

**One Hundred Poems from the  
Chinese:  
From the *Shijing* to Mao  
Zedong**

Translated by Earl Trotter

**Peach Blossom Press**



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# Tang Dynasty (618–907)

In the Tang dynasty, poetry reached its pinnacle. It turned away from the ornate “Palace Poetry” style and aimed at direct feeling or socio-political critiques. Often the latter had to be placed in the far past or was allegorical, in order to avoid censorship or even punishment for outspokenness. All facets of culture prospered and especially noteworthy is the establishment of Buddhism as a major religious and cultural force.

## Tang History

Li Yuan became the first Tang emperor, Emperor Gaozu. The empire was gradually expanded. The Li family continued to reign but in 690 Wu Zetian, who started out as influential consort, maneuvered her way to become Empress and founded the Wu Zhou dynasty (690–705). The Li’s were restored to power by a palace coup. The most significant ruler thereafter was Emperor Xuanzong who ruled 713-756. The most important poets flourished under his reign. After being an able ruler for the first part of his rule, he began to lose control. Later, his infatuation for Yang Guifei, led to his overthrow and her death. Amidst all this was the An Lushan Rebellion (755– 763) which threatened the empire but was eventually crushed. After this the Tang went into slow decline until its total collapse in 907.

## Tang Poetics

The main innovation in Tang poetry was regulated verse or *lu shi*. Prior to the Tang, when scholars began translating Buddhist texts from India, they became aware of tones in their own language and identified four. The idea arose to employ the tones in

systematic manner to poetry. It was in the Tang that this began to be applied most systematically. Speaking in general terms, the rule was to have tones at key positions in the line (especially 2 and 4), contrast within the couplet and match between the last couplet line, and first line of the next couplet. In this schema, there was the level tone and the other three were classed together as non-level. Such verse was called “regulated.” There were also rules for word categories or parts of speech matching. As well the lines were either five- or seven-characters long and the poem length was four or eight lines. Poems not following this schema were “unregulated.” Of course Tang poets continued to write in all the genres. They also revitalized the *yuefu* with new *yuefu* which extended this form in theme and style.

## **Tang Poetry and Poets**

Tang poetry is usually divided into four periods: Early Tang, High Tang, Middle Tang and Late Tang. This is an arbitrary division and dates are approximative.

### **Early Tang (618–712)**

At the very beginning, poets were still influenced by the “Palace-Style” poetry with its ornate and extravagant diction. There was a gradual change over the decades and with Wang Ji (585–644), who emulated Tao Yuanming, the move towards simplicity and frank expression gained hold. At the end of the period, the poetry of Chen Zi'ang (661–702) ushered in the new Tang style.

### **High Tang (713–765)**

This is when the greatest poets came to the fore. Wang Wei (701–761) who wrote not only Buddhist nature poetry but all kinds of formal and informal verse; Li Bai (701–762) with his

Daoist flight of vision and more; and Du Fu (712–770) with his Confucian social concern and who was perhaps the best poet.

### **Middle Tang (766–826)**

Poets in this time frame built on the work of Du Fu and others. Frontier Poetry and Landscape Poetry were popular. One outstanding poet was Han Yu (768–824), who was also a great prose writer and urged a return, from Buddhist, to Confucian values. As well, Bai Juyi (772–846) aimed to write simple poetry that could be appreciated by all. His poetry proved popular and later he was lauded in Japan. Liu Zongyuan (773–819), although not so highly regarded as the other two was also a great prose writer and wrote some compelling poetry. Later in the Tang, Li He (790–816) foreshadowed the Late Tang with his imaginative expressionist pieces.

### **Late Tang (827–907)**

There was a decline in the late Tang but some poets still shone. Du Mu (803–852) wrote both *shi* and *fu*. He wrote lyrical quatrains on love and history. Against a conservative basis he added a variety of wordplay which became popular in the Late Tang. Li Shangyin (813–858) on the other hand wrote complex and allusive poetry. Finally, at the very end of the dynasty, the last Tang Emperor, Li Yu (c. 937–978), who was also a poet, wrote some fine *ci* which became the forerunner for the explosion of this genre in the following Song dynasty. However the end was in sight for both the Tang dynasty and the later style of poetry (outside the *ci*).

There were two important collections of Tang poetry made in the Qing dynasty. First, *The Complete Anthology of Tang Poetry* (*Quan Tangshi*) contains some fifty thousand poems by more than two thousand poets. The other collection which proved to be one of

the most read anthologies was *300 Tang Poems* compiled by Sun Zhu. It is still used in the school system and many of the general populace are familiar with at least some of its poems.

## Liu Zongyuan (773-819)

Liu Zongyuan was born in Chang'an and rose quickly in office. On the death of the emperor in 805 he was sent to a minor provincial post in Henan for ten years. On his recall he was sent to Liuzhou in what is now Guangxi, then a very remote area, and died there.

He was esteemed as a prose writer and allied with Han Yu in this regard in espousing the clarity and utility of the Ancient Style Prose Movement. On his exile he began to write *fu* and landscape essays. His later prose writings are considered his finest.

About 180 of his poems survive. His poetry is considered relatively minor and overshadowed by his prose. However he wrote a number of fine pieces and "River Snow" is a classic and was often a theme for painting. His late poems are imbued with a Confucian, Daoist and Buddhist sensibility, foreshadowing Neo-Confucianism. He also wrote allegories and animal fables.

## An Autumn Morning Walk through an Abandoned Village in South Gorge

It is the end of autumn – frost and dew lie heavy  
as morning dawns. I go to a secluded valley  
where yellow leaves cover a bridge over a stream.  
In a desolate village are only ancient trees;  
in the cold, the scattered flowers look forlorn.  
A tiny hidden stream seems to end but flows on.  
Already, I have long forgotten my calculating mind,  
so why do I startle that deer.

Liu Zongyuan (773-819)

### 秋曉行南谷經荒村

杪秋霜露重，  
晨起行幽谷。  
黃葉覆溪橋，  
荒村唯古木。  
寒花疏寂曆，  
幽泉微斷續。  
機心久已忘，  
何事驚麋鹿？

柳宗元

## At Dawn I Visit Transcendental Master's Courtyard to Study Buddhist Sutras

I draw cold water from the well to rinse my teeth;  
with a pure heart I brush the dust from my clothes.  
Leisurely I carry a palm-leaf scripture  
and walk out of the east study reading it.  
No one understands how to seek the true source;  
the world pursues absurd ways.  
Leave behind words, aim for the profound;  
cultivate your nature to perfect it.  
The Buddhist monk's courtyard is serene;  
the emerald moss penetrates the bamboo grove.  
The sun is rising but fog and dew persist;  
the pines shine green like hair ointment.  
Tranquil, I leave words behind  
and joyfully awaken, my mind sufficient unto itself.

Liu Zongyuan (773-819)

### 晨詣超師院讀禪經

汲井漱寒齒，  
清心拂塵服。  
閑持貝葉書，  
步出東齋讀。  
真源了無取，  
妄跡世所逐。  
遺言冀可冥，  
繕性何由熟。  
道人庭宇靜，  
苔色連深竹。  
日出霧露余，  
青松如膏沐。  
澹然離言說，  
悟悅心自足。

柳宗元



## Lyric on a Caged Goshawk

There is a chill sleet wind  
    and a severe frost blows in.  
Above, the goshawk strikes and wheels about  
    in the light of dawn.  
Clouds split, the mist disperses  
    and a fragment of rainbow appears.  
Like a clap of thunder and flash of lightning  
    it skims a hilltop ridge.  
With a whoosh, its vigorous feathers cut through  
    thorns and brambles.  
Below it seizes fox and hare  
    then soars into the blue vastness.  
Fur on its talons, blood on its beak,  
    a hundred birds flee.  
It stands alone peering in four directions,  
    holding high its fierce head.  
When scorching winds and humid summer heat  
    suddenly arrive,  
the feathers of its wings moult and fall. It is devastated  
    and goes into hiding.  
Wildcats and rodents in the grass  
    are enough to worry it.  
In a single night it looks around ten times,  
    alarmed and distressed.  
Still, it wishes for the clear autumn skies to return,  
    when it will be set free,  
toss off its myriad burdens,  
    and soar amidst the clouds.

Liu Zongyuan (773-819)

## 籠鷹詞

悽風淅瀝飛嚴霜，  
蒼鷹上擊翻曙光。  
雲披霧裂虹蜺斷，  
霹靂掣電捎平岡。  
砉然勁翮翦荊棘，  
下攫狐兔騰蒼茫。  
爪毛吻血百鳥逝，  
獨立四顧時激昂。  
炎風溽暑忽然至，  
羽翼脫落自摧藏。  
草中狸鼠足為患，  
一夕十顧驚且傷。  
但願清商復為假，  
拔去萬累雲間翔。

柳宗元

## River Snow

A thousand mountains block the flight of birds;  
people's tracks vanish in the myriad paths.  
In a lone boat, an old man, wearing straw coat and bamboo hat,  
fishes alone on the cold river in the falling snow.

Liu Zongyuan (773-819)

## 江雪

千山鳥飛絕  
萬徑人蹤滅  
孤舟簑笠翁  
獨釣寒江雪

柳宗元

## The Old Fisherman

The old fisherman spends the night  
by the western cliffs.  
At dawn he draws water from the clear Xiang  
and lights a fire of Chu bamboo.  
The mist dissolves in the rising sun;  
there is no one to be seen.  
The beating of oars is the only sound  
in the green of mountains and hills.  
Looking back, he sees the horizon  
merge with midstream;  
Above the cliffs  
clouds mindlessly chase one another.

Liu Zongyuan (773-819)

## 漁翁

漁翁夜傍西岩宿，  
曉汲清湘燃楚竹。  
煙銷日出不見人，  
欸乃一聲山水綠。  
回看天際下中流，  
岩上無心雲相逐。

柳宗元

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