

## **The Extraordinary Word: Chinese Poetry and Its Historical Resonances**

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Chinese poetry often presents interpretive challenges to western readers. There are generic reasons. Poetry, in the end, is not meant for translation. One may safely assume, not without a degree of woefulness, that much is usually lost in translation when it comes to poetry. But there are also historical and linguistic reasons. The following is a brief discussion of the latter, with the purpose of clarifying in some initial ways the distance between cultures and languages, so that we may at least start to think about in which direction we may channel our efforts for a more fruitful though limited understanding.

Like the Greeks, the early Chinese also cherish human language as of great importance in organizing social life. The difference, however, is that whereas their European contemporaries esteem the immediacy of speech, the Chinese tend to lay emphasis upon the power of the written word. Oral narratives, theater, or lively philosophical debates are not abundantly developed as we see in the examples of Homer, Sophocles, or Plato. This may be because, since its early formative stages, the Chinese polity has always covered a largish and varied geographical area, in which the spoken language is not consistent. What comes to assume great importance is therefore a mediated speech, or forms of communication inscribed on enduring materials to facilitate its circulation: divination comments on the oracle bones, celebratory inscriptions on the bronze vessels, historians' notations compiled into books of bamboo strips and leather binding.

For the convenience of discussion, we may derive from this initial distinction two general hypotheses to tentatively describe the extraordinary nature of the written word as compared to its spoken counterpart in Chinese history. First, given that the composition of inscribed speech requires material investment such as in the making of bronze vessels and books, it incurs quite a bit of expenditure in finance and man power. Therefore, it is an enterprise not to be engaged but for the most serious considerations. Practically, there is incentive on the part of the writer to exercise maximal economy to give full use to the limited space. Furthermore, because the written word is to withstand the passage of time and voyages across space, it encourages the author to use great circumspection to preempt unnecessary controversy. Because of its scarcity, its grave meanings, and the amount of human effort that goes into its inscription and circulation, the written word thus attains an aspect of sacredness in the early Chinese society. Second, compounded by its scarcity, knowledge of the written word is also only available to a privileged few, to whom the benefits of an extended historical horizon and social sphere predictably accrue. Literacy gives a person not only access to events and wisdom of the past, but also the ability to communicate with those whose spoken medium is not his own. It distinguishes him from the majority of those with whom he associates in everyday life. The impact of these two historical factors is to be borne out, again very briefly, in the following illustrations of the Confucian canon, the linguistic making of Chinese poetry, the relationship between letters and politics in imperial China, and modern Chinese poetry's understanding of its classical legacy.

### *The Confucian Canon*

In the veritable history of Chinese poetry that goes back for about two thousand and five hundred years, the majority of poets do not write in the style of *the Book of Odes* allegedly compiled by Confucius, also known as the first collection of verses in Chinese. But Confucius is still regarded, especially before the dawn of the twentieth century, as the origin of all Chinese poetry. Perhaps in contrast to figures of the divine in the Greco-Roman and Judeo-Christian traditions, the Sage is not an author or maker, but a keeper of what is made, i.e., the past, for those who come after him. If we trust the authenticity of *the Analects*, a set of his conversations recorded by his students, he is obviously a man of poetic inclination, for many are the occasions on which he recites lines from works known to his contemporaries. Yet compose he does not. The lyrical device that he exemplifies so thoroughly and that constitutes an essential dimension in later Chinese poetry is then the facilitation of a multi-vocal structure in poetic language: to speak is to let speak. Confucius does not evoke a lyrical moment univocally. He allows others to participate in the realization of his lyrical life. The lyrical moment is then not an enunciation of the absolute individual presence, but the coming together of different voices, experiences, and agendas. As keeper of the past, the lyrical persona has to draw life from the written word, since voices of the past do not come to him directly, but only by way of inscriptions. To let speak, then, is also to awaken the past, to give voice to what has become silent in writing. In later centuries, especially when the genre is adopted by the educated elite, such embedded references to the past and to life worlds different from one's own become a core value in Chinese poetry composition. In our readings, Chen Lin's poem about the laborer and his wife is a forceful example. Though sometimes

rigidified into a mere matter of stylistic adornment among lesser writers, this basic humanism and openness of Confucian poetry survives all the way to very the end of China's imperial age.

### *A Tonal Language*

Those who have some knowledge about the Chinese language may realize that in their phonetic making, Chinese words are mostly monosyllabic in structure. That is, they are usually made with a beginning consonant and a vowel or vowel and consonant compound that follows it. Given the limited vowel/consonant combinations that are orally available, tonal (and graphic) markings become a necessity in the creation of Chinese vocabulary. But this basic tonal system remains largely an inert fact in early Confucian China, until it came under strong Buddhist influences after the third century of the Common Era. The massive translation of Buddhist sutras provides occasion for the Chinese to reflect upon the unique formal properties of their own language. The matching of multi-syllabic, non-tonal Sanskrit terms with mono-syllabic, tonal Chinese characters, for instance, helps render the latter's distinctive attributes into unprecedented high relief. A phonetic theory of poetry ensues. It soon becomes apparent to Chinese poets that, to invigorate the sound element of poetry, verses may be arranged not only in lines of equal or varying numbers of characters, but also according to sophisticated tonal patterns. The classification of characters according to their vowel or vowel compound roots and their tonal conditions attains great rigor and refinement. Between the Six-dynasty period that begins in the fourth century and the Song dynasty that ends in the thirteenth, the tonal structure becomes methodically integrated into Chinese poetry and spawns a good number of sub-

genres in poetry writing. This agenda to establish the preeminence of spoken articulation in poetry, however, is not complete. Precisely because China's political territory embraces several dialectal or linguistic regions, the definition of phonetic values has to be carried out within a privileged dialect. But the nomadic conquests of northern China also lead to the repeated physical migration and political demotion of older privileged dialects to the south. As a result, the classification system of vowels and tones that is generally followed by later Chinese poets remains a set of written rules that may not always conform to the actual spoken language of any individual poet.

### ***The Letters and Political Integration***

Besides its pivotal moral importance, the written word in Chinese poetry also takes on aspects of the extraordinary for its political implications. In the west, the lyrical is very much an antithesis of the political. The bard may sing of politics, but he always remains outside of it, as an observer, imparting wisdom about its nonsense and cruelty. The Confucian poet, on the other hand, is at the center of politics. The mastery of the written word not only opens up a wider world, but also grants access to a leading role in, i.e., a degree of ownership of and responsibility for, this world. The Chinese word for the written text or the letters, *wen*, also means observable patterns and laws of nature and then human society. If in the early centuries, poetry is sometimes still seen as an outward manifestation of imperial grandeur, in the middle centuries, especially after the civil service system is installed, it becomes a key component in the inner making of an educated Chinese man's moral and political world. The system of examinations is designed to engineer a non-hereditary, meritocratic form of government in tandem with a

hereditary imperial house. The scholar-officials graduated from each of the three levels of testing are candidates to receive commissions to supervise the mundane operations of the empire, such as irrigation, tax collection, and even war. They are considered directly or indirectly the emperor's personal protégés, and constitute an important extension of the latter's political body and will. Within a world of political mechanics that he sees as his responsibility, the political men raised on Confucian teachings in imperial China then invest in poetry to give life its senses. It is in this world that he encounters his equals in the past and among contemporaries. Again, in the readings, we may find Li Po and Su Tung-po's works particularly addressing this issue. But we must also understand that constructing a world beyond their immediate political offices is not to denounce politics, but to illustrate the possibility of withdrawal and non-service when there is need for protest against unworthy policies of the government. The commitment to politics is permanent. The world of personal sentiments and experiences, sometimes in Taoist and Buddhist disguises, is only a necessary breathing space for the political man of Confucian making to reflect upon his or some general political failure and regroup for future efforts to change the world for the better.

### ***Modernist Permutations***

In the early twentieth century, this ancient and venerable tradition of poetry making comes to an end in China. The Confucian polity, under the extreme stress of colonialist onslaught and internal strife, implodes in a general catastrophe. Nationalism, a favorite project among the educated Chinese of the time, is urgently cultivated to oppose colonization and reorder the Chinese society. In high culture, the spoken language is

given unprecedented consequence amidst promotions for a spontaneous, organic social life. Students returning from the west begin to systematically campaign against the classical canon and traditional forms of life, and ask for a new poetry that simulates the everyday speech of an average person. In the early 1920s, when the Republican government abolishes classical Chinese as the primary medium in the educational systems, the so-called vernacular language movement brings to an end a linguistic tradition that informs the Chinese culture for two thousand plus years. Writing in a language the modern public school system now teaches en masse, modern poets no more enjoy the privilege of an elevated medium. Also, with the introduction of the western idea of authorship, poetry writing is transformed into a much more personal endeavor. The Confucian stewardship of the past is rejected for the lack of originality and innovation. Then, the abolition of the traditional civil service examination system also terminates the relationship between letters and politics. Poetry is no longer a component in the life style of holders of political offices.

What is worse, the dream of the vernacular language is also dashed very soon. Despite the change in the form of government and medium of culture, old problems persist. China is still a multi-dialectal country. The modern vernacular is not a native tongue of all members of the nation. It is a particular branch of mandarin spoken near Beijing, which is politically nominated as a surrogate for an absent national language, i.e., not much different than classical Chinese in that regard. Though with the advancement in education, this Beijing style mandarin is spoken by most of school children these days, for many it remains an adopted and sometimes written idiom, not intrinsically a spontaneous language. But beset by these problems, modern Chinese poetry still achieves

a lot in less than a hundred years. Experiments between the classical and modern, native and foreign, languages can be formally and qualitatively intriguing. Also, like its counterparts in other regions of the world, the industrializing Chinese society provides ample opportunity to consider the human experience in drastic historical changes. The attention to the absolutely particular and transient also becomes a central theme. Wang Xiaoni's deliberation upon her aching tooth humorously suggests a personal space whose physical and sensory boundaries are constantly shifting.

In the mass media and blog spheres today, the written word of modern mandarin is certainly not extraordinary. But by a stroke of luck, or in the poet's sudden flight of imagination, it may still be put to some extraordinary uses.

## Li Po

Biography – information taken from Wikipedia

His name was traditionally pronounced Li Bo or Li Po (depending on the romanisation), hence the familiar name Li Po by which he has long been known in the West. However, the use of the pronunciation 'bó' ([pinyin](#) romanisation), originally associated with the reading of [Classical Chinese](#), has largely disappeared in modern [China](#), partly as a result of [language planning](#) and [standardisation](#).

Called the **Poet Immortal**, Li Bai is often regarded, along with [Du Fu](#), as one of the two greatest poets in [China](#)'s literary history. Approximately 1,100 of his poems remain today. The [Western world](#) was introduced to Li Bai's works through the very liberal [translations](#) of [Japanese](#) versions of his poems made by [Ezra Pound](#).

Li Bai is best known for the extravagant imagination and striking [Taoist](#) imagery in his poetry, as well as for his great love for [liquor](#). Like [Du Fu](#), he spent much of his life travelling, although in his case it was because his wealth allowed him to, rather than because his poverty forced him. He is said to have drowned in the [Yangtze River](#), having fallen from his boat while drunkenly trying to embrace the reflection of the moon.

Li Bai's birthplace is uncertain, but one candidate is Suiye in [Central Asia](#) (near modern day [Tokmok](#), [Kyrgyzstan](#)). Some have suggested that he might be of [Turkish](#) origin. However his family had originally dwelled in what's now southeastern [Gansu](#) <sup>[1]</sup>, and later moved to Jiangyou, near modern [Chengdu](#) in [Sichuan](#) province, when he was five years old. He was influenced by [Confucian](#) and [Taoist](#) thought, but ultimately his family heritage did not provide him with much opportunity in the aristocratic Tang Dynasty. Though he expressed the wish to become an official, he did not sit for the [Chinese civil service examination](#). Instead, beginning at age twenty-five, he travelled around China, enjoying wine and leading a carefree life -very much contrary to the prevailing ideas of a proper Confucian gentleman. His personality fascinated the aristocrats and common people alike and he was introduced to the Emperor [Xuanzong](#) around [742](#).

He was given a post at the [Hanlin Academy](#), which served to provide a source of scholarly expertise and poetry for the Emperor. Li Bai remained less than two years as a poet in the Emperor's service before he was dismissed for an unknown indiscretion. Thereafter he wandered throughout China for the rest of his life. He met [Du Fu](#) in the autumn of [744](#), and again the following year. These were the only occasions on which they met, but the friendship remained particularly important for the starstruck Du Fu (a dozen of his poems to or about Li Bai survive, compared to only one by Li Bai to Du Fu). At the time of the [An Lushan Rebellion](#) he became involved in a subsidiary revolt against the Emperor, although the extent to which this was voluntary is unclear. The failure of the rebellion resulted in his being exiled a second time, to Yelang. He was pardoned before the exile journey was complete.

Li Bai died in Dangtu, or modern day [Anhui](#). Traditionally he was said to have drowned attempting to embrace the moon's reflection in a river; some scholars believe his death

was the result of [mercury](#) poisoning due to a long history of imbibing Taoist longevity [elixirs](#) while others believe that he died of [alcohol poisoning](#).

Simon Elegant novelized Li Po's life in his 1997 work, *A Floating Life*.

Over a thousand poems are attributed to him, but the authenticity of many of these is uncertain. He is best known for his *yue fu* poems, which are intense and often [fantastic](#). He is often associated with [Taoism](#): there is a strong element of this in his works, both in the sentiments they express and in their spontaneous tone. Nevertheless, his *gufeng* ("ancient airs") often adopt the perspective of the Confucian moralist, and many of his occasional verses are fairly conventional.

Much like the genius of [Mozart](#) there exist many legends on how effortlessly Li Bai composed his poetry; he was said to be able to compose at an astounding speed, without correction. His favorite form is the *jueju* (five- or seven-character [quatrain](#)), of which he composed some 160 pieces. Li Bai's use of language is not as erudite as Du Fu's but impresses equally through an extravagance of imagination and a direct correlation of his free-spirited persona with the reader. Li Bai's interactions with nature, friendship, and his acute observations of life inform his best poems. Some, like *Changgan xing* (translated by [Ezra Pound](#) as *A River Merchant's Wife: A Letter*), record the hardships or emotions of common people.

## TO MY TWO CHILDREN

In the land of Wu the mulberry leaves are green,  
And three times the silkworms have gone off to sleep.  
In East Luh where my family stay,  
I wonder who is sowing those fields of ours.  
I cannot be back in time for the spring work,  
I can help with nothing, traveling on the river.  
The south wind blowing wafts my homesick spirit  
And carries it up to the front of our familiar tavern.  
There I see a peach tree on the east side of the house  
With thick leaves and branches waving in the blue mist.  
It is the tree I planted before my parting three years ago.  
The peach tree has grown now as tall as the tavern roof,  
While I have wandered about without returning.

Ping-yang, my pretty daughter, I see you stand  
By the peach tree and pluck a flowering branch.  
You pluck the flowers, but I am not there;  
How your tears flow like a stream of water!  
My little son, Po-chin, grown up to your sister's shoulders,  
You come out with her under the peach tree,  
But who is there to pat you on the back?  
When I think of these things, my senses fail,  
And a sharp pain cuts my heart every day.  
Now I tear off a piece of white silk to write this letter,  
And send it to you with my love a long way up the river.



The poet Li Po by the artist Liang Kai

Su Shi 1037-1101 (Su Tung Po)

Song-dynasty poet and painter, often known as Su Dongpo. Born in Meishan, Sichuan province Su—together with his father Su Xun and his younger brother Su

Che—were known as the "Three Sus". After passing the *jinshi* examination in 1061, Su was appointed notary in Fengxiang, but his official career was marked by a series of political setbacks which included appointments to remote minor posts, including to the then barbarous Hainan Island from the years 1097-1100. From a literary point of view, however, such tribulations served to enrich his writing. Su was a master of all literary forms, including *shi* poetry, *ci* poetry, *fu* and prose essays. 2400 *shi* poems by Su survive, many of them vivid evocations of the poet's own experiences. Although he wrote only 350 *ci* poems, these played an important role in enlarging the scope of this genre and made Su famous as the founder of the *haofang* [heroic abandon] school. English translations of Su's work can be found in Ronld Egan's 1994 study, *Word, Image, and Deed in the Life of Su Shi*.