

After Hearing a Monk of
Shu Play the Lute

By Erick Smithe



*The monk of Shu,
Bearing his lute 'Green Damask',
Descends in the west—
The peak of Er Mei.*

*The moment his hands
Begin to strum across the strings,
It is like hearing the wind
In the pines of ten thousand valleys.*

*The traveler's mind
Is washed in flowing water.
Lingering echoes
Sound in the frost-ringing bells.*

*Unnoticed,
Evening has come,
To green mountains.
The clouds of autumn—
How many layers dark?*

—Hearing a Monk from Shu Play the Lute, Li Bai, trans. G. Wincup—

One night, back in 762, Li Bai was traveling by boat on the Yangtze. Beholden to the reflection of the moon upon the water, he dove in—trying to embrace it, and drown. What then could we ever hope to benefit from the study of such a rash character? Very little about boating to be sure. However, at the same time, his end illustrates most splendidly the Taoist principle by which he lived, that to win the world one must surrender everything; that by a great leap one might attain the stars.

Despite the somewhat astonishing way he is said to have met his end, or perhaps in part because of it, Li Bai remains one of the greatest poets in Chinese history—a poetry-god, or so the saying goes. His death was utterly befitting a life spent in relentless pursuit of the ideal. He was so enamored with the world of the unseen—the mystical realm—that he pursued it with complete abandon. While very few would ever be able or willing to live (or die) as Li Bai did, all the same his poetry offers great insight to all those in search of Tao. He shone most brightly, illuminating through verse those states of consciousness which are as if ever cloaked in shadow for us mere mortals.

Many of the poets of ancient China, as elsewhere, led less than monastic lives. The stories of their exploits, in many cases, make it seem perfectly reasonable for Plato to have kicked all such poets out of his Republic. He'd have criticized that although

they at times expressed divine truth, their inspiration was somewhat unreliable, and often brought on by the drinking of wine. To be fair, this does seem to be a rather accurate description of poets such as Meng Hao Ran, Li Bai and Tao Qian—that they were at the very least partly inspired by wine is a point beyond contention. Despite that fact, they, among others, were able to capture in verse so many of those moments which all too often defy description—the states which exist as Eliot puts it, “both in and out of time”.

These ancient poets wrote of the world that is hidden from common vision, the mystical dimension. They did not speculate upon it, but rather demanded its existence. And this certainty shines through their work. They report to us from the world beyond the “shadowy portal”; a world that they were able to enter, if by no other way than by throwing themselves headlong into it. While their method for approaching Tao may not be that which we would choose for ourselves, we can still benefit greatly by associating with their verse. Their work communicates something to us both across time and through the barriers of language. They remind us of that which is in front of our noses but often goes unseen, seeming more distant than foreign shores.

*As a young man
I listened to the song of rain pattering on the rooftop,
Gazing at the red glow of the candle reflected on the mosquito
mesh while I dozed.
As a man in my prime years,
I listened to the rain fall as I traveled on a ferry boat in the river
wide.
The clouds hung low above—
The broken call of wild geese wafting on the western breeze.*

*Today,
I listened to the rain from under a monk's thatched roof,
The hairs on my temples thinned and sparse as the stars scattered
in the night sky.
From sorrow to joy,
Separation to communion and back to distress again—
Isolation and reunion are always the most merciless and precious
moments.
Let me post myself before the doorstep,
Listen to the raindrops,
And await the coming of the dawn.*

—Su Dong Po, 1037 - 1101, trans. Anderson & Smithe—





*I erect a cottage in the mortal world,
In a place free from the noise and bustle of traffic, horse and
cart.
Ask you why I've come to this distant place.
My heart is detached,
So naturally I've chosen a secluded spot.*

*Picking chrysanthemum flowers beneath the eastern hedgerow—
Weightless spirit gazing at the distant southern peaks.
The mountain air is good both the day and night,
As birds frolic and friends return in pairs.
In this there is truth,
And if you wish to debate
Then stop right where you are.
For I have already forgotten the words.*

—Tao Qian, 365-427 C.E, trans. Anderson & Smithe—

The language of poetry—somewhat out of step with the everyday—persuades us to break the patterns of conventional thought. By its meter it draws us into more vibrant and deeper states of awareness. By bending to its often-stilted forms and somewhat unnatural impositions on the conscious mind, we come, by degrees, to look beyond the form and pattern—beyond the mere words themselves to the essence that stands behind them. The form of poetry is often like some kind of archaic rite—the true purpose of which has long been lost or obscured—holding untold promise for those who submit to its mysteries. The poetic rite, skillfully performed, is a point of intersection between the timeless and the temporal. It is a passage into the Tao.

The poet's skill often lies in taking aspects of the everyday and leading them towards something other. In this alchemy, the events of ordinary life are changed into golden moments, which shine through and exist eternally in the memory of the world. At its best, poetry speaks to something greater than ourselves. It has the power, if only for a moment, to settle the muddiest of minds and awaken senti-

ments long since forgotten or given up as lost. And tea drinking seems to make such states all the more readily available. Tea is something akin to poetry in liquid form, a notion long since recognized in Chinese thought. It is said that the essence of poetry and the essence of tea are one in the same—twin currents of the same river, and that to try and separate them is to lose sight of both. Both tea and poetry lead to the Way as it is understood in Chinese philosophy. And through the study of them, we come to notice the invisible markers that line the trail known as Tao.

Tea, much like poetry, has a rhythm to it. As one drifts along the strands of its meter, the ordinary world slowly slips away, and you find yourself suddenly thrust into those spaces that lie in-between the rhyme. You are still very much connected to the world, yet now able to appreciate the strangeness of it from a certain aesthetic distance. The soul of a poet is born from the mouth of a teapot: The change creeping up on you slowly, so that you hardly notice it at first, like the rain that seeps in through a woolen coat.





Sometimes, it may be a line from Tao Qian that brings you outside of yourself—into that moment of the most maudlin sweetness which in Chinese is called “the experience of ten thousand years contained within in the space of a single moment.” Such experience is utterly un-relatable to that of common hours, and we again find ourselves looking to poetry to try and contextualize it, to give it a frame of reference. But words are always troublesome when trying to describe such things. With any luck, someone has expressed it before, and in better terms than we ever could hope to ourselves.

A poem is a reflection of the consciousness of the one who created it. The more the poet reaches within himself, the further his feet lift off the ground, and the closer in proximity he is to the gods, our muses of—the eternal realm. Such poetry

is the poetry of the ages. It endures the passage of time because in the very moment it was created it was timeless.

Poetry is a vehicle for the expansion of consciousness, though what is most of interest in it is not the words but the consciousness that stands behind them. The spaces in between the words, the things left unsaid, are often of greater importance than the words themselves. Or from Zhuang Zi, “The purpose of a snare is to catch a rabbit. Once you have the rabbit you forget the snare. The purpose of the words lies in their meaning. Once you have the meaning you forget the words.”

When we lose ourselves in poetry, time falls away and we connect with the forces that drove the poet to creation. The experience of a poem, which

may at first seem somewhat alien to us, perhaps for its stilted rhythms and archaic language, breathes with newborn life. It becomes just as vibrant and essential to the present moment as it was all those centuries before. The Way then becomes something not that we study, but which we live. In these pristine hours, it is as if the stars descend from their spheres and illuminate a whole new world that stretches out before us. Akin to the old world in every respect, save for the way it manages to catch the light.

Like poetry, I return often to the bowl—to move my heart to the spaces between sips, often of much greater importance than the tea or teaware. In the same way the poets captured moments of transcendence—wrestling with their lightning powers to force them splashing ink down upon the page—like this, the tea master wields his pots, cups or bowls as conscious expressions in form of the formless dimension. Not only do I turn to the leaf as towards such loftier currents, but after returning to the ordinary moment, the poetry of the ancients is also that much more enjoyable—clarified by the properties of the tea.

Poetry never speaks to me so much as when I am well into my cups of tea. The words, enlivened by the brew, seem to lift up off the page as they’ve never done before. As we sit quietly, the rhythm of the tea draws us into the meter of each stanza and cup. The tea steeps into the cracks of the poem, filling it out, and leading to insights that go far beyond the power of the words alone. Tea and poetry then mingle in the artless realm out of which all great inspiration comes.

A great tea session reaches into silence and returns a breath of life to poets long since gone. The poets then speak to us from across time. And in that way, the ancients live on, lingering for a time around our tea tables.



The Leaf

*Each of us is originally innocent,
Not needing to ask of others,
Yet all the same we ask.
When we come to heed our conscience,
Do we become good?
All talk and armchair speculation are in the end a waste of time.*

*Heaven and Earth are plain to see,
They were once meant for more than just the painted scene.
How did it come to be that my spirit is covered in dust?
Do not simply say that you are studying the Way.*

These words are offered for the benefit of all you honest gentlemen.

—Wang Yang Ming, 1472-1528 C.E, trans. Anderson & Smithe—