope of Li Ping's music—images that are filled with gods and monsters:

Jade from Mount Kun is shattered,
 Phoenixes shriek,
 Lotuses are weeping dew,
 Fragrant orchids smile....

Where Nü Gua smelted stones
 To weld the sky,
 Stones split asunder, sky startles,
 Autumn rains gush forth.

He goes in dreams to the Spirit Mountain
 To teach the Weird Crone,
 Old fishes leap above the waves,
 Gaunt dragons dance.

Traditional Chinese commentators attempt to put the pieces of Li He's mind together in various ways, not always convincingly; they know more than the unschooled Western reader, but still do not have all the answers. For a younger generation of poets, this incoherence must have seemed unnerving but exciting. It influenced the style of the greatest ninth century poet, Li Shangyin, who is famous for his obscure hermeticism. The opening poem of *his* collection, *The Brocade Zither*, is a similar string of allusions that seem to have nothing to do with each other (two of these allusions can also be found in Li He's jade-hunter poem):

... Master Zhuang's morning dream confuses the butterfly;
 Emperor Wang's lascivious heart is entrusted to the cuckoo;
 Bright moon over the gray sea; pearls weep tears.
 The sun is warm on Indigo River fields; jade emits smoke....

One soon imagines that these mysterious poems are not concealing a secret narrative; rather, mystery itself *is* the narrative.

Another novel aspect of Li He's poetry was its fictional imagination. It was common for poets to reminisce about important historical events, especially when visiting the site of an ancient battlefield or an old palace. This usually gave them an opportunity to deliver a moral lecture, or to dwell on the ephemerality of human accomplishments. However, it was quite another matter to

visualize scenes from the past, or to ventriloquize dead poets—something Li He attempts most obviously in *Song: Returning from Guei-ji*, *The King of Qin Drinks Wine*, *Song: Do Not Dance, Sir!*, *Qing Gong*, *Reflections on the Ancient Terrace of Liang*, and more subtly in other verse. He may be the first Chinese poet to ever compose a poem in the voice of an inanimate object, as he does in “Songs of the Brazen Immortal Bidding Farewell to Han.” And when he does write a site-visiting poem, he discovers that the places are animated with the quite literal ghosts of the past (as in *Su Xiao Xiao’s Tomb* and *Song of an Arrowhead from Chung-ping*). This identification with the past also resulted in his resurrection of the dense and hyper-aesthetic diction of the court poets of the sixth century. This brought a sort of archaic flavor to his writing, as well as romanticizing the refined and pampered lives of doomed aristocrats of those past ages. The effect is not unlike that produced by the pre-Raphaelites, and by the early poetry of Ezra Pound.

These attractive though somewhat questionable techniques (lyrical fragmentation, fictional imagination, and use of archaic diction for aesthetic purposes) kept emerging at various points in later Chinese poetry as a sort of counter-narrative to the mainstream. Everybody read Li He, and he influenced many; but he was a disreputable model, a poet who was somehow unhealthy. The founding text of Chinese poetics, the second century CE “Great Preface” to the ancient *Classic of Poetry*, had clearly linked poetic style with the well-being of the state: “The sounds of a well-governed age are peaceful and joyous; its administration is harmonious. The sounds of a chaotic age are resentful and angry; its administration is perverse. The sounds of a doomed state are lamenting and brooding. Its people are in hard straits.” No one wanted to be famous for sounding like Li He. If he was

not included in the standard school anthology *Three Hundred Tang Poems* (as Graham and Frodsham both note), it wasn't because no one knew about him; it was because you didn't want your kids to read him.

Li He was thus very much a product of his own poetic tradition—eccentric and unique, but a product nonetheless. However, even if we as English-language readers bring our own baggage when we read him, the analogies between our cultural inheritance and his are close enough to be appropriate. If we react positively to his strangeness and acknowledge his originality, we are not completely different from pre-modern Chinese readers (though we may be less bothered by the moral problems his work provoked). When I read him, I still think what I thought as a college freshman: I see a doomed young artist like Dowson or Rimbaud or Trakl (or Hendrix or Cobain). And it is maybe not so anachronistic to see a sort of post-romantic sensibility beneath the famous story told in Li Shangyin's short biography of the poet, one that was repeated in the official *New Tang History*: "His mother used to have her maid rummage through the bag [of verse he had written during the day] and when she saw that he had written so much she would exclaim angrily: 'This boy of mine won't be content until he has vomited out his heart.'" For younger readers—ones perhaps less inclined to know poetry—there might be something Goth as well as Gothic in him; a combination of adolescent moodiness with a Lovecraftian paranoia directed at the alien world he unwillingly inhabits:

Though I have a horse to ride,
I cannot go home,
For the waves that drowned Li-yang

Loom large as mountains.
Poisonous, horned dragons glaring,
Rattling their brazen rings.
Lions and griffons drooling
From slavering jaws....

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