



# The Selected Poems of Li Po

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TRANSLATED BY DAVID HINTON

WINNER OF THE 1997 HAROLD MORTON LANDON TRANSLATION AWARD

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Li Po

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A NEW DIRECTIONS BOOK

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# INTRODUCTION

## I. THE WORK

There is a set-phrase in Chinese referring to the phenomenon of Li Po: “Winds of the immortal bones of the Tao.” He is called the “Banished Immortal,” an exiled spirit moving through the world with an unearthly ease and freedom from attachment. But at the same time, he belongs to earth in the most profound way, for he is also free of attachments to self, and that allows the self to blend easily into a weave of identification with the earth and its process of change: the earth is perpetually moving beyond itself as the ten thousand things unfold spontaneously, each according to its own nature.

In Chinese, this unfolding is *tzu-jan*: literally “self-so” or “being such of itself,” hence “natural” or “spontaneous.” Li Po’s work is suffused with the wonder of being part of this process, but at the same time, he *enacts* it, makes it visible in the self-dramatized spontaneity of his life. To live as part of the earth’s process of change is to live one’s most authentic self: rather than acting with self-conscious intention, one acts with selfless spontaneity. This spontaneity is *wu-wei* (literally “doing nothing”), and it is an important part of Taoist and Ch’an (Zen) practice, the way to experience one’s life as an organic part of *tzu-jan*. Educated Chinese had always been imbued with Taoist philosophy, and Ch’an had become very influential among the intellectuals of Li Po’s time, many of whom associated with Ch’an monks and spent time in Ch’an monasteries. *Wu-wei* was therefore a widely-held ideal, appearing most famously in “wild-grass” calligraphy (begun by Chang Hsü and Huai Su, friends of Li Po who would get drunk and, in a sudden flurry, create a flowing landscape of virtually indecipherable characters), in the antics of Ch’an masters, and in Li Po himself.

But for Li Po, it seems not so much a spiritual practice as the inborn form of his life, much of which was spent wandering. As this was primarily wandering on whim rather than traveling out of necessity, it gives his life the very shape of spontaneity: sailing downriver hundreds of miles in a day or settling in one place for a year. Li Po’s spontaneity also takes the form of wild drinking and a gleeful disdain for decorum and authority, as in the story where he fails to pay the proper respects when being introduced to a governor and, upon being reprimanded, quips: “Wine makes its own manners.” Li Po’s poetry was itself often intended to shock his readers, and he was considered outlandish by the decorous literary society of his time. But it was in another aspect of his writing that Li Po embodies the principle of *wu-wei* in a more fundamental way: the headlong movement of the poem and its gestures. This movement is a natural result of the spontaneous composition process which is a major part of the Li Po legend. The story recurs in many forms, perhaps most famously in Tu Fu’s “Song of the Eight Immortals in Wine”:

For Li Po, it's a hundred poems per gallon of wine,  
then sleep in the winehouses of Ch'ang-an markets.

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The most essential quality of Li Po's work is the way in which *wu-wei* spontaneity gives shape to his experience of the natural world. He is primarily engaged by the natural world in its wild rather than domestic forms. Not only does the wild evoke wonder, it is also where the spontaneous energy of *tzu-jan* is clearly visible, energy with which Li Po identified. And the spontaneous movement of a Li Po poem literally enacts this identification, this belonging to earth in the fundamental sense of belonging to its processes.

Li Po wrote during the High T'ang period (A.D. 712-760) when Chinese poetry blossomed in its first full splendor, and he is one of the High T'ang's three preeminent poets, Wang Wei and Tu Fu being the other two. A major catalyst in the High T'ang revolution was admiration for a poet who had been neglected since his death three hundred years earlier: T'ao Ch'ien (365-427), the poet of "fields and gardens." Wang Wei, Li Po, and Tu Fu are all direct heirs to T'ao Ch'ien's resolute individuality and authentic human voice. But Li Po is no less heir to Hsieh Ling-yün (380-433), the poet of wild "mountains and rivers." *Mountains* were not merely natural, but sacred objects. Quite literally sites where the powers of heaven met those of earth, they were inhabited and energized by those powers. *Rivers* formed part of a single cosmic watershed. Beginning at the western mountains where the Star River (our Milky Way) descends to earth, they flow east toward the sea, and there ascend to become again the earth-cradling Star River. And together "mountains and rivers" literally means "landscape," wild landscape as a truly numinous phenomenon.

The moon, though, absorbed the Banished Immortal utterly. Appearing in over a third of his poems, it is a beacon from his homeland. It's difficult for us now to imagine what the moon was for T'ang intellectuals, but it was not in any sense the celestial body that we know. In a universe animated by the interaction of *yin* (female) and *yang* (male) energies, the moon was literally *yin* and visible. Indeed, it was the very germ or source of *yin*, and the sun was its *yang* counterpart. Like all other natural phenomena, a person's spirit was thought to be made up of these two aspects. It took the form of two distinct spirits: the *yin* spirit, which was called *p'o* and remained earthbound at death, and the *yang* spirit, which was called *hun* and drifted away into the heavens at death. The moon, too, was known as *p'o* or *yin-p'o*. Hence, the moon was the heavenly incarnation of, was indeed the embryonic essence of that mysterious energy we call the spirit (*yin* spirit, with the sun being the source of *yang* spirit). This is the conceptual context within which Li Po's poems operate, the culture's account of the moon's mystery. But rather than account for it, the poems themselves evoke it directly, evoke it and yet leave it as it is, even now: an enduring mystery.

With the moon, inevitably, comes wine. Drinking plays an important part in the lives of most Chinese poets, acting as a form of enlightenment comparable to Ch'an practice. But only T'ao Ch'ien is as closely identified with the "sage in the cup" as Li Po. Usually in Chinese poetry, the practice of wine involves drinking just enough so the ego fades and perception is clarified. T'ao Ch'ien called this state "idleness" (*hsien*): *wu-wei* as stillness. But although Li Po certainly cultivates such stillness, he usually ends up thoroughly drunk, a state in which he is released fully into his most authentic and enlightened self: *wu-wei* as spontaneity.

During China's T'ang Dynasty, a man named Li Po is born in the year 701, at the beginning of the great cultural flowering known as the High T'ang. He wanders. The moon beckons from



his homeland, dances with his shadow. The river flows on the borders of heaven. He meets Tu Fu in a country wineshop, and they share a few days. Armies burn fields and cities. The T'ang smolders, a fitful ruin. In 762, Li Po's wandering ends south of the Yangtze River, at someone else's house, when he falls into a river and drowns trying to embrace the moon. The phenomenon of Li Po moves perpetually beyond the everyday facts which make up a life. He belongs at once to the realm of immortals and to the earth's process of change, its spontaneous movement beyond itself. But his most enduring work remains grounded in the everyday experience we all share. He wrote 1200 years ago, half a world away, but in his poems we see our world transformed by winds of the immortals, bones of the Tao.

## II. THE LIFE

As with most immortals, the facts of Li Po's existence are nebulous. He was himself the ultimate source for most of the biographical information we have, and with his perpetual self-dramatization, he was a decidedly unreliable source. Fortunately, few of the poems depend on biographical context for their meaning. Although many can be reliably dated, scholars have doubted the authenticity of up to nine-tenths of the poems, making the age-old attempts to guess their dates especially futile. In spite of the uncertainty, it has seemed best to leave aside the question of authenticity and to arrange the poems in some chronological order, however imaginary that order may be. This is the only way to re-embodiment the legend that Li Po is, and even if the legend has little to do with historical fact, it is the Li Po that has been revered for 1200 years.

### Early Years (A.D.701-742)

Li Po's life begins, suitably enough, nebulous and beyond. He was born outside the boundaries of China, in Central Asia, and his full given name was T'ai-po, meaning "Venus." His great-grandfather had apparently been exiled to Central Asia, and as they found themselves on the trading routes between China and the West, the family may have turned to trading for a livelihood. When Li Po was still young, the family moved to Ch'ang-ming in western China, where they probably continued their trading business. Wanting to create an exotic aura for himself, Li Po promoted his Central Asian background, which may indeed have been a complete fabrication invented by a man of the lower merchant class to give himself an aristocratic pedigree. He claimed the same imaginary genealogy as the imperial family (which also had Central Asian connections) a genealogy reaching back to no less a figure than the mythical Taoist philosopher Lao-tzu (whose family name was Li). Still, evidence such as descriptions of his strange and striking appearance suggest Li Po had much Central Asian blood in him. Indeed, he may not have been Chinese at all.

In any case, Li Po was accepted as part of the far-flung and illustrious Li family, a "cousin" of imperial princes. Most of his relatives were officials in government, some of a fairly high rank. But even though he showed considerable literary talent at a young age, he never studied for the imperial examinations, though that was the normal route to a career in government. If indeed he was a Li, such a career would have been the expected thing for him, the way to secure a place for himself in the world. Instead, he spent some time as a "knight-errant," which involved avenging

injustices suffered by the helpless, and it is said that in this role he killed several people with his sword. He also spent several years as a Taoist recluse in the mountains near his home. These two occupations are emblematic of Li Po's temperament: a deep and quiet spirituality on the one hand and on the other, a swaggering brashness.

Around A.D. 724, Li Po sailed out of Szechwan, his remote home province in the west, and down the Yangtze River to travel in eastern China. Some years later, he was married and living in An-lu. This began a decade of apparently settled life about which little is known. By the late 730s, his wife and perhaps a son had died, and Li Po had begun in earnest the wandering which dominated his life. This wandering seems to have been carefree, probably supported by the lucrative family business and the relatives with whom he often stayed.

## Ch'ang-an and Middle Years (A.D.742-755)

To be a poet in China meant little without a position in the government, for that was the basic source of status and self-esteem. So although Li Po was by now a famous poet, he surely aspired to an official position, and he could have hoped for an appointment outside the usual examination system, on the basis of his extraordinary literary abilities and/or his considerable Taoist expertise. And in 742, through his friendship with a well-known Taoist writer, he received an imperial summons which took him to the capital, Ch'ang-an.

Ch'ang-an, with a population of two million, was perhaps the most cultivated and cosmopolitan city in human history, and T'ang civilization was at its peak. Under Emperor Hsüan-tsung's enthusiastic patronage, arts and letters flourished. Indeed, his reign is often considered the pinnacle of Chinese cultural achievement. The government's frugality and devotion were legendary; corruption was rare and taxation light. Able generals secured the borders against even the most threatening "barbarians," and within China there was peace and prosperity.

Instead of receiving a position in the central government as he must have hoped, Li Po was appointed to the Han-lin Academy, becoming a court poet in attendance on the emperor. His preternatural talents and bold disdain for decorum and authority were a hit, and there are numerous tales of his eccentric behavior in the capital. As at any other time in his life, he was often to be found in winehouses, carousing with courtesans. In a typical story of Li Po's exploits, the poet was summoned to capture the glory of an imperial outing and arrives dead drunk. Attendants throw cold water in his face to rouse him, and he thereupon tosses off a celebrated series of poems. The full account of Li Po in Tu Fu's "Song of the Eight Immortals in Wine" contains another version of this story:

For Li Po, it's a hundred poems per gallon of wine,  
then sleep in the winehouses of Ch'ang-an markets.

Summoned by the Son of Heaven, he can't board the ship,  
calls himself *your loyal subject immortal in wine*.

Indeed, it was at this time that he received the appellation "Banished Immortal": an immortal who had misbehaved and been sent to earth for punishment. But Li Po's irresponsible antics eventual

resulted in his dismissal. Although just what happened is unclear, Li Po was sent from the capital in 744.

He resumed his wandering, soon meeting Tu Fu in a country wineshop near Lo-yang and traveling with him briefly. Li Po had by now remarried, and the family, which included a daughter and son, was settled at Shach'iu in eastern China. The following year, Tu Fu lived briefly in the same region, and Li Po visited him. Tu Fu is an important part of the Li Po legend. The two of them are traditionally considered the greatest poets in Chinese history, even if such claims are an exaggeration. But this pairing is based on more than their shared preeminence. They were friends and their work is often said to represent the two poles of Chinese sensibility: Li Po being the Taoist (intuitive, amoral, detached), and Tu Fu the Confucian (cerebral, moral, socially-engaged). Informative though it may be, this contrast is a simplification. To be a complete human being, a Chinese intellectual must be both Taoist and Confucian, and this was true of both Li Po and Tu Fu. In any case, the elder Li Po was already quite famous when the two poets met, and the as yet unknown Tu Fu admired him inordinately. But this was to be the last time the two poets would meet. It seems Tu Fu quickly passed from Li Po's mind. Only two of Li Po's surviving poems are addressed to Tu Fu, both occasional poems dating from this period (and typically, one is probably not authentic). But Tu Fu often thought of Li Po, and over the years wrote more than a dozen poems concerning him.

Li Po seems to have spent rather little time with his family over the next decade. Instead, he continued to wander eastern China in fine fashion, accompanied by servants and courtesans. Meanwhile, China suffered several major military setbacks, and criticism of the government's expansionist policies grew. Between 750 and 754, there was an unprecedented series of natural disasters which wreaked havoc upon the common people. Although the government tried to provide disaster relief, it was far from adequate, and popular resentment grew. To make matters worse, the emperor's obsessions turned from art and government to magic elixirs of immortality and his infamous consort, Yang Kuei-fei. He left the affairs of state to a scheming and dangerous prime minister, Li Lin-fu. One of Li Lin-fu's many disastrous actions was to replace loyal military governors whom he could not be certain of controlling with illiterate barbarian generals. Soon, the emperor controlled only the palace army directly, while foreign generals with no real loyalty to the T'ang government controlled vast autonomous armies and territories, setting what should have been an all too obvious stage for the catastrophe soon to follow.

## War, Exile, and Later Years (A.D.755-762)

An Lu-shan was the most powerful of these military governors, controlling all of northeast China. Although most people knew a rebellion was imminent, the self-involved emperor would hear nothing of it, so loyal forces were unprepared to defend the country. In December of 755, An Lu-shan's forces swept out of the northeast and quickly captured Lo-yang, the eastern capital, where An declared himself emperor of a new dynasty. The following summer, he captured Ch'ang-an. Both cities were sacked brutally, and the devastation elsewhere was staggering.

Li Po fled to the south with his family and settled in the Hsün-yang area. In 757, Li Po became the presiding poet for a large force led by a certain Prince Lin, who had been sent to lead government resistance in the southeast. Eventually it became clear that the prince's true intention was to establish an independent regime in the south, and government armies engaged him

Yangchou. His generals quickly abandoned him, as did Li Po, and the prince was soon defeated and executed.

Li Po made his way back to Hsün-yang, but he was there arrested as a traitor and jailed under sentence of death. Although the imprisonment lasted several months, he was finally exonerated. Not long afterwards, however, a new administration in Hsün-yang took a different view of his involvement with Prince Lin. Li Po, who was seriously ill, suddenly found himself banished to Yeh-lang in the far southwest.

Li Po was allowed to make the journey into exile at his leisure, and he made the best of it. He traveled up the Yangtze slowly, stopping often to visit friends and relatives. The chronology of Li Po's exile is vague, but it seems to have lasted about a year and a half. He eventually made the dangerous passage upstream through Three Gorges to K'uei-chou, which the Chinese considered to be on the very outskirts of the civilized world. The nearly impenetrable Wu Mountain complex which surrounded the city was inhabited by aboriginal tribes speaking dialects unintelligible to Han Chinese. Had Li Po left K'uei-chou for Yeh-lang and the malarial southlands, he would have entered a true banishment. Already sick, he would have expected to die there. Fortunately, he was pardoned while staying at K'uei-chou, and he promptly sailed back down the Yangtze to resume his life of wandering, though it was hardly the spontaneous and joyful wandering of his earlier years. Indeed, for the last eight years of his life, beginning with the outbreak of the An Lu-shan rebellion, Li Po wandered more as a sick refugee and exile than a carefree romantic.

Rebel forces, which had been pushed back into the northeast and seemed all but defeated, dealt the government forces several severe defeats and began regaining territory, including Lo-yang. Meanwhile, with the central government foundering, opportunists throughout China began launching local revolts in the attempt to set up independent regimes in their regions, and Li Po had to flee several such revolts in his last years. Throughout this period of fighting, Li Po hoped and petitioned for an administrative position which would allow him to help the government defend itself against the rebels. And yet, in marked contrast to Tu Fu's work, Li Po's poetry reveals little concern with the fighting or the tremendous suffering it caused. The fall in census figures from 50 million before the fighting to only 17 million afterwards summarizes the rebellion's catastrophic impact. Of 53 million people, 36 million were left either dead or displaced and homeless. And although the rebellion itself ended in 763, the T'ang Dynasty never fully recovered from it and the chronic militarism it spawned.

In 762, a sick Li Po went to visit his "cousin" Li Yang-ping, one of the great T'ang calligraphers. It was the last in a lifetime of journeys. In the end, *tzu-jan* is the form of loss. Li Po arrived at Li Yang-ping's home with a confusion of rough drafts which, being desperately ill, he asked Li Yang-ping to edit and preserve. He had managed to keep only a few hundred of the several thousand poems he'd written, and these were in turn soon lost. Another collection, of unknown origin, was discovered and edited by Li Po's friend, Wei Hao, but it too was lost. Little is known about the history of these texts, or what transformations they underwent, until they were combined in a printed edition hundreds of years later. Meanwhile, poems and manuscripts scattered around the country were collected and edited, and many of them were presumably included in the combined edition, though no one knows how many were actually written by Li Po. Of the several thousand poems he is said to have written, the collection we now have contains only about 1100, and only a portion of these is authentic. So the large majority of Li Po's work was apparently lost, especially that written during the difficult years of the rebellion. (Had this work survived, Li Po might look a little more politically engaged than he now does.) Combined with the

dubious authenticity of so many surviving poems and the lack of biographical information, the loss makes Li Po as much unknown as known, as much legend as history.

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It may be just as well, for the legend Li Po made of himself is more consistent and compelling he remains, like the moon, an enduring mystery. Whatever actually happened at Li Yang-ping's house in the winter of 762, Li Po died as the legend says he died: out drunk in a boat, he fell into the river and drowned trying to embrace the moon.

—D.L.

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# **EARLY YEARS**

(A.D. 701-742)

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## GOING TO VISIT TAI-T'IEN MOUNTAIN'S MASTER OF THE WAY WITHOUT FINDING HIM

A dog barks among the sounds of water.  
Dew stains peach blossoms. In forests,

I sight a few deer, then at the creek,  
hear nothing of midday temple bells.

Wild bamboo parts blue haze. A stream  
hangs in flight beneath emerald peaks.

No one knows where you've gone. Still,  
for rest, I've found two or three pines.

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## O-MEI MOUNTAIN MOON

O-mei Mountain moon half-full in autumn. Tonight,  
its light filling the P'ing-ch'iang River current,

I leave Ch'ing-ch'i for Three Gorges. Thinking of you  
without seeing you, I pass downstream of Yü-chou.



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## AT CHING-MEN FERRY, A FAREWELL

Crossing into distances beyond Ching-men,  
I set out through ancient southlands. Here,

mountains fall away into wide-open plains,  
and the river flows into boundless space.

The moon setting, heaven's mirror in flight,  
clouds build, spreading to seascape towers.

Poor waters of home. I know how it feels:  
ten thousand miles of farewell on this boat.

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# GAZING AT THE LU MOUNTAIN WATERFALL

1

Climbing west toward Incense-Burner Peak,  
I look south and see a falls of water, a cascade

hanging there, three thousand feet high,  
then seething dozens of miles down canyons.

Sudden as lightning breaking into flight,  
its white rainbow of mystery appears. Afraid

at first the celestial Star River is falling,  
splitting and dissolving into cloud heavens,

I look up into force churning in strength,  
all power, the very workings of Creation.

It keeps ocean winds blowing ceaselessly,  
shines a mountain moon back into empty space,

empty space it tumbles and sprays through,  
rinsing green cliffs clean on both sides,

sending pearls in flight scattering into mist  
and whitewater seething down towering rock.

Here, after wandering among these renowned  
mountains, the heart grows rich with repose.

Why talk of cleansing elixirs of immortality?  
Here, the world's dust rinsed from my face,

I'll stay close to what I've always loved,  
content to leave that peopled world forever.

Sunlight on Incense-Burner kindles violet smoke.

Watching the distant falls hang there, river

headwaters plummeting three thousand feet in flight,

I see Star River falling through nine heavens.

---

## VISITING A CH'AN MASTER AMONG MOUNTAINS AND LAKES

Like Hui-yuan fostering Ling-yün,  
you open the gates of Ch'an for me:

here beneath rock and pine, serene,  
it's no different than Glacier Peak.

Blossoms pure, no dye of illusion,  
mind and water both pure idleness,

I sit once and plumb whole kalpas,  
see through heaven and earth empty.

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## NIGHT THOUGHTS AT TUNG-LIN MONASTERY ON LU MOUNTAIN

Alone, searching for blue-lotus roofs,  
I set out from city gates. Soon, frost

clear, Tung-lin temple bells call out,  
Hu Creek's moon bright in pale water.

Heaven's fragrance everywhere pure  
emptiness, heaven's music endless,

I sit silent. It's still, the entire Buddha-  
realm in a hair's-breadth, mind-depths

all bottomless clarity, in which vast  
kalpas begin and end out of nowhere.

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## SUNFLIGHT CHANT

Sun rises over its eastern harbor  
as if coming from some underworld,  
and crossing heaven, returns again to western seas,  
nowhere its six sun-dragons could ever find rest.  
It's kept up this daily beginning and ending forever,  
but we're not made of such ancestral *ch'i*,

so how long can we wander with it here

Flowers bloom in spring wind. They never refuse.  
And trees never resent leaf-fall in autumn skies.  
No one could whip the turning seasons along so fast:  
the ten thousand things rise and fall of themselves.

Hsi Ho, O great  
Sun Mother, Sun Guide— how could you drown

in those wild sea-swells of abandon

And Lu Yang, by what power  
halted evening's setting sun?  
It defies Tao, offends heaven—  
all fake and never-ending sham.  
I'll toss this Mighty Mudball earth into a bag  
and break free into that boundless birthchamber of it all!

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## WRITTEN ON A WALL AT SUMMIT-TOP TEMPLE

Staying the night at Summit-Top Temple,  
you can reach out and touch the stars.

I venture no more than a low whisper,  
afraid I'll wake the people of heaven.

---

## CH'ANG-KAN VILLAGE SONG

These bangs not yet reaching my eyes,  
I played at our gate, picking flowers,  
and you came on your horse of bamboo,  
circling the well, tossing green plums.

We lived together here in Ch'ang-kan,  
two little people without suspicions.

At fourteen, when I became your wife,  
so timid and betrayed I never smiled,

I faced wall and shadow, eyes downcast.  
A thousand pleas: I ignored them all.

At fifteen, my scowl began to soften.  
I wanted us mingled as dust and ash,

and you always stood fast here for me,  
no tower vigils awaiting your return.

At sixteen, you sailed far off to distant  
Yen-yü Rock in Ch'ü-t'ang Gorge, fierce

June waters impossible, and howling  
gibbons called out into the heavens.

At our gate, where you lingered long,  
moss buried your tracks one by one,

deep green moss I can't sweep away.  
And autumn's come early. Leaves fall.

It's September now. Butterflies appear  
in the west garden. They fly in pairs,



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