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The Poetry of (Li Bai, alias Li Po, alias Tai Bai (701-762): A Voice from Imperial China

- ▶ The Poetry of (Li Bai, alias Li Po, alias Tai Bai (701-762) : A Voice from Imperial China
Samuel Hinton
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- ▶ Poetic Ambience
Emperors in Imperial China hired Poets to add ambience to court activities. Poetry was a subject in the Chinese civil service examinations. The voices of Poets were heard in the courts of Imperial Chinese Emperors.
- ▶ Li Bai, Li Po, Tai Bai
He lived during the Tang Dynasty (619-907); this was probably the golden age of Chinese poetry. Li Bai is a major Chinese poet. However, he never sat for the Chinese Civil service examination. He was an avid reader in his youth and had sufficient connections to be introduced to the Emperor Xuangzong who consequently employed Li Bai as a palace poet. Li Bai served for two years before resigning. He is reputed to be a wanderer and a connoisseur of good wine.
- ▶ Demise
He died in Dongfu in modern day Anhui. Did he drown while attempting to embrace the reflection of the Moon in a river? Did he die of mercury poisoning because he drank too much Taoist longevity elixirs, or because of too much sex. He evoked Taoist sentiments and he wrote with unrestrained emotion, deep appreciation of people, and a love of nature.
- ▶ Translation
Robert Frost once wrote that “poetry is what gets lost in translation.” There are usually differences between what the poem denotes and what it connotes. One needs critical thinking skills to “fully understand a poem, no matter how simple it may be. Hsieh (2004) indicated that “Chinese poetry loses its inherent quality in translation”. Hsieh, Lily (2004).
- ▶ Rhyme
Poetry is a highly regarded literary genre in China. It is traditionally divided into (Shi), (Ci), and (Qu). There is also a free verse western style form. All traditional forms of Chinese poetry are rhymed, but all rhymed texts in China are not classified as poetry. For example, lines from the I Ching are often rhymed but it is not considered poetry. The I Ching is also known as the Zhouyi or the Book of Changes. The text was transmitted between c50BC – AD 10 and was written at the beginning of the Western Han Dynasty. It survived the Qin’s book burning because it was preserved among the peasantry.
- ▶ Book Burning
The I Ching is a reflection of the universe in miniature and it embodies the three principles of – simplicity (use of substance-variability, use of essence and persistency, and the essence of substance). Qin Shihuang burned many books. Therefore, the earliest anthologies are the Shi Jing and Chu Ci, date to the Spring and Autumn period and the Warring States period.

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▶ Tang Dynasty

The Tang Dynasty (618-907 BC) was rich and opulent. The arts including painting pottery, calligraphy, sculpture, dance, and literature flourished and received great attention. The Chinese believe that it was necessary to surround one with material things when one passed over. Tombs and graves of the rich were more ornate and findings from many tombs have assisted archeologists and historians to understand how life was lived in these ancient times.

The Tang Dynasty was characterized by generations of wars and battles against the Turks and the land mass grew in geographic proportions. China became a powerful nation in the world scene at that time. Historical and archeological finds pertaining to that period included figurines representing warriors, soldiers and their horses. Military strength guaranteed periods of peace and prosperity.

▶ Tea and Wine

Tea and wine were commonly enjoyed in business, social, and domestic activities. Some of the most beautiful tea - pots and wine jars were created during this period. Poets and other literati enjoyed high status. Poets wrote about great social events and evenings were filled with verse and drinking wine. Changsha wine flasks and pottery reflected high craftsmanship. Tang Sanchai (three colored ware of polychrome lead glazed) pottery was of a very high quality. Li Bai (Li Po) wrote many poems about wine or the use of wine.

▶ Museum Exhibits

Many of the Museums we visited during our study-tour of China showcased beautiful and functional wine casks, wine containers, or wine goblets. My thoughts were that drinking wine was very popular in high society. One would think that peasants and common people would indulge in making and drinking wine when they could afford it.

▶ Wine and Modernization

Wine drinking wine could be associated with the culinary culture of modernization. In addition, it could be justified because it is a healthier drink when compared to other alcoholic beverages such as beer, whisky, or rum. Poo (1999) published an article titled "The Use And Abuse of Wine in Ancient China." He traced the use of wine in ancient China by accessing archaeological and literary sources. Poo (1999)...The origin of wine began with the Ancient Kings. Some say it was (made by) I Ti, others say it was Tu K'ang. In fact, it began when discarded rice was fermented and it accumulated a rich fragrance after a long period in an empty trunk. It was because of this, rather than any secret method that wine was produced. The I Ching is also known as the Zhouyi or the Book of Changes. The text was transmitted between c50BC – AD 10 and was written at the beginning of the Western Han Dynasty. It survived the Qin's book burning because it was preserved among the peasantry.

▶ Drunken Modernity

Kjellgren (2004) has observed that wine is more than a simple beverage. As grape wine tries to sell its way into the standard culinary repertoire of China, it is more than simply a process of a global culinary flow from the centre to the periphery. Chinese wine in contemporary times is a new tool for identification as well as a sign of the nation's renegotiated position in the world.

Wine appeared to be a preferred beverage among many members of our Fulbright-Hays group while we were in China. I believe that this group will like Li Po, Li Bai if they had lived during his time.

▶ Poem #1 AMUSING MYSELF

Facing my wine, I did not see the dusk,
Falling blossoms have filled the folds of
My clothes.

Drunk, I rise and approach the moon in
the stream,
Birds are far off, people too are few.

▶ Poem # 2 AMID THE FLOWERS, A JUG OF WINE

Alone I drink and none with me
The cup I lift the Moon invite
Who with my shadow makes three
(Translation by W.J.B. Fletcher)

▶ Poem # 3 SENT TO DU FU BELOW SHAQUI CITY

What is it that I've come to now?
High before me: Shaqui city.
Beside the city, ancient trees;
The sunset joins the autumn sounds.
The Lu wine cannot make me drunk,
Qi's songs cannot restore my feelings.
My thoughts of you are like the Wen's waters,
Mightily sent on their southern journey.

▶ Poem #4 SONG OF THE RIVER

My boat is of ebony
the holes in my flute are golden.
As a plant takes out stains from silk
so wine takes sadness from the heart.
When one has good wine,
a graceful boat,
and a maiden's love,
why envy the immortal gods?
(Translation by D.J. Klemer)

▶ Poem #5 LONG YEARNING

To be in Chang'an.
The grasshoppers weave their autumn song by the golden railing of the well;
Frost coalesces on my bamboo mat,
changing its colour with cold.
My lonely lamp is not bright, I'd like to end these thoughts;
I roll back the hanging, gaze at the moon, and long sigh in vain.
The beautiful person's like a flower beyond the edge of the clouds.

Above is the black night of heaven's height;
Below is the green water billowing on.
The sky is long, the road is far, bitter flies my spirit;
The spirit I dream can't get through, the mountain pass is hard.
Long yearning,
Breaks my heart.

► Poem #6 CROWS CALLING AT NIGHT

Yellow clouds beside the walls; crows near the tower.
Flying back, they caw, caw; calling in the boughs.
In the loom she weaves brocade, the Qin river girl.
Made of emerald yarn like mist, the window hides her words.
She stops the shuttle, sorrowful, and thinks of the distant man.
She stays alone in the lonely room, her
tears just like the rain.

► Poem #7 ALONE LOOKING AT THE MOUNTAIN

All the birds have flown up and gone;
A Lonely cloud floats leisurely by,
We never tire of looking at each other-
Only the mountain and I.

► Notes

Björn Kjellgren, *Drunken modernity: wine in China*, *Anthropology of food* [Online],
3 December 2004, Online since December 1, 2004. Retrieved December 16, 2009. URL :
<http://aof.revues.org/index249.html>.

Chang'an is Chang'an is located in Shaanxi Province near Xi'an. It was one of the most important ancient capital cities of China. It was the eastern terminal of the Silk Road and served as capital to the Han, Sui, and Tang dynasty leaders. The city was first constructed beginning about 200 BC at the behest of Emperor Gao Zu; it was destroyed in AD 904.

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