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In Response to the Howling Monkeys along the Yangtze: An American Eco-Critic’s Translation of Three Hundred and Eleven Tang Poems

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In Response to the Howling Monkeys Along the Yangtze:

An American Eco-Critic's Translation of Three Hundred and Eleven Tang Poems

– Ning Yu

with Carlos Martinez
IN RESPONSE TO THE
HOWLING MONKEYS ALONG THE YANGTZE
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In Response to the
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“数猿肠断和云叫”:
一个生态文学批评者
英译唐诗三百十一首

Ning Yu with Carlos Martinez

Center for East Asian Studies,
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Introduction

If you have read Tang poetry, you have probably encountered its ubiquitous monkeys, especially along the narrow, rapid waterway of the Three Gorges. Sometimes, they cry sadly, sometimes they howl with excitement. Sometimes, hand in hand, they form a "monkey ladder," taking turns descending to quench their thirst from the stream that rushes by a rocky cliff. Sometimes they approach a traveler, a poet, their one-time master, who, urged by his conscience the year before, broke the gold chains around their necks and set them free. They howl to the poet, as if sending a message to humanity through their master-friend.

Humanity, however, has not responded well to the monkeys' call. These crying messengers went silent in Chinese poetry long before the Three Gorges Dam was built, long before the 1960s and 1970s, when people chopped down trees to create terraced fields and blew up the mountains to quarry limestone for the construction of their "Four Modernizations." Yet the howling monkeys have left such a profound impression on the Chinese imagination that in 2007 the government and private business re-introduced eighty monkeys to the banks of the Yangtze at the Qutang Gorge, just so tourists on cruise boats could hear the famous howl once again.

Carlos Martinez and I were led to this project when we became aware of the disappearance of wild monkeys from both the actual and poetic landscapes. Personally, I read and re-read forty-three thousand poems written by twenty-five hundred Tang poets before selecting and translating three hundred and eleven poems that share a focus on the non-human environment. Carlos then worked through two subsequent drafts to finalize the translation; we cooperated closely to ensure the poetic effects experienced by American readers are as near as possible to those experienced by fluent readers of the original Chinese.

In the process of researching, translating, and revising, we confirmed once more what we had always believed: poets are meant to be misunderstood. Li Bai (in an older transcription, Li Po) in his "Prose Overture to the Banquet at the Peach and Plum Garden in a Spring Night" states that "the Great Lump [of earth] lends him his writing." What he meant was that his literary inspiration came from the natural beauty of the landscape. He simply borrowed from nature; the ultimate ownership of his talent belonged to the earth itself. In the course of history, however, the concept of "the Great Lump" was twisted to mean "writing of great length." William Shakespeare stated that the purpose of theater, and by extension literature in general, is to "hold, as 'twere, the mirror up to Nature" (Hamlet. Act III, Scene ii, l. 24). Perhaps due to Hamlet's own narrow interpretation, "Nature" has been read as the world of human affairs, including human emotions and states of mind, political struggles, military conflicts, romantic affairs, and bloody revenge. The tendency to read "Nature" in its narrower sense as the human world has led people, especially people in the "socialist bloc," to define literature as "the study of man." This was encouraged by Maxim Gorky, who, trying to clarify his line of writing, said his work was human studies rather than local studies. This narrower definition is obviously too limited. It was on such a literary principle that some Chinese literary scholars centuries ago misinterpreted the first poem in The Book of Odes, "Quack, Quack, the Wild Duck," interpreting it as a celebration of the virtues of the kings' queens and concubines. Gorky himself would find it hard to imagine his self-clarification evolving into such a formulaic doctrine, a notion that "literature equals the study of man." For in his own fiction, Tales from Old Lady Izegil (which I read in Chinese translation many years ago, as 《伊则吉尔老婆婆》), the
eagle, the steppe, and the forests of Russia played roles as important as the human characters. The male protagonist in the first tale is a son born to an eagle and a woman.

Shakespeare’s “Nature” – like Li Bai’s “Great Lump” – includes, but is not limited to, human nature and the human world. To put it another way, the human world is part of a much vaster world. This inclusion is perhaps better demonstrated by the case of “Quack, Quack, the Wild Duck.” The poem starts with a vivid depiction of a spring scene, where all lives wake up to the rather demanding task of perpetuating the species. Under the pressure of the mission of life itself, princes and court ladies get busy, just as do the glorious quacking ducks on the river island. Ancient folk singers sang the praises of life as a whole. The “mirror” they held up reflected a network of close connections among all life forms. If we define literature only as the study of humankind, we won’t be able to explain why Confucius encouraged young people to read The Book of Odes not only as a “human study” about how to serve their fathers and princes, but also as a way to learn the names of birds, beasts, grasses, and trees. In fact, The Book of Odes – a collection of three hundred and five poems – mentions twenty-four different grain crops, thirty-eight kinds of vegetables, seventeen medicinal herbs, thirty-seven grasses and weeds, forty-three trees, fifteen fruit-bearing flowers, forty-three birds, forty animals, twenty-seven different names for horses, thirty-seven insects, and sixteen fishes. The Book of Odes shows us that human beings do not exist in isolation. Our survival depends on many other species that accompany and support us. When literary critics theorize, they shouldn’t overlook the important role nature, or less confusingly, the non-human environment, plays in world literatures. Eco-criticism emerged in the late 1990s in part in response to an academic failure to acknowledge the pressures humans have placed on the non-human world, through depletion of natural resources, environmental pollution and global warming.

Granting that literary theories should include a broader definition of literature, which embraces rather than expels nature from art and literature, is it still appropriate to apply a critical theory developed in late twentieth-century America to poems written twelve hundred years ago in the Tang Dynasty? In other words, is it advisable to read Tang poetry in light filtered through the green glasses of twenty-first-century ecology and environmentalism? My answer to this question is in the affirmative, as the rise of the Tang Empire, together with its poetry, was closely connected to the natural environment of the eighth-century world.

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During the first half of the eighth century – about a hundred years after the Mayan Golden Age (300–600), one hundred and eighty years before Basil I began to expand the Byzantine Empire, and as Charles Martel, “The Hammer,” stopped in France the expansion of the Islamic Empire – the Tang Empire in China reached its apogee. As one of the two super powers of the age – the other being the caliphate, at the other end of Eurasia – it was ambitious in territorial expansion, confident in diplomacy, active in international trade, innovative in technology, and creative in artistic expression. The poetry of the “High Tang” period has always been celebrated as free and original, reflecting the bursting vitality of a prosperous empire. According to S. A. M. Adshead, during the second half of the first millennium, relatively mild temperatures and higher levels of precipitation led to rapid growth of the world economy. As economies grew, empires rose. And it was, he states, the economy of the Tang Empire that grew the fastest, along with its population, which increased by fifty percent, from fifty million to seventy-five million. In accordance with Adshead’s postulations, Chinese historians also point out that as the physical territory of the Tang Empire expanded, its culture came to dominate in the newly-conquered territories as well as in the heartland of China. To imagine the growth of the Tang Empire, you can visualize the following: at the beginning of Tang Dynasty, its size was about half that of modern China; in less than a century, it grew
to be one-third larger than what China is now. In short, the size of the empire nearly tripled, as it came to include Mongolia in the north, parts of Vietnam, Myanmar, and Laos in the south, the coast in the east, the Korean Peninsula in the northeast, and much of Central Asia in the west.

Thus, Li Bai, arguably the most famous of the Tang poets, was born and raised in Suiye City, located in what is now Kyrgyzstan. The city was then the seat of China’s far-west military governorate, which controlled a region extending farther west into land that is now Tajikistan, Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, and Afghanistan. Li Bai himself spoke several Central Asian languages, and some Chinese historians have argued that he was not a Chinese, but a hu ren, a foreigner.

As I reviewed forty-three thousand and translated four hundred Tang poems, I noticed among the diverse subject matters of High Tang poetry a ubiquitous concern for sustainability, both of the empire and of the non-human environment that had made human society sustainable in the first place. As if through intuition, the Tang poets seem to have known that human life depends on land and is interconnected with the lives of many other species. They saw that over-expansion and over-exploitation would hurt the land, which sustains the working people who labor to support the empire. What the poets found in nature was not only literary inspiration, but also an ethical lesson: humans must live within the means allowed them by nature. The rise and fall of empires, they believed, depends upon observance of this ethic. Their contemplation on and imagination of these issues are certainly relevant to the concerns of people living in the twenty-first century, an age when concerns about climate change, environmental pollution, and depletion of natural resources have not as yet led the general populace to shed their obsession with a growth-driven economy.

In response to my findings, from the four hundred translated poems I’ve selected three hundred and eleven to be included in this collection. These poems were written by seventy-six poets, and by one horse. I am pleasantly surprised by my ancestors’ faith in a horse-poet, and I am proud of the fact that, for over a thousand years, no fellow Chinese has ever questioned that a Tang Dynasty horse could use human language to compose a short lyrical poem. I still find it hard to believe that a horse could speak Tang Chinese, but I do believe that all lives are created equal and they all have their own intelligence. My belief has been confirmed by the poems I translate, poems among which the motif of friendship and spiritual communication between humans and animals is recurrent. For the horse-poet as well as the human poets, I have written my translator’s notes, providing socio-geographical and historical information about the time and place in which the poems were written. In some cases, I contrast historical geography with what I saw in those places during trips I made in 2002, 2006, and 2009.

Now, exact translation of poetry is indeed an impossible endeavor. To try the impossible, we have to be prepared to compromise. Instead of struggling for a formalistic fidelity, in this volume I aim at the sharing of emotions similar to those conveyed by the original; it is my sincere hope that my translation will provoke these feelings in an American audience unfamiliar with Chinese language or culture. My approach has been to read aloud the Chinese originals together with my translation in the presence of my good friend, poet Carlos Martinez, who then offered feedback and suggestions for further revision. We then worked together to fine-tune the translation, until he indicated reception of poetic effects similar to those I experienced reading the original. Though difficult, the process was as a whole extremely pleasant and rewarding.

As the Bible states, there is nothing new under the sun. In this collection, we can see that the Tang poets and an environmentally conscious audience in the twenty-first century share many concerns about the non-human environment that sustains us. That, however, should not lead us to the false conclusion that eco-criticism has nothing new to offer, for what is new is how we cope with the problems that humans have faced over the centuries. If, with the help of these sensitive and generous poets, we begin to give up some of the biases by which we place ourselves at the center of attention and instead begin to see that the larger picture includes other peoples and other species, we may reverse our tendency toward over-consumption and pollution at the cost of the interconnected biosphere on which our own survival depends, we may
control our behavior so that our lifestyle will stay at a level sustainable by the ecosystem, and so give our children and grandchildren a healthier environment in which they can grow up without fear of environmental catastrophe. We may even hope that someday – as a result of lifestyle changes which help mend the damage already inflicted upon nature – our progeny may hear the howl of freeborn and wild monkeys, like those Li Bai once encountered. That, indeed, would be a new thing under the sun.

Let’s read these ancient poems and work toward new things under the sun.

Ning Yu, Summer 2013, Bellingham, Washington.

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5 For territorial expansion see Hou Bolin, Tangdai yidi bianhuan shilue (Taipei: Shangwu yinshuguan, 1972), pp. 180-86. For the cultural interaction and intermingling, see Li Hongbi, Tangchao zhongyang jiquan yu minzu guanxi (Beijing: Minzu chubanshe, 2003), p. 53.
6 See Lu Weifen, Zhang Yanjin et al., eds., Sui Tang Wudai Wenxue Yanjiu (Beijing, Beijing Press, 2001), pp. 769–74
The Poems
To Ann, John and Lynn, My Mentors
Chu Liang 褚亮

Chu Liang was born in the year 555, on the bank of Qiantang River, near present-day Hangzhou. He lived an unusually long life for his time – ninety-two years – and died in 647. As a man of letters, Chu Liang is not as well known as his son, Chu Suiliang 褚遂良, the poet, scholar, and calligrapher. Yet, in the court of the early Tang Dynasty he was one of the most important statesmen, involved in drafting important imperial documents. The famous Emperor Taizong (r.626-649) chose him as one of the eighteen members of the high chancellery, officials who took turns staying on duty in the palace, day and night, in order to offer advice to the emperor and draft documents in response to any possible urgent national affair. As a loyal and trusted courtier, he participated in the most important decision-making processes, including military planning. He supported the empire’s expansion, even sending his son Chu Suiliang to serve in the military.

As a faithful and powerful counselor to the emperor, he played another role as well, demonstrated in the poem translated here.

In addition to supporting the emperor’s pragmatic endeavors, he also helped to enhance the ideology upon which rested the emperor’s legitimacy: the maintenance of harmony between heaven and earth, or at least the appearance thereof. In order to achieve this goal, he sought to keep the emperor and the lords in their proper places within the larger system of an agrarian cosmos. The emperor, it will be remembered, possessed the mandate of heaven, and his power was almost absolute in ancient China. Yet, it was obligatory that he behave according to rules handed down to him from emperors who had lived – triumphantly or otherwise – before. His call was to honor the ancestral god from whom his power was claimed to derive, and so set an example for his subjects to follow: to work diligently on the land that sustained their lives. Chu Liang supported myths of this kind: among the things he did in his long career was to stop the father of Emperor Taizong from hunting in winter, not wanting the retired emperor to disturb the peaceful life of ordinary farmers.

The performance of ritual plowing was maintained in Chinese culture down to Qing, the last dynasty (1611–1911). Even today, in the southern part of Beijing, there still exists a cluster of ancient buildings opposite the Temple of Heaven, which surround the acres used for ritual plowing since the Ming Dynasty (1368–1644). This ritual fascinated even the imagination of the western world; for example, J. Hector St. John de Crevecoeur described, in Farmer James’ Second Letter, how the American farmer worked his own land as proudly as the Chinese Emperor tilled the ritual acres.

Chu Liang as a poet is now eclipsed by his son, but he did receive much honor. During the Tang, his portrait was hung in the imperial archive, the highest honor an official could receive. Centuries later, during the Song dynasty, the scholar Ji Yougong 计有功 placed him in a rather high position in Tang Shi Ji Shi, a collection of Tang poetry first published in the year 1224. His mind, according to Ji Yougong, was “alert and sharp” from youth to very old age (Ji Yougong, Tang Shi Ji Shi. Shanghai, Zhonghua Press, 1965, p. 40).
To Our Ancestor the First Farmer, in Sincere Harmony

Grain begins with you
The First Husbandman

From ancient times to now
all have depended on you

This is the law of men and heaven

To till this land
is the duty of the emperor

To sow those fields
is the duty of the lords

All use these brilliant rituals
All watch with respect

In return may gods bless us
with good fortune
**Wang Ji 王绩**

Wang Ji was born and raised in Jiangzhou (mod. Hejin, Shanxi). He held a position in the court of the Sui Dynasty (581-618) in his earlier years, and was allowed to stay in that position even after establishment of the Tang Dynasty (618-907). Yet, the replacement of an empire was accompanied by wars and chaos throughout the state. Wang was unhappy in the court and often pondered with a sigh: “the imperial power is like a net the size of the whole sky; where is the place where I can live in peace?” He soon “pretended to be ill with gout and abandoned his office, sailing back to home on a small boat” (Xin Wenfang, *Tang Caizi Zhuan*. Shanghai, The Press of Ancient Literature, 1957, p. 2). At home, he indulged himself in excessive drinking while expressing his admiration for ancient drunk poets before him, such as Ji Kang 稽康 (223-262), Ruan Ji 阮籍 (210-263), and perhaps especially the great poet of reclusion, Tao Qian 陶潜 (365-427).

The exact dates of composition for these three poems are unknown, but it is fascinating to read them as a sequence, for they reveal the poet’s process of adjustment to his new life and the country environment. In the first poem, Wang Ji is still confused about his identity and the kind of life he wants to live after retiring from the court. He wanders about but does not know where he belongs; he finds nothing in common with the working people and so must communicate in his imagination with the idealized sages of ancient times. The second poem shows that the poet has found a footing in his new country life and has made a friend – a fellow recluse who, like Wang himself actually works in the field to support the new life away from and so independent of the court. The poet seems to suggest that simply being there does not make country life rewarding: one must work on the land and follow the cyclical process of the seasons to develop a real sense of place. The third poem shows that Wang has successfully compromised the ideal with the practical. He pats his half-empty stomach the way an optimist looks at a half-full glass, and feels no embarrassment talking about his humble, sparse meals with tender care, having accepted the imperfect life he now lives. His life more closely approaches his ideals after he has relinquished the materialistic comforts offered by the corrupt court.

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**Wild View**

I watch the early dusk on the Eastern Hill.
I move, I lean, but what should I lean on?

Trees, trees, in all their autumn colors.
Hills, hills, lit only by the setting sun.

Oxen-herds chase their calves back to their village.
A hunter on his horse returns with game birds.

He turns to look at me, and I him – we do not know each other.
In remembrance, I utter the long chant, “Gathering Peas.”

---

*“Gathering Peas” is a song created and sung by ancient sages.*
Autumn Night, Happy to Meet Recluse Wang

You finish hoeing beans on the North Ground.
I return from cutting millet on the East Hill.
We meet beneath the full autumn moon,
when fireflies dance around us.

After a Meal

I have nothing in my farmhouse.
My supper is always delayed.
My vegetables stay green through the three months of autumn.
I cook my “Hundred-day Brown” rice,
grind flax seeds baked mountain style,
eat verbena seeds the way wild elk eat them.

When those run out I eat sun-dried pine bark.
To that I add rice wine –
nostoc counters its bad effects.*
Wild elderberries give my vegetable stew a fresh fragrance.
I beat my tummy as if it were a drum.
How can I not know that I live in the most prosperous age?

*Nostoc is a kind of jelly-like, green algae.
Hanshan

An at least semi-legendary figure, Han ("cold") Shan ("mountain") was a Buddhist monk and poet who has fascinated the imagination of American poets such as Gary Snyder, Wendell Berry, and Red Pine (Bill Porter). He lived in southeastern China, and practiced Buddhism at Mount Tiantai, the Mountain of Heavenly Terraces, by a peak called Cold Rock. In addition to naming himself after the rock, Hanshan wrote many of his poems on the rock, and among the trunks of trees and bamboos surrounding it. An interesting contrast exists between him and Wang Ji, his contemporary in the North. While Wang was saddened by loneliness and cheered by friendship, Hanshan seems to brag about the desolate environment in which he lived.

As a Buddhist, he seems to have achieved a sufficiently high level of enlightenment to remain indifferent to the harsh landscape, the seasonal changes, and the human confusion. Half buried by the snow on his shoulders, Hanshan had become one with the cold mountain of Tiantai. He never worried about his identity as did Wang Ji, for his identification with the land was complete: Cold Mountain was the cold mountain. Despite the slight difference between Tiantai Buddhism and Zen, Hanshan held an attitude similar to that of the Zen masters when disciples came to ask for enlightenment. When asked about the "Way (the 'Dao') to Cold Mountain," or rather, the identification he had achieved with the harsh land in which he dwelt, he answered with a deliberate arrogance Zen masters also adopted to shock their disciples into realizing that Buddha-hood already existed within them. The masters believed, in fact, that Buddha-hood existed in crumbled bits of tiles and bricks, or even, to further emphasize the point, in dry feces. When disciples asked Hanshan about the Dao to Cold Mountain, his first response might very well be annoyance: if you listen to yourself carefully, you should know; so why ask me? You must have assumed a difference between you and me, but that difference is superficial and has nothing to do with Buddha-hood.

Since Chinese poetry, or prose, for that matter, does not have punctuation, I took a certain liberty in translating Hanshan’s response to the inquirer into rhetorical questions. I hope Western readers perceive the tone of sarcasm and arrogance Hanshan assumed in those questions.

Hanshan’s simple lifestyle served him well, for he is said to have been the longest living Tang poet. According to the Chinese scholar Qian Xuelie’s research, Hanshan was most likely born in 725 and died in 830, when he was one hundred and five years old ("Han Shan Shengping Xin Tan." Shenzhen Daxue Xuebao, February, 1998, pp. 101-107).
Deep in Cold Mountain

Remote, remote,
Winds Cold Mountain road.

Lonely, lonely,
Its cold stream banks.

Chirp, chirp,
The birds sing all the time.

Alone, alone,
There is no other human around.

Dusty, dusty,
The wind blows into my face.

Flake upon flake,
The snow buries my body.

Morning after morning I see no sun.
Year after year I know no spring.

《杳杳寒山道》（《全唐诗》卷806）

杳杳寒山道，落落冷涧滨。
啾啾常有鸟，寂寂更无人。
朔风吹面，纷纷雪积身。
朝朝不见日，岁岁不知春。
The Way to Cold Mountain

You ask me the Way to Cold Mountain.
The Way to Cold Mountain is blocked.

In summer, ice does not melt,
sunrise blurred by thick fog.

How can people like me live there?
My heart differs from yours.

When your heart feels the way mine does,
you'll be on the Mountain in no time.

My Home Below the Green Cliff

My home is below the green cliff.
I never cut the weeds in the yard.

Young vines drape all over the walls.
Ancient crags form a natural fortress.

Wild monkeys pick wild apples there.
Snowy egrets pierce fish in the pond.

Under a tree I read to myself
books of Immortality – a volume or two.*

*Hanshan is an unconventional Buddhist in all senses of the word. The “Book of Immortality” was most likely composed of Daoist recipes for achieving actual immortality, rather than Buddhist sutras of ways to achieve Nirvana.
Homage to Cold Mountain

Cold Mountain should be respected, where white clouds always roam at ease.

Monkeys howl to clear the inner Dao.
Tigers roar to overcome the noise of the human world.

Walking alone I follow the rocky trail, climb vines up through the pine branches, to chant with rustling winds among chirping birds.
Du Shenyan 杜审言

"Demotion and demotion literature," argues Professor Shang Yongliang 尚永亮, “is a unique cultural phenomenon in Chinese history” (Yuanhe Wu Da Shiren yu Bianzhe Wenxue Kaolue. Taipei, Wenjin Publishing Company, 1993, p. 1). While questioning whether this “phenomenon” is unique to Chinese culture, I want to extend his argument to include “service travel” (huanyou 宦游) as an important field of study for the scholars of Tang poetry, and, indeed, the poetry of many other Chinese dynasties. Huanyou means traveling to various places, be they far or near, “civilized” or “wild,” as government officials in the service of the empire and emperor. It is an interesting sub-genre of Chinese poetry that often describes the impressively diverse landscape of the Tang empire. At the same time, it reflects the subtle emotional attachment to or repulsion from various places to which these poets journeyed. The Tang poets often gained access to positions at different levels of government through their poetic achievement and reputation. Traveling to their offices, they found new inspiration and subject matter with which to further develop their poetic talent. Their experience of the land thus could vary dramatically, as witnessed by the poems of Du Shenyan.

Du Shenyan was an important poet in the Early Tang Period; his poetic reputation is surpassed only by his grandson Du Fu (also transcribed as Tu Fu 杜甫). Born in 646, he moved at an early age to Gong County, Henan Province, between the two great rivers that nourished Chinese culture and Chinese people: the Yellow River and the Yangtze River. He passed the imperial examination in 670 (Fu Xuancong, Tangdai Shiren Congkao. Beijing, Zhonghua Publishing Company, 1980, p. 25), when he was only twenty-four – a promising start by any standard. However, his career fluctuated with political struggles in the court. For twenty years he was unable to reach any higher rank than that of county magistrate or sheriff. The first poem translated below was written after 670, the year he was appointed county sheriff in Xicheng – in 760 changed to Xihe County – in the northwestern province of Shanxi.

The second poem was written nineteen years later, when Du Shenyan was frustrated still to be a low-rank official, the magistrate of Jiangyin County, Jiangsu Province. The poem was written during an early spring excursion with his friend Lu, the magistrate of the neighboring county of Jinling. Lu’s original poem was lost. Although the two travel poems were not written on the occasion of demotion (Du having never gotten much of a promotion to begin with), they certainly share the melancholy traits that Professor Shang highlights in his excellent book.

Following the dramatic death of his son (a long story we shall not pursue here), Du Shenyan’s luck changed in the year 702 when he became one of the inner group of poets in the court of Empress Wu Zetian 武则天. But he was soon demoted after a rebellion in the far south, together with other poets such as Shen Quanqi 沈佺期 and Song Zhiwen 宋之问. These poets wrote poems to each other as they crossed the Grand Yu Ridge. Du’s poem was lost; Song’s was preserved and is translated a few pages after this.

The third poem offers additional information about the size of the Tang empire. The minor official of the empire suffers from homesickness and finds the land of Vietnam strange. How would the local people feel about his presence and what he represents there? When we talk about “sense of place,” can we ignore the question of “whose sense of whose place”? The reader can’t help but wonder.
These three poems are representative of what I call a sub-genre in Chinese poetry. Most Tang poets were also officials, officers, and clerks serving the empire. They had to compromise their ideal lifestyle with the harsh reality. Hence, thousands of poems were written to complain about their futile pursuit of petty offices hundreds or even thousands of miles away from home. This is the sub-genre of Tang poetry that often reflects a depressing sense of placelessness, giving modern readers a better understanding of Tang China’s physical environment.

《经行岚州》（《全唐诗》卷62第22首）

北地春光晚，边城气候寒。
来花不发，新旧雪仍残。
水作琴中听，山疑画里看。
自惊牵远役，艰险促征鞍。

Traveling by Lanzhou

In the North spring light comes late.
In frontier towns it is always cold.

I come and go but flowers never bloom.
Old snow – and new snow – still remains.

The river appeals to me as a harp,
the mountain a dream-like painting.

I’m surprised how far I’ve come to serve the emperor.
Hardship and danger push me from my saddle.
In Response to Lu Cheng's Poem “The Impression of an Excursion in Early Spring”

Lonely is the man who travels to serve the emperor, shocked by signs of another new season.
Burning clouds rise with the sun from the sea.
Plum and willow buds cross the Yangtze to the North.
Spring air urges the yellow orioles to mate.
Brilliant sunlight turns the duckweeds green.
Suddenly I hear you sing our ancient songs –
Tears fall on my chest – I miss my home.

Sojourn in Vietnam

Chochin China, such a different climate!
Cold days come late, soon chased away by warmer winds.
Wild flowers begin to bloom the first month of the year.
Incessant rains make a somber mist.
My homeland is ten thousand miles away –
In my thoughts, the distance doubles.
Wang Bo 王勃

Wang Bo was born in the year 650 and died in 676. Like John Keats, his talent was recognized by society at an early age and he lived a comparably short life. Growing up in Jiangzhou, Shanxi Province, Wang was known as a child prodigy. Recommended to take an examination in the court, he passed with honor and at the age of fourteen was given an official position as the secretary to a prince. His poems were well received, and he became one of the Four Great Poets of the Early Tang Dynasty (the other three being Yang Jiong 杨炯, Lu Zhaoling 卢照邻, and Luo Binwang 骆宾王).

The proud young genius soon ran into considerable trouble: he was first demoted because his humorous essay on cock-fighting offended the emperor. Then, he was charged with killing a servant. Though spared execution, his father was demoted to the position of a county magistrate in the remote southern prefecture of Cochin China, an area including parts of the present-day provinces of Guangdong and Guangxi, and northern and central areas of Vietnam. On his way to join his father in the far south, Wang fell into the sea; although he was soon fished out of the cold salt water, he became very ill from the shocking experience and died shortly thereafter.

According to the modern Chinese scholar Zhang Mingfei 张明非, together with the other three great poets of the Early Tang period Wang inspired the “mountains and rivers” school of previous dynasties with a sense of actual human dwellings (Tang Yu Lun Sou. Guilin, Guangxi University Press, 1993, esp. pp. 195-205). In addition to a vivid description of the physical locale, Wang offers the reader a sense of how it feels to live in that environment. Professor Ge Xiaoyin 葛晓音 further argues this addition allowed Wang to develop a sense of seasonal and diurnal changes in the landscape as the lights, weather, and temperature change (Shanshui Tianyuan Shi Pai Yanjiu. Shenyang, Liaoning University Press, 1993, esp. pp. 112-20).

《山中》（《全唐诗》卷 56）

长江悲已滞，万里念将归。
况属高风晚，山山黄叶飞。

From the Mountain

The Long River flows
sad and slow.
Ten thousand miles from home,
I pray for my return.
High in the mountain
the night wind blows.
Mountains, mountains—
yellow leaves fly.
A Winter Walk Outside the City Walls

Tight sweet olive shrubs
White rock flowers
The last of last year’s pears
hanging among a few red leaves
From the cold river cliffs
I watch sails disappear
My thoughts of home
disappear with them.

A Spring View from the Top of the City Wall

From the world of things,
I come closer to mountains and rivers.

Fine weather freshens the misty landscape—
flowers and willows outside the city walls.

What place is not appropriate for spring?

On Summer Wind

Severe and chilly rises the wind
brings purity to my woods
chases the smoke out of the gurgling ravine
rolls the mountain mist out of my hut windows
Come and go, it leaves no clear traces
Move and stop, it feels as if with empathy
Mountains and rivers quiet
The sun strikes the harp of pine needles
Guo Zhen 郭震

Guo Zhen was born in what is now Daming County, Hebei Province, in the year 656. Contrary to what he describes in the poem, his poetic talent was well-received by Empress Wu, who heard of his poems in the year 695 and invited him to return to the capital, Chang'an, for a court interview. Guo seized this opportunity and presented to the court his poem about a legendary sword; Empress Wu appreciated it enough to have it hand-copied and presented to scores of her favorite courtiers. Guo Zhen went on to rise to rather high positions in the military, in 712 becoming general commander of the Northern Army. He was, however, soon demoted and sent to the south, and died on the road in 713 (Chen Wenxin, Liu Jiafu, et al., eds. Zhongguo Wenzue Nianjian: Sui, Tang, Wudai. Changsha, Hunan People’s Press, 2006, pp. 118, 198-99).

Through most of his career, Guo was a high-ranking official, and eventually a peer. Though there is no mention in the surviving historical record regarding his actual treatment of poets new to officialdom, still, the camaraderie shown in the piece below between poet and crickets is both original and quite striking. Comparison of the crickets’ song with his own poetry is not directly stated in the poem, but is suggested in the personal pronoun jun 君 (meaning gentleman, Sir, princely man), with which the poet addresses them. The poem is both humorous and thought-provoking.

《蛩》（全唐诗 卷66）

蟋蟀离家未达人，一声声到枕前闻。
苦吟莫向朱门里，满耳笙歌不听君。

Crickets

Saddened to death, I’m a man
who left home in search of fame and rank.

Chirp after chirp penetrates the pillow around my head.

Don’t you direct your bitter chanting
at the Red Gates,* I tell those crickets.

The lords’ ears, full of sweet songs and pipes,
have no time for you.

*In the Tang Dynasty, only aristocrats were allowed to paint their gates red.
Song Zhiwen 宋之问

The Grand Yu Ridge 大庚岭, also known as the South Ridge, or just “The Ridge” (in the southwestern corner of modern Jiangxi Province) is an important landmark in Chinese poetry as well as Chinese geography. Legend has it that migrating geese would not fly any farther south than this ridge before stopping and turning back north. Thus, it also demarcates a psychological limit in the imagination of ancient Chinese poets: the landscape south of the ridge, despite its actual beauty, always evokes homesickness, a sense of alienation and banishment, as witnessed by the three poems translated below.

The life of Song Zhiwen (656-712) is tragically typical of the “talented poet” in medieval China. Passing the imperial examination at the age of nineteen, he entered the bureaucracy early enough. Unlike Wang Bo 王勃, who died young, or Song’s friend Du Shenyan 杜审言, who was kept at “petty offices” by a series of setbacks, Song Zhiwen worked his way up to the fairly high rank of an assistant undersecretary in the Imperial Personnel Department (kao gong yuanweilang). He accelerated his advancement in the court by ingratiating himself with Zhang Yizhi 张易之, Empress Wu Zetian’s 武则天 lover, and Princess Taiping 太平公主, the Empress’s daughter. (More information about the Princess is offered below in the translator’s note to the poet Han Yu 韩愈.) In the end, however, Song Zhiwen paid the ultimate price for his involvement with power. As Empress Wu lay dying, a powerful courtier killed Zhang Yizhi, and immediately after her death, in 705, Song Zhiwen was banished to Longzhou, in what is now Guangdong Province, as reflected in the first poem below. The scenery was apparently fresh, interesting, even exciting to him, but he missed the lands he knew in the north. The exact duration of this exile is unknown, but it lasted at least a couple of years (“Through winters and springs”). Song’s sense of homesickness and alienation must have been unbearable, for he escaped from his first exile and returned to his home in central China, said to have been in northwest Henan Province or even farther north, in mid-west Shanxi Province. Traditionally, his lines – “Now a fugitive nearing home in north,/I’m too scared to talk with anyone/who seems to come/That Way” – have been read as a deep concern for the wellbeing of his family and friends. Re-contextualizing those lines in history, however, we can see that his fear was real, and not just for family or friends, but for his own life as well. Indeed, he was soon (some time in or after 710) banished again, this time to Qinzhou, Guangxi Province, a place farther southwest than his first banishment. This time he did not even think of escape. Instead, he simply wished to see the plum blossoms on the ridge, blossoms symbolizing the utmost southern limit in the poetic imagination of his time. In this second exile, he was “graciously given the imperial order to commit suicide” (ci si 赐死), in 712, a year before Princess Taiping attempted to murder or banish Li Longji 李隆基, the emperor Xuanzong 玄宗 (r. 712-756). The Princess failed and received the same “gracious imperial order.”

In the life story of Song Zhiwen we see how naïve it can be to romanticize ancient Chinese poetry or landscape. The landscape in southern China is real, beautiful, and fresh to the poet from central China, but Shangri-la never existed in the “exotic Orient.” A Tang poet’s sense of place – or rather being out of place – was intertwined with and complicated by power struggles in the empire.
Starting Early from Jiangkou River in Shixing County

Before dawn I travel over the sharp peaks of Min.
In spring I’ll view the Terrace of Canton.*

Night clouds fall among the wings of rocs.†
The moon lingers between two peaks,
a pearl held by the shells of a clam.
The vines of climbing figs wave in greenish air.
Moss covers the trunks of ancient sugar-palms.
Dew-moistened cassia bark sends forth a rare fragrance.
Winding through rocks, the spring gurgles quietly.
Holding onto leaves, black monkeys howl back and forth.
Flowers between beaks, the kingfishers come and go.

The scenery of the south appears to be pleasant.
My thoughts of the north increase by the day.
In a few days my temples turn white.
My heart becomes as dead as ashes.
When can I turn around and head for home,
If only to weed my deserted garden?

* Min is now Fujian Province; Guangdong Province is its neighbor to the south. The Terrace of Canton, however, is at the southern end of the southern province of Guangdong.
† Mythical giant birds of Indian and Arabic origin.
Crossing the Han River

For the last winter and this spring, I’ve lived South of the Grand Ridge.
Once an exile, now I’m a fugitive near home,
sick of waiting for letters, too scared
to ask travelers about any news.

Written on the Wall of the Northern Stage of Grand Yu Ridge

I’ve heard the legend of the wild geese
that stop here in their October flight.
I have to go on south from here,
not knowing when I could ever come back.

With the evening ebb the river falls quiet.
A deadly mist permeates the woods.
Tomorrow morning from a distant peak,
I hope to see these plum blossoms glowing
on the “southern-most” Grand Yu Ridge*

*The narrator of this poem obviously traveled much farther south from the “southern-most” Ridge. All he could hope is to see the plum flowers on the southern slope of the Ridge.
Shen Quanqi 沈佺期

Shen Quanqi is a contemporary of Song Zhiwen in a literal sense. They were born in the same year, 656, passed the imperial examination in the same year, 675, fawned on the same man who served Empress Wu as a male concubine, and were both banished from court when that man was killed in 705. (Shen Quanqi, however, lived two years longer than Song, and died a natural death in 714.) Small wonder, then, to see the first poem expressing similar feelings of a lone “floating sojourner” who had crossed the outer boundary of the Central Empire. The southern landscape is beautiful, but it can only evoke hopeless feelings of estrangement: the poet had to leave the meaningful land of the “Center” and enter the uncertainty of the marginalized region of the “wild.” Interestingly, however, outside of the Central Empire – which had dictated meaning of life as well as pattern of behavior to such miserable courtiers as Shen and Song – nature seemed to assume an intention of its own and thereby derived the power to give meaning to life: the mountain moon “peeped into the window,” the “Silver River of Stars” (the Milky Way) “flowed into the door,” spring turned leaves green, and the cuckoo broke the silence of the dark “void” of the “wild” region. Knowingly or unknowingly, when pushed out of the familiar boundary of the established meaning-making system, the poets returned to a larger world, one that moves along its own orbit. Did they gain some comfort from writing these poems? Why escaping from his first exile did Song wish only for a view of the plum blossoms on the boundary ridge?

In the flitting world of humans, empires rise and fall, glories come and go. The Northern Hills of Mang outside the ancient capital of Luoyang, and the silent graves arranged there, seemed to Shen Quanqi permanent witness to the vainglory of the empire-builders who died in that place. Today, this traditional symbolism is challenged by the rapid “modernization” of China: as I traveled by Luoyang in 2009, for example, construction of a new expressway tore open several ancient tombs. Also, on what had been the remote and lonely western slope of the Peak of Seven Hairpin Bends (on the border between the modern Shaanxi and Sichuan provinces), I was trapped for an hour in a traffic jam on the newly completed inter-provincial highway. The jam was created by peddlers who crowded the “freeway” with their food and souvenir stands. A local government official told me that they had “worked on” regulations for months: on the one hand, they did not want the peddlers to stop the traffic; on the other hand, stopped traffic made travelers buy things and thereby contributed to the revenue for the local government. What can the “People’s Government” do? A dilemma that Shen Quanqi could never have imagined during the sleepless night he spent there.
Spending the Night on the Peak of Seven-Hairpin Bends

Alone I travel more than a thousand miles.
High on the west slope of the Seven-Hairpin Bends,
I lie down to a long, wakeful night.

The morning moon falls closer to my window,
The Silver River,* already low, flows into my front door –
together to make greener the leaves of gingko trees
that housed the cuckoo singing in the clear night.

A floating sojourner, I try to listen
to the sounds of home, east of the mountain.
What I hear from the last city of the Central Kingdom
is the chorus of roosters urging me to travel farther.

* The Milky Way.

The Northern Hill

On the Northern Hill of Mang
tombstones of ancient lords
stand in perfect files and ranks
for thousands of years
overlooking the East Capital Luoyang

In the evening, bells ring in towers
people in the city sing
with the setting of the sun

On the Northern Hills can the lords hear
pine needles and cypress leaves sigh
with the rustling wind over Luoyang
He Zhizhang 贺知章

He Zhizhang was born in 656 in Yuezhou (now Xiaoshan, Zhejiang Province), in southeastern China. He left home early, but did not pass the imperial examination until he was thirty-six, then gradually worked his way up into the Imperial Secretariat. Having nick-named himself “the mad traveler from the Siming Mountains,” he retired to become a Daoist monk in his hometown by Mirror Lake. He lived a long life, dying in 744.

Though not as widely written about as Grand Yu Ridge, Mirror Lake 镜湖 is also a famous landmark in the Chinese poetic imagination. After He Zhizhang, the lake’s “clear water” was reflected in the works of Lu You 陆游 (Song Dynasty), Zhang Kejiu 张可久 (Yuan Dynasty), Qi Biaojia 祁彪佳 (Ming Dynasty), and Li Ciming 李慈铭 (Qing Dynasty), all of whom lived by and wrote about the lake. Also known as Chang Hu 长湖 (Long Lake), it used to be a large lake along the foothills of Kuaiji Mountain, in Zhejiang Province, connected to the Cao E River to the east, which flowed into the ocean. In the Eastern Han Dynasty (25-220), the lake had a circumference of one hundred and fifty-five kilometers. During the Tang, even as He Zhizhang wrote about its “unchanged ripples,” the lake began to fill with silt; when the Song Dynasty poet Lu You began to write, dykes were built and most of the lake reclaimed as rice fields. Now, only one stretch of the river, somewhat broader than the rest, remains as a reminder of the former Mirror Lake. Nor are the clear ripples of the lake as unchanging as those poets had imagined, having been polluted by the rampant industrialization in southeastern China, and especially by the growing city of Shaoxing. As the city grows, the lake continues to shrink. When I visited this (once) poetic lake in the summer of 2009, I was surprised to see that a part of the lake shore had been partitioned with a rope, marked to become part of a new golf course that replaced the traditional mulberry trees on the slope of the rolling hills.

《咏柳》（《全唐诗》卷112）

碧玉妆成一树高，万条垂下绿丝绦。
不知细叶谁裁出，二月春风似剪刀。

To A Willow Tree

Decorated with green jade
You stand tall and graceful

letting your hair down
a greenish silky waterfall
Who has the skills and tools
to cut such exquisite leaves so well

Winds of March* are sharper
than the best of shears

* The second month of the lunar calendar is roughly equivalent to March.
Homecoming, I

I left my home a young man
Now I finally return my temples grey

The village urchins see me
wondering who I am

They smile and ask me
Mr. Traveler
where are you from

Homecoming, II

For thirty years I’ve been away from home
Lately I’ve realized many friends died
Only the ripples on the lake
glitter and shimmer as always
unchanged by spring winds
Zhang Jiuling 张九龄

As explained in the note on Song Zhiwen 宋之問, the Chinese scholar-official-poet dreaded the vast region south of the Grand Yu Ridge, a region that included what is now north and central Vietnam. Zhang Jiuling, however, is an exception. He was born in 678 among the southern foothills of the Grand Yu Ridge, in Rock Pond Village, Shixing County, near what is now Shaoguan City, Guangdong. His family had lived in that small village since the time of his great-grandfather, though recent research suggests Zhang Jiuling himself lived, and in 740 died, in Qujiang District, about seventy kilometers southwest of the ancestral village (He Ge’en, “Zhang Jiuling Nianpu,” and “Zhang Jiuling Nianpu Bu Zheng,” both in Lingnan Xuebao, Vol. 4, No. 1, April 1935, and Vol. 6, No. 1, April 1937; also see Fu Xuancong, “Tang Dai Shiren Kao Lue: Zhang Jiuling” Wen Shi, Beijing, March, 1980).

Critical consensus says Zhang Jiuling wrote more poems about water – including lakes, rivers, and waterfalls – than mountains, farms, or other features of the landscape (Tao Wenpeng, “Du Zhang Jiuling Shanshui Shi Biji.” Guangming Daily, March 24, 1987). Yet, I think his belief that grasses and trees have their own heart is something that should not be forgotten, for in the mid-nineteenth century, Henry David Thoreau’s first Maine Woods essay was banned for the statement in it that the white pine of Maine has as good a soul as himself and will go to as high a heaven. Even today, Western environmentalists are still trying hard to help people “think like a mountain” and respect the “mind” of other species such as the whooping crane and the spotted owl.

《感遇十二首其一》（《全唐诗》卷 47）

兰叶春葳蕤，桂华秋皎洁。
欣欣此生意，自尔为佳节。
谁知林栖者，闻风坐相悦。
草木有本心，何求美人折。

Random Thoughts on My Life;
Verse One of Twelve

Orchid leaves in spring grow soft and luxuriant.
Osmanthus blossoms in autumn shine with pure light.

Lovely is this meaning of life – in keeping with the seasons they celebrate their own good days.

The recluse in the woods smelling their sweetness is inspired to make a pleasant remark –

Grasses have their hearts, trees their own minds.

Beautiful ladies of powerful lords, flowers never ask you to pick them.
Viewing the Waterfalls on Mount Lu
From the Inlet of Lake Poyang

For ten thousand feet, the flood tumbles through layers and layers of cloud, sending red and purple mists over the sky, falling over shrubs and trees.

It looks like a rainbow arching over the sun, sounds like a summer thunderstorm in a clear, blue sky.

Inspired mountains of diverse beauty!
You impregnate the void with moist light.

万丈洪泉落，迢迢半紫氛。
奔飞流杂树，洒落出重云。
日照虹霓似，天清风雨闻。
灵山多秀色，空水共氤氲。
Wang Zhihuan 王之涣

Wang Zhihuan’s family had since the time of his great, great, great-grandfather, lived in the Prefecture of Jinyang, in what is now Shanxi Province. He served in lower offices and traveled in central and northern China most of his life, on either bank of the Yellow River. Born in 688, during the Reign of Empress Wu, he died in 742, at the beginning of the reign of Emperor Xuanzong, the peak of the Tang Empire.

The Tower of Storks was located in Puzhou, now Yongji County, Shanxi Province, on an island mid-stream in the Yellow River. According to Shen Kuo 沈括 (1031-1095), a Song Dynasty poet and scientist, “the Tower of Storks stood above the mighty Yellow River, facing the soaring Zhongtiao Mountains 中条山. Tang poets wrote many pieces on the walls of the tower, but only three poems could virtually re-present the scene and sense of the place. Wang Zhihuan’s poem is the best of the three” (Mengxi Bi Tan. Chengdu, Bashu Press, 1995, p. 209).

“The Song of Liangzhou” has been established as a poetic sub-genre since the Han Dynasty, often describing the ritual in which poets broke a twig of willow to give to a departing friend as a token of the length of the period during which they would miss each other. In this poem Wang is saying that though there are no willow twigs to break in the high deserts of the far northwest, the soldiers guarding the frontier there know that, and should not grumble. American New Critics would have loved this poem, for Wang’s irony is quite successful: he complains more effectively by reminding a fellow soldier not to complain.

Wang never rose higher in his official career than county secretary. He seems to have been unhappy about that, often keeping beat with a sword while singing his own poems out loud. His poems were very popular in his time, sung by sing-song girls at parties and market places. It’s a pity only six of them have survived.
Wang Zhihuan 王之涣

《登鹳雀楼》（《全唐诗》卷253）

白日依山尽，黄河入海流。
欲穷千里目，更上一层楼。

Climbing the Tower of Storks

The pale sun comes to an end behind the mountains.
The Yellow River flows into the sea.

He who wants to see even farther than that,
must climb another story.

《凉州词》（《全唐诗》卷253）

黄河远上白云间，一片孤城万仞山。
羌笛何须怨杨柳，春风不度玉门关。

A Song of Liangzhou

The Yellow River leads us up into the clouds
To guard a lonely castle and ten-thousand-foot mountains

Don’t complain, you player of the Tartar flute
for spring winds never bother to come over the Yumen Pass
Meng Haoran 孟浩然

Meng Haoran was born in 689, the year after the birth of Wang Zhihuan 王之涣, in the key strategic city of Xiangyang, along the Han River in modern Hubei. He never much liked the court and stayed away from it until the age of forty, when, his hair having already turned gray, he finally travelled to Chang’an to take the imperial examination. He failed. While in the capital, he met the poet Zhang Jiuling 张九龄, who admired his poetic talent but could not help him win office. Frustrated, Meng traveled in southeastern China during the year of 728. A decade later, in 737, when Zhang Jiuling had been demoted to be governor of Jingzhou, he appointed Meng Haoran an administrative assistant in his prefectural office. Two years later, the poet Wang Changling 王昌龄 was demoted and sent to the southwest. On his way to his new posting, he stopped by Xiangyang and met Meng Haoran in Zhang Jiuling’s office. The next year, returning from the south Wang again met with Meng Haoran, on which occasion the two ate river fish and drank a great deal of wine. That meal supposedly worsened a subcutaneous ulcer Meng Haoran had on his back, and he died soon after the party. In the same year, the poet Wang Wei 王维 was appointed to succeed Zhang Jiuling as governor of Xiangyang. Upon news of Meng’s death, Wang Wei painted a portrait of Meng to hang in his office. These stories help explain why in his poems Meng Haoran described the importance of friendship in his life of rural reclusion.

The last poem translated below is likely more interesting to the environmentalists of the twenty-first century, offering a basis for reconciliation of culture and nature. Lord Yang Hu, whose epigraph moved Meng Haoran to tears, protected the interest of the common people while serving as the emperor’s general. Four hundred years before Meng Haoran was born, Lord Yang had often hiked Mount Xianshou, drinking wine and composing poems there with his friends. Once, moved by the landscape, he told his friends that “this mountain seems to be born with the universe itself and sages since ancient times have hiked the mountain and viewed the panorama long before we did. Yet those sages were all gone and not to be heard of ever since. Thinking of this makes me sad” (quoted in Xiao Difei, et al., eds., Tangshi Jianshang Cidian. Shanghai, Dictionary Publication Company, 1983, p. 88. My translation). After he died, local people erected a monument for him on the top of Mount Xianshou, which, according to Meng Haoran, added to the aesthetic value of “mountains and rivers” and gave meaning, even immortality, to human existence. In his view, natural objects can be revealed or concealed as the seasons change, yet a text recording good human behavior stands clear, clarifying change in nature and reunifying culture with nature. Meng Haoran turned out to be right, but with a twist of irony: Yang did become immortal, but more because of Meng’s poem than the monument. On the other hand, the “Swamp of Dream,” often associated with another swamp, the “Swamp of Clouds,” is posited in the poem as another symbol of immutability. Cold and deep in Meng’s time, the swamps had long since dried up and disappeared under rice fields, villages, and towns. According to the Song Dynasty scholar and scientist Shen Kuo, 沈括 (Mengxi Bitan. Chengdu, Bashu Press, 1995, p.47), the Swamp of Dream on the south side of the Yangtze was on higher land, and therefore dried up first; when the lower swamp on the north side of the Yangtze, the Swamp of Clouds, finally dried up, farmers in the south had already started tilling the fields and growing crops on what was the Dream. However, both swamps retain their strong presence in people’s imagination through texts that include Meng’s poem. Perhaps that is what environmental literature is all about. Small pools of water remain in the general areas where the two giant swamps used to be. This is how twentieth-century Chinese non-fiction writers describe them, though mistaking them as one: “Yun (Cloud) Meng (Dream) swamp was a giant lake in ancient China, but silted by the mud and sand from both Yangtze and Han rivers; it gradually became quality farms and forms what is now the Yangtze-Han Plain.
Waking up to a Spring Dawn

From a spring slumber I unknowingly wake
Everywhere I hear chirping birds
Overnight the sounds of wind and rain
How many flowers have fallen

Sent to Zhang Wu during a Hike up Mt. Lan

In the North Mountains, in banks of clouds
the recluse is pleased with his life.

Hoping to see him, I hike Mount Lan – my mind flies with the disappearing birds.

A slight sadness rises as the sun sets, my desire to travel stirred by pure autumn.

I see people returning to their villages, walking along the sand beach, resting against ferry railings.

Trees along the skyline small as mustard greens, boats along the river slivers of new moon.

Oh, my friend! When are you coming with wine, to fall drunk with me on the Ninth Day of the Ninth Month?*

*Nine 九 (jiu) is not only the largest single digit, but also, as the highest number, symbolizes the yang. It shares the same sound with the word “long (time) 久” in Chinese. The Ninth Day of the Ninth Month, also known as the Double Nine and the Double Yang, sounds in Chinese like “long, long,” implying the good omen of longevity.
《夏日南亭怀辛大》
（《全唐诗》卷159）

山光忽西落，池月渐东升。
散发乘夕凉，开轩卧闲敞。
荷风送香气，竹露滴清响。
欲取鸣琴弹，恨无知音赏。
感此怀故人，中宵劳梦想。

Written While Thinking of Xin Da
in the South Pavilion on a Summer Day

The light above the west mountains disappears
The moon over the pond slowly rises

I let loose of my hair to enjoy the evening cool
opening the windows I lie down in the leisure space

lotus flowers send me fragrant breezes
bamboo leaves drip dew – what pure sounds

I want to play my harp alas
where is the friend who appreciates my music

Feeling this I miss my old companion –
could you come to my dream tonight

《故人庄》（《全唐诗》卷160）

故人具鸡黍，邀我至田家。
绿树村边合，青山郭外斜。
开轩面场圃，把酒话桑麻。
待到重阳日，还来就菊花。

Visiting a Friend’s Farm House

My friend prepared a chicken and millet dinner
He invited me to his farmhouse

Green trees surround the village
Blue mountains slant outside the town

Opening the windows we face the garden and threshing ground
Holding our cups we toast to the harvest of mulberries and hemp

I will come again dear friend on the Ninth Day of the Ninth Month
to enjoy your chrysanthemums with or without your invitation
Hiking Mount Xianshou with Fellow Poets

In human affairs one generation replaces another
They come and go to make history and the present world
Rivers and mountains retain their beautiful traces
We hike the mountain to visit in person
The river has fallen revealing rock weirs of the past
The autumn turning chilly descends on the deep Swamp of Dreams
The epitaph of Lord Yang clear as ever
My tears make the reading dim
Qi Wuqian 蒋毋潜

Ruoye Creek 若耶溪 is another famous landmark in the Chinese poetic tradition. Pre-Tang poets and Tang poets such as Qi Wuqian’s friends, Qiu Wei 丘为 and Li Bai 李白, to name a few, have written about the creek, now called Pingshui Jiang — “The River of Even Water.” For centuries people believed this creek (located near Shaoxing, in Zhejiang) had seventy-two tributaries, which gathered together north of the Town of Even Water before splitting into two after passing Yu Ling—with one turning west to flow into the very Mirror Lake celebrated in the poems of He Zhizhang 贺知章. In the poetry and prose of ancient China, the creek is always described as flanked by green mountains that give the pure stream a tint of greenish blue. Yet, in the summer of 2009, I saw big barges barely passing each other in the narrow river, belching thick and black smoke of low quality diesel.

Qi Wuqian wrote this poem as a letter to his poet-friend Chu Guangxi 储光羲, who, upon receiving the poem, immediately composed a piece in return. The “fisherman” in the poem — given its geographical placement — is a literary allusion as well as an actual man of humble circumstance. It is a reference to Yan Ziling 子陵, a famous recluse of the Eastern Han Dynasty (AD 25–220) who chose to be a fisherman on Fuchun River, in the same (Zhejiang) province rather than serve as high chancellor to Emperor Guangwu (r. AD 25–58), who had been a teenage friend of Yan Ziling’s and fellow pupil under the same master. However, neither Ruoye Creek nor Zhejiang Province was Qi Wuqian’s home, and he certainly did not grow old by the famous creek. He was born in the southern part of Hubei Province, on the mid-reaches of the Yangtze River. Born during the reign of Empress Wu, in 689, he took the imperial examination in 721, but failed. Before leaving the imperial capital for home, Wang Wei 王维 and Lu Xiang 卢象 wrote poems for him at his farewell party. Five years later, he took the exam again and passed, and was soon assigned to be the sheriff of Yishou County. He gradually worked his way up to the mid-rank position of Zhuzuolang, in charge of composing the contemporary imperial history, but in the process grew tired of official life and in 733 resigned. At this second farewell party, his poet-friend Wang Wei again wrote him a touching poem. He was one of the few Tang poets who lived to his sixties.

The Yuan Dynasty critic Xin Wenfang 辛文房 claims in Tang Caizi Zhuan (first published in the year 1304) that “Qi Wuqian is especially talented in describing scenes beyond this world. In this respect, no poets in all the previous dynasties had ever achieved what he has achieved” (Tang Caizi Zhuan. Shanghai, The Press of Ancient Literature, 1957, p. 21).
Boating on Ruoye Creek in Spring

My love of solitude is never broken
This trip depends on random whim

Evening wind pushes the boat
I enter a creek covered with fallen flowers

At dusk I turn around and go into a valley
Over the mountain I see the South Star

The mist over the lake mingles with moonshine
The moon behind the trees falls lower and lower

Mistier than the night is my fate in the human world
I’d rather grow old here with fishing rod in hand
Wang Changling 王昌龄

Critics and literary historians differ about Wang Changling’s place of birth. Was it in Taiyuan, Shanxi Province? Or was it the capital city, Ch’ang’an? Or was it Jiangning County on the southern bank of the Yangtze? I tend to agree with Chief Editor of Zhonghua Press, Mr. Fu Xuancong, and favor the suburb of the capital city as Wang’s home town. According to Fu, Wang’s home village, Zhiyang, was located on the White Deer Plain, in Wannian County, Shaanxi Province (Tang Dai Shiren Cong Kao. Beijing, Zhonghua Press, 1980, pp. 110–11). Wang Changling was born in 690, the year in which the powerful Wu Zetian discarded her title of Empress of Tang and claimed herself to be the female “Emperor” (huangdi 皇帝) of her own dynasty – the Zhou (which lasted just 15 years until Tang Restoration and her death in 705). Wang died in 756, when China’s prosperous years abruptly began to come to an end in the chaotic wars that followed the rebellion led by Emperor Xuanzong’s favorite “foreign courtier,” An Lushan. The years of Wang’s life were, however, in theory at least, the best years of a great age in China. But Wang, who lived near the capital city, did not share the prosperity, despite his widely acknowledged talent. As he describes the situation in a letter to a friend: “I do appreciate the fact that I live among green hills and drink the pure water that flows by [the village]... yet with meager financial resources, I often find myself sitting alone, weeping for lacking the strength to carry some rice [from the market place to home]” (Quoted in Fu, p.115. Translation mine).

Wang Changling is best known for his short poems. His contemporary critic Yin Fan 殷璠 praised Wang’s poetic talent highly: “For the four hundred years since the Yuanjia Period [424–453] in the Southern Dynasties... the poetic tradition had deteriorated... until from Taiyuan, Wang Changling... [made his] strong voice heard...” (He Yue Yingling Ji [comp. 752]. Reprinted with annotation, Chengdu, Bashu Press, 2006, p. 300. Translation mine).

The three poems translated here are all about women’s life. The first and the second are about how the war on the frontiers interrupted family life, soldiers missing their wives, and a lady missing her husband, whom she had encouraged to pursue fame and rank on the frontier. The third one is about the southern part of China, which was not directly impacted by the empire’s expansion wars in the northwest. The ironic contrast that emerges from reading these three poems together reflects Wang Changling’s attitude toward the behavior of the empire at its peak.

《从军行》（《全唐诗》 巻 43）

烽火城西百尺楼，黄昏独上玉门秋。
更吹羌笛关山月，无那金闺万里愁。

The Song of the Enlisted

By beacon fire on the hundred-foot west tower
alone in the evening I stand facing the desert wind

Someone plays a Tartar flute to the castle moon
What can we do in such an autumn night
but to miss our wives ten thousand miles away
《闺怨》（《全唐诗》卷43）
闺中少妇不知愁，春日凝妆上翠楼。
忽见陌头杨柳色，悔教夫婿觅封侯。

《采莲曲》（《全唐诗》卷43）
荷叶罗裙一色裁，芙蓉向脸两边开。
乱入池中看不见，闻歌始觉有人来。

The Complaint of a Lady

Deep in a mansion
stranger to distress
a young lady
in heavy make-up
climbs her green tower

She sees the weeping willow
turn green in spring

Regret seizes her

Why did she encourage her husband
to seek fame and position
on the frontier

Song of Lotus Gathering Girls

Lotus leaves and their skirts – the same color
Lotus blossoms and their faces – pink and fresh

They scatter all over the lake – invisible
I know one is coming towards me – hearing her songs
With Cui Guofu, it is not only unclear where he was born, but also when. Regarding the place, some say he was from the famous city of Suzhou, in present-day Jiangsu Province; others believe he was from the county of Shanyin, now Shaoxing City, in Zhejiang, the same town where the Daoist poet He Zhizhang 贺知章 grew up and to which he retired. Though we don’t know the year of Cui’s birth, he passed the imperial examination in 726, and gradually rose from the position of a county sheriff to that of an editing librarian in the imperial library and a middle-rank official in the Department of Rituals. In the year 752, he was demoted to the Prefecture of Jingling – now Tianmen City in Hubei Province – where he met Lu Yu 陆羽, the famous Sage of Tea. Jingling 竟陵 is located in the middle reach of the Yangtze River, near the junction of the Yangtze and the Han. The name of the town means in Chinese “where the rolling hills end,” and the flood plain begins to show its massive expanse. Lakes and marshes are innumerable there, and they inspired Cui Guofu’s songs of lotus girls.

Both lotus songs and boat songs were directly inherited by the Tang poets from the genre of Yuefu Geci of the Han Dynasty, a genre officially established by Emperor Wu of Han, who was in power from 141 to 87 BC. This form includes a wide variety of lyrics for ritual chanting, prayers for good harvest, celebration of important national events, and lively, simple folk songs. As songs, they were set to music, but during the long period of time between Han (206 BC–AD 220) and Tang (618–907), poets tried to turn them into more refined and elegant “pure” poetry. In the able hands of the Tang poets, however, Yuefu Geci were restored to their original folk-song style, as witnessed in the two poems by Cui, who captured with passion and accuracy the rhythm of working people’s life close to the beautiful and mild nature of south-central China.

The Lotus Gathering Song (Lotus Geci)

By a river bay, green as jade,
red flowers bloom.

Around a golden pond,
green streams flow.

Two lotus gathering boats meet,
unwilling to part again.

Girls tie the boats
side to full side.

《采莲曲》（《全唐诗》卷21）
玉溆花红发，金塘水碧流。
相逢畏相失，并著采莲舟。

Lotus Gathering Song

By a river bay, green as jade,
red flowers bloom.

Around a golden pond,
green streams flow.

Two lotus gathering boats meet,
unwilling to part again.

Girls tie the boats
side to full side.
A Little Nanking Boat Song

The dim moon sends a breeze
over the dim lake.

A boy searches around
but can't find his girl –
his boat entangled in water-chestnuts.

He knows she’s somewhere
on this lake –
her songs, almost endless,
rise and fall
among Trapa leaves.

*Trapa is a kind of water-chestnut that bears a root-fruit in the form of a
bat-shaped nut, with white, starchy, sweet meat.
Little is known about Lu Xiang’s early life. Originally from a humble family at Wanshui, in the Yimeng Mountains of what is now Shandong Province, he later moved his family to the lower reach of the Yangtze River. Through poetry he made himself a reputation during the reign of Emperor Xuanzong (712-756), finding special favor with Prime Minister Zhang Jiuling. The order of the first two poems as they appear in Quan Tang Shi (The Complete Poetry of the Tang Dynasty) may very well be the chronological order, for they reflect the different climates of his home in the Yimeng Mountains in northern China, where creeks “congeal into lumpy ice,” and his new home after he moved to the south of Yangtze River, where “ice never fully seals the pond.” For me, it’s fascinating to imagine that in what is now the over-populated southeast of China the Tang poet actually saw a bear hibernating under a cold cliff.

The technology most powerfully destructive to the natural environment in ancient China was fire, as it was elsewhere in the world. Yet, it is still mind-boggling to imagine that in order to smoke out a courtier who managed to flee his court after helping him recapture his kingdom, Prince Wen 文公 (r. 636-628 BC) of the State of Jin 晋 (now the major part of Shanxi Province) would burn down a whole mountain – Mount Mian 绵山 – fifty kilometers (31 miles) in length, with a summit 2,072 meters (almost 7,000 feet) in height. Jie Zitui 介之推 and his mother died in the fire. In memoriam, people decided not to use fire to cook anything on the day of his death, and thus the tradition of Cold Food Day started.
Written on the Occasion of a Neighborly Gathering
After I Returned Home from the Civil Examination

Cocks crowed to send me on the road
from the county seat in the east.
In sunset, I saw my mulberry groves –
so cold, tugged in the valley shade.

On top of the hill, south of my home,
my horse stopped, exhausted and lame.

My neighbors, old acquaintances,
come in descending dusk,
to tell me bitter stories of taxes unpaid.
In return, I tell them the hardship on the road
of a scholar pursuing rank and fame.

My garden is nestled in the cold valley.
My vegetables have lost their leaves.
Though the weather is fine, our hilltops remain
covered with patches of snow.
The creeks, though deep, congeal into lumpy ice.

What’s the use of my pursuit of fame
if we can’t have a merry New Year’s Eve?
I loudly toast to my neighbors dear,
with this lengthy song to relieve their grief.

*The New Year’s Eve here refers to the Chinese New Year, also known as the Spring Festival.
A little ice here, far south of the Yangtze, never fully seals the rivers or ponds. Hills and lakes are connected by warmth circulating underground.

In mid-December you still hear birds chirping in the shady woods. Under the cold cliff I see a bear hibernating in a cave.

When spring arrives, the willow groves close up with luxuriant foliage, asparagus grow wild along the edge of the marsh.

My heart, stirred by the wind from the north, flies towards my home in Jinling on the northern bank of the Yangtze.
On the Day of Cold Meals

Within Four Seas,
over a thousand years,
people refrain from using fire
on this chilly day.
To quell their hunger, they eat
only cold meals, to remember one man,
the virtuous Jie the sage.

He ran away from his prince
and refused to comply
with the scheming world.
He hid in the mountains
yet could not avoid
total destruction.

The prince burned
the elms and willows
all over the mountains
just to smoke out one man.

The sage died in the fire –
profound injustice
no words can describe!
notorious behavior
with no match in history!

Jie's soul and ghost float with Qi
over mountains
and along rivers
to become the god of wind and thunder.

In fire and smoke
elms and willows were destroyed.
In fire and smoke
a man was made immortal.

Prince Wen,
proud ruler of Jin:
you have wronged
the world and man!
Ding Xianzhi 丁仙芝

Ding Xianzhi grew up in a town known in the Tang as Qu'e (mod. Danyang in Jiangsu Province), about thirty kilometers north of the town of Yanling (now Jintan), where his good friend and fellow poet Chu Guangxi 储光羲 was born and raised. Ding passed the imperial examination in 725, earlier than Chu. For unknown reasons, however, he was not offered official position until 730, when he was assigned to lower rank offices in a region of many lakes in what is now Zhejiang Province, about fifty kilometers south of the great lake of Taihu and three hundred kilometers east of his home town. His friend Chu Guangxi once compared him to a bird born with high-soaring wings, but forced to build his nest on a low branch. Apparently, it was hard for Ding Xianzhi to live a life of a low-rank official who had to help support his family by tilling the land by the lakeside. He rationalized his hard life with the help of the Daoist philosophy of simple living, yet the fear of failing to pay ever-increasing taxes haunted him like a nightmare, as in the case of other poets, such as Wang Wei 王维 and Lu Xiang 卢象 – for the Tang Empire did not tolerate civil disobedience, and failure to pay taxes on time was penalized much more severely than by one single night in the county jail, as was the case during the time at which Thoreau wrote his immortal essay. Fear of punishment prompted him to ask his high-ranking friend to remember their early Daoist ideals, and to do something to make it possible for the poor working people to exist in voluntary or not-so-voluntary poverty.

Identification of the Five Great Lakes varies in Chinese historical records. In this piece, Ding Xianzhi uses the definition offered by the scholar Wei Zhao 韦昭 (AD 204–273) in his annotation to Sima Qian’s 司马迁 (145–? BC) famous Historical Record (Shiji): “The Five Great Lakes are actually [parts of] one, that is Lake Taihu” (Shiji. Beijing, Zhonghua Press, 1982, p. 1407). Taihu – literally “Grand Lake” – is located between Jiangsu and Zhejiang provinces in eastern China, a couple of hundred kilometers west of Shanghai. With other Tang poets, however, the term refers to five different lakes in central and eastern China, namely Lake Poyang, Lake Dongting, Lake Chao, Lake Taihu, and Mirror Lake.
Ding Xianzhi 丁仙芝

《赠朱中书》（《全唐诗》卷 114）

十年种树五湖滨，十年遭涝尽为薪。
频年并税常不足，今年缮钱谁为输。
东邻转谷五之利，西邻贩缯日已贵。
而我守道不迁业，谁能肯效此事。
紫微侍郎白虎殿，出入通籍回天眷。
晨趋彩笔柏梁篇，竖出雕盘大官膳。
会应怜尔居素约，可即长年守贫贱。

Sent to State Secretary Zhu

For ten years I planted by the side of the Five Lakes
For ten years floods laid waste of my fields
Often I’m unable to pay in full the “Ninth Plot Grains”*
This year how can I find the cash for the “Silk Tax”?†

My neighbor in the east transports grain.
His profit margin is by the half.

My neighbor in the west sells silk
He becomes wealthier every day and lives like a lord.

I stay with the Dao and do not leave the essential profession.
Who dares to follow me on the sure road to poverty?

You, my friend, the Imperial Advisor
of the White Tiger Office in the Purple Palace,
in the presence of the Emperor all day long.
In the morning you draft the document with your colorful pen.
In the evening you dine with Him with delicate chinaware.

You should remember our youthful agreement
to live a simple life by the Dao.
Please do something to make it possible now
for me to live in poverty for the rest of my years.

* The typical agricultural tax was said to be one-ninth of the harvest, but it
  was sometimes higher than that in Tang Dynasty.
† Farmers in southeastern China typically grew grains and mulberry trees, the
  leaves of which were fed to silkworms. They were then taxed for the silk
  they produced that way.
Wang Wei 王维

Wang Wei is one of the greatest of the Tang poets, an excellent painter, and chief of the court musicians.

The research of Professor Zhao Zhangping 赵章平 convincingly postulates that Wang Wei was born in the year 692 and died in 761 (“Wang Wei Shengzunian Kaozheng Buyi,” in Zhonghua Wen Shi Lun Cong. 1987, No. 1, p. 33). When he was first introduced to the capital city of Chang’an, at the age of eighteen or so, a prince read his poems and was surprised: he had read these poems and loved them, thinking they were the works of masters in ancient times. He had never suspected that a young contemporary could be the author of those wonderful pieces. Wang Wei soon became popular in the palaces of princes and princesses in the capital, and he passed the imperial examination at the top of class at the age of twenty. He was immediately promoted to the position of chief musician in the court, from which he was demoted eight years later because some of the dancers under him had improperly performed the yellow lion dance to an audience other than the imperial family. The chief musician was punished for his subordinates’ mistake.

During the rebellion of An Lushan 安禄山 (d. 757), Wang Wei was captured and forced to serve as chief musician to “the Pretender.” Impelled to perform, he wrote and performed a poem that begins with, “Ten thousand families are suffering from broken hearts; millions of acres lay wasted under the wild smoke.” Because of this poem, when the emperor of Tang reestablished his control over China, Wang Wei was not banished as was his friend Chu Guangxi 储光席, but instead given an important position, from which he was gradually promoted to the position of Assistant Director of the Right in the Department of State Affairs (shangshu youcheng), an important office with supervisory control of key government ministries. Nevertheless, returning to the court Wang Wei began to adopt a more modest attitude and spent a lot of time in his country house in Wangchuan Village, in Lantian County, near the capital city. Here he adopted vegetarianism, practiced Zen Buddhism, worked the fields of his estate, and came to find a sustainable sense of place.

Wang’s poet friends Pei Di 裴迪, Qian Qi 钱起, and Chu Guangxi lived nearby and visited him often. Strolling across the plains and among the hills, they wrote poetry to celebrate the actual land on which they stood. The war that came with the rebellion led by An Lushan started a sense of loss in Wang Wei; he was far ahead of his time in noticing in the short poem “Mengchang Col” the loss of stately trees. Pei Di often walked over Huazi Hill to visit him, and wrote poems about that hill that had lost its vegetation. Today, that hill has been reduced by centuries of wear and tear, wars and rebellions, into a mound of yellow earth. It still occupies an impressive position as the viewpoint between the plains and the mountains, but the sense of loss Wang Wei experienced in Mengcheng Col overwhelmed me as I stood on what I believed to be Huazi Hill—now called Hua Slope by the locals who live in the two villages nearby. Like Meng Haoran’s 孟浩然 Swamps of Clouds and Dreams, Wang Wei’s twenty famous places in Wangchuan township are permanently beautiful only in his poems. Let us all hope that this is not the essential role of environmental poetry.

As a musician who understood the importance of silence in a passionately played melody, and a painter who skillfully manipulated negative space, Wang Wei was especially good at saying a great deal in very short poems, suggesting more within the confined space of a wu jue 五绝 (a short poem of four lines with five syllables in each line) than other poets – or even he himself – could do in longer forms. The ability to use
intense images to describe what eyes cannot see earned him praise from Su Dongpo, a Song Dynasty poet and painter, who wrote on a landscape scroll painted by Wang: “[Wang Wei’s] poems have paintings in them and [his] paintings contain poetry.” The Japanese Haiku masters, such as Basho and Issa, took Wang Wei as their model when inventing their own genre. Wang Wei himself looked back to the great Southern Dynasties poet of reclusion, Tao Qian (or Tao Yuanming, 365-427), as we see in Wang’s poem developing Tao’s famous story of the Peach Blossom Spring.

The red-crown crane in “An Extempore Poem Written in My Mountain Dwelling” might be a heron or snowy egret, for cranes build their nests in marshy wetlands rather than on top of pine trees. Wang Wei is not the only poet who mis-portrayed the nesting habit of the cranes. In Chinese paintings, one can find many pine-dwelling cranes because Chinese mythology holds both pine and crane as symbols of longevity with an ethical implication: they can endure hardship and are non-conforming to the evil influence of the corruptible world.

《桃源行》（《全唐诗》卷 125）

渔舟逐水爱山春，两岸桃花夹古津。
坐看红树不知远，行尽青溪不见人。
山口潜行始隈隩，山开旷望旋平陆。
遥看一处攒云树，近入千家散花竹。
樵客初传汉姓名，居人未改秦衣服。
居人共住武陵源，还从物外起田园。
月明松下房栊静，日出云中鸡犬喧。
惊闻俗客争来集，竞引还家问都邑。
平明闾巷扫花开，薄暮渔樵乘水入。
初因避地去人间，及至成仙遂不还。
峡里谁知有人事，世中遥望空云烟。
不疑灵境难闻见，尘心未尽思乡县。
出洞无论隔山水，辞家终拟长游衍。
自谓经过旧不迷，安知峰壑今来变。
当时只记入山深，青溪几曲到云林。
春来遍是桃花水，不辨仙源何处寻。

The Land of Peach Blossoms
(An Ancient Song in Andante)

A fisherman on his boat followed the winding stream, fell in love with the spring, the peach blossoms along the ancient creek. Watching the red trees he forgot how far he had traveled until the creek ended in wilderness, not a man in sight.

He entered a gulley, narrow twisted and dark, that turned again and again to reveal a broad open valley. From afar he saw only trees upon trees under the clouds. Approaching, he discovered thousands of houses scattered among flowers and bamboo groves.

The fisherman, the residents mistook him for a woodcutter, told them for the first time the name of the Han Emperor, the surprised residents dressed in the style of the dynasty before. They had lived by the source of Wuling Creek, a farming community outside the busy world.

In moonshine under pine trees their houses stood in silence. When the sun came up, roosters and dogs started a chorus in the clouds. They gathered around the fisherman as soon as they heard of his arrival.
Competing with each other, they invited him to their houses, asking him about the capital and other cities. They told him that they had swept away the fallen flowers that morning, not expecting visitors – fishermen or woodchoppers – to come via the creek.

They had left the empire, fleeing from wars, deciding never to return but to live like immortals in the clouds. Nobody in the valley knew what had happened in the outside world. The world looked at the valley, mistaking their cooking smoke for clouds.

The fisherman never suspected how rare it is to stumble onto paradise.

Urged by his love of the world to return to his village and county, he left, exiting through the gulley, resumed his life.

Separated from those people by mountains and rivers, he never forgot their peaceful existence. Bidding goodbye to his family he wants to join the commune in the valley. Having been there once he will never forget the way. What he remembers is that he traveled far into the mountains. The stream wound and wound and took him to the cloudy forest.

Alas, the spring flood has created streams all over the mountains. He can't find the way to the source of that immortal creek.

**Green Creek**

Whenever I come to the Valley of Yellow Blooms
I always trace the stream of Green Creek.

It turns and twists a thousand times in the course of thirty short and steep mountain miles.

It roars and splashes over rocky bends, glides serenely through shady pines.

In brimful pools it nurtures floating hearts and water caltrops.

It mirrors bulrushes, reeds in perfect images rocking in clear ripples.

It here resumes tranquility, reminding me of a long suppressed indifference
I feel to fame and power.

Heaven, Let me remain on the rock here and fish until the end of my life!
A Farming Village in the Wei River Valley

The sun sets, lighting up the village with slanting rays.
Cows and sheep return to poverty-stricken alleys.
An old man, expecting his grandson, waits by the wattle gate, leaning against his staff.

Pheasants chuck.
Wheat puts forth ears.
Silkworms sleep, mulberry leaves picked, as the season changes.
Peasants greet each other on their way home.
They chat and chat, reluctant to part company.

In vain, I admire their free and leisurely life.
I’ll never become one of them.
The only thing I can do is to sing the refrain from an ancient ode:
“Why can’t I go home?”

Mid-Spring, Written in My Garden Farm

On the roof of my house the turtledoves coo
Outside the village white apricots bloom

My axe helps me to trim my mulberry trees
The hoe is handy for mending the ditch

Returning swallows remember their nests under my eave
Already an old man I study the new almanac

Wineglass in hand I’m unable to drink
Missing my friend the lonely wayfarer
Viewing the Fields after the Rain

I see the ferry
miles away
near the castle gate
that stands against
stacked blue peaks.

The river glares through trees
that fringe its course
supplying water to paddies
where farmers work
on a mirror under the sun.

Peasants,
elders,
children,
women,
all busy
in the busiest month of the year.

Written in My Mountain Villa in Autumnal Dusk

The empty mountain is refreshed by cooling rains.
A breeze of autumn comes with the descending night.

Through twigs of pines the moon illuminates
the rocks in the pure gurgling stream.
Washing girls return, with laundry loads
on shoulders, rustling through bamboo groves.
The lotus blossoms sway to let a fishing boat pass.

My princely friend! The flowers have
enjoyed their growth in spring and now they rest.
You too should stay with me in nature here.
《归嵩山作》（《全唐诗》卷126）

清川带长薄，车马去闲闲。
流水如有意，暮禽相与还。
荒城临古渡，落日满秋山。
迢递嵩高下，归来且闭关。

Composed in a Carriage on My Way to Mount Songshan

My horses trotted at an easy pace
along the river and its narrow marsh.
The stream followed me a long way
as if reluctant to say goodbye to me.
Migrating birds accompanied in dusk
my carriage to the gate of my country house
by the sandy ferry near the deserted town.

The sunset lit the mountains with mellow rays.
I closed my door to the world of man.

《终南别业》（《全唐诗》卷126）

中岁颇好道，晚家南山陲。
兴来每独往，胜事空自知。
行到水穷处，坐看云起时。
偶然值林叟，谈笑无还期。

My Villa in the Zhongnan Mountains

At middle-age I took to the practice of Dao.
Now, old, I make a home by Mt. South.
Alone I hike the mountain everyday
to see the wonders only I appreciate.
I often trace the stream to its source,
sit down to watch the mist transform to clouds.
By chance I meet a woodchopper or two.
We chat and laugh and forget it’s time to leave.
Composed in My Cottage Near Wangchuan Village  
After Days of Rain

Days of rain, empty woods, breakfast smoke rises, sluggish.
Steaming and boiling, village women get the food ready for their men in the fields.

Over the rice paddy, in thin mists, snowy egrets fly and land.

In shady trees, yellow orioles chirp under summer leaves.

On hill top I reflect on the short life of hibiscus flowers.

In my quiet studio under the pines
I pick some okras, fresh with dew drops.
In the tavern the village elders fight with me for the favorite seat.

Why do the gulls still suspect me as a man of ill will?*

*This is a literary allusion to a well-known legend about a boy who plays with sea gulls everyday on the beach. One day, he comes home to tell his father what great playmates the gulls make. Upon hearing that gulls land freely on the boy’s head, hands, and shoulders, the father suggests that the boy catch one for him the next day. The boy agrees and goes out to the beach with the father’s plan the next morning. The gulls, however, notice the ill will and refuse to come close to the boy anymore. This story suggests that animals can tell the intentions of humans, just as they notice the boy’s loss of innocence.
Wang Wei 王维

《孟城坳》（《全唐诗》卷128）
新家孟城口，古木馀衰柳。
来者复为谁，空悲昔人有。

Mengcheng Col
I build a new home at Mengcheng Col, among a few aging willows, lonely survivors of an ancient forest.
Who are the people who come after me to sigh, missing what our ancestors had.

《白石滩》（《全唐诗》卷128）
清浅白石滩，绿蒲向堪把。
家住水东西，浣纱明月下。

The White Rock Rapids
Green and lush the cattails grow in the pure, shallow water of the White Rock Rapids.
From east and west, the girls come to wash their clothes in brilliant moonshine.

《竹里馆》（《全唐诗》卷128）
独坐幽篁里，弹琴复长啸。
深林人不知，明月来相照。

Hut in the Bamboo Groves
I sit alone in a grove of dark bamboos, chanting long and loud, playing my harp.
So deep the grove is that nobody hears me except the moon that peeps through the rustling leaves.
Magnolia Cove

In the mountains,
at every twig’s end
the magnolia sends forth
red buds.

Along the quiet creek
the petals bloom
and fall
in man’s absence.

The Keeper of the Lacquer Tree Garden

The ancient sage is no arrogant officer.
He declines the offer of a higher rank,
knowing he lacks the ability to set the world right.

By chance he finds himself a sojourner
in the petty office
of the lacquer garden manager.

By chance he dances
with the winds,
with the shadows of lacquer trees.

《辛夷坞》（《全唐诗》卷128）

木末芙蓉花，山中发红萼。
涧户寂无人，纷纷开且落。

《漆园吏》（《全唐诗》卷128）

古人非傲吏，自阙经世务。
偶寄一微官，婆娑数株树。

《酬诸公见过》（《全唐诗》卷125）

嗟予未丧，哀此孤生。
屏居蓝田，薄地躬耕。
岁晏输赋，以遂粢盛。
晨往东皋，草露未晞。
暮看烟火，负担来归。
我闻有客，足扫荆扉。

箠食伊何，槿瓜抓枣。
仰厕群贤，皤然一老，
愧无莞簟，班荆席藁。
泛泛登陂，折彼荷花。
静观素鲔，俯映白沙。
山鸟群飞，日隐轻霞。
登车上马，倏忽云散。

雀噪荒村，鸡鸣空馆。
还复幽独，重欷累叹。
Written to The Lofty Friends Who Came and Visited Me on Wangchuan Farm In Lantian, the “Blue Field”

Oh, why haven’t I died yet? Why do I sigh again for this lonely life?

living isolated in Blue Field, I till a few acres of barren land. Unable to pay taxes until late in the year, I can hardly offer the emperor five kinds of grain he might use in the rituals for the New Year.

In the morning I work on the eastern hill, dew drops shining on leaves of weeds. In the evening I walk home towards supper smoke, carrying my harvest with a pole.

Then I hear that I’m having visitors!

I sweep the path clean to the wattle gate. I ask my guests to sit down on the wicker mat, and mattresses stuffed with straw.

I cut melons into slices, offer dates in a shallow bamboo basket.

In such distinguished company I find myself old – an old man of white hair.

We take a walk around the pond, pick up lotus blossoms here and there, or quietly observe the fish, silver streaks against the white sands, until the birds scatter, the sun hides behind feathers of cloud.

My guests scatter like birds and clouds, aboard painted carriages, or tall on their steeds.

They leave a deserted village and an empty house to chirping sparrows, cackling hens.

I return to my loneliness, to sigh again, and again.

To Mr. Liu Lantian

The dog barks behind the fence to welcome you home at mid-night. Your family stands beside the dog to meet the man of the house who finally pays off the taxes on the last day of the year.

From now on what grows in your field can feed your family. Whatever fabric your wife weaves can dress the children.

You’re willing to pay tribute to the lords — so you say. But you’re a simple man, who depends on the lords to figure out what is wrong or right.
To Pei Di

Beautiful days, beautiful evenings,
beautiful landscape and weather to write our poems.

Leisurely we view the sky – brilliant and far away.
We rest our heads on hands – happy and content.

Spring breeze stirs the weeds,
orchids emerge from under my fence.

The sun warms up the inner chamber.
My farmer neighbor comes to remind me
– spring has returned to the happy hills,
floods have filled ponds to the brim,
the plums and peaches are yet to bloom,
magnolia petals weigh down fragrant branches.

Pray get your horse and whip ready, my poet.
Go back to your own studio, my friend.
Today I start my farmer’s year.

An Extempore Verse on My Mountain Dwelling

Facing the fading brilliance of sunset in loneliness I close my wattle gate.

Hardly any man has ever knocked on this gate of my mountain dwelling.
Cranes build nests all over my one pine tree.

Bamboo scatters fresh green pollen.
Pink lotuses shed old petals on the pond.

Smoke from supper fires rises by the ferry to welcome home loved ones from gathering water chestnuts on the lake.
Country Life

Grain from last year – almost gone.  
Harvest of the new crop – little to expect.  
That’s why, an old man, I love  
to water down my porridge,  
to wear the same shabby clothes  
year after year.

By my moss-covered well  
sparrows feed their young.  
On the plain plank gate  
cackle skinny hens.  
My sickly ox pulls home the firewood cart.  
I in straw-sandals herd the hairy hogs.

I hope the evening rain  
ripens the pomegranates  
and early in the fall  
taros grow fat.  
So I can rest well  
under the mulberry trees  
after I carry lunch to the young men  
working hard in fields.  
Then I walk back  
to my house surrounded by tall grasses.

Please don’t ask me  
whether my life is right or wrong.  
Don’t you know the name of my town?  

The Valley of Stupid Men.
Zu Yong 祖咏

Zu Yong was born in 699, in what was called “the East Capital” city of Luoyang, now in Henan Province. The “upper” capital (shangdu) of the Tang Empire, of course, was Chang’an, the modern Xi’an in Shaanxi Province, to which Zu traveled to take the state examination. While in Chang’an he met Wang Wei, with whom he would maintain a life-long friendship. In one poem, Wang Wei wrote about how happy he felt when Zu Yong visited him and planned to stay overnight. The following lines from another, however, which Wang Wei wrote when demoted and sent to Jizhou, has helped critics see that for a long time Zu Yong lived in obscurity and poor health:

“I’ve been your close friend for thirty long years,
yet not a day has society fully appreciated you;
you suffer from poverty and poor health,
while I suffer from missing you, my dear friend.”
(See Xin Wenfang, Tang Caizi Zhuan. Shanghai, the Press of Classic Literature, 1957, p.18.
The translation of the four lines is mine.)

Like many other Tang poets, Zu Yong did pass the imperial examination, in 725, and went on to serve at low ranks in the government. What is unusual about him was the fact that he resolutely quit his job and moved to the north bank of Rushui River. For a few years he lived as a fisherman and woodchopper. The hard manual labor did not help his already weak health. He died in 746.

My translation below shows the deep respect Zu Yong pays to the “true hermit,” his peasant neighbor who lived strictly off the land and never complained about the hardship that comes with such a lifestyle. To live in “close affinity to Dao” is not an easy thing, as already seen in the poems of Ding Xianzhi, Wang Wei, and Lu Xiang. Zu Yong must have learned this truth from chopping wood and fishing for dinner. In the strict definition of the word, his close friend Wang Wei was not always a “true hermit.” Twenty-first century environmental poets and critics should ask themselves, perhaps: how far are we willing to go in the direction of tianrenheyi 天人合一 (to live as one with nature)? How much are we willing to give up when practicing what Lawrence Buell calls “the aesthetics of relinquishment”?
An Extempore Verse for My Peasant Neighbor

My old house was on the Eastern Hill.
Left and right I overlooked deserted villages.
The woodchopper’s trail was right in front,
and you, my peasant neighbor, lived across the path.

I enjoyed the country life and pleasant strolls
I took on the terrace through willow twigs,
in the floating mist after a rain,
at the dusk of an early autumn eve.

You occasionally rested
by the foot of the wooded hill
after cutting twigs to mend your wattle fence
or digging a ditch to divert the gurgling spring.

You never complained how hard farm work could be –
you were happy about the mulberries and hemp.

I, seeking peace for heart and mind,
would chat with you, my friend the true recluse.
We never dined over chicken and steamed millet.
My heart admired your closeness to the $Dao$. 
Because of different calendar systems and the diverse sources of historical records, many of the Tang poets’ years of birth are hard to confirm. The same is true with Chu Guangxi. Professor Ge Xiaoyin’s research shows convincing evidence, however, that Chu was born in the year 702 rather than 706 as many believed ("Chu Guangxi Ping Zhuan," in Zhongguo Lidai Zhuming Wenxuejia Pingzhuan. Jinan, Shandong, Shandong Press of Education, 1989, p. 594).

Chu passed the state examination in 727, the same year as his friends Cui Guofu 郭国辅 and Qi Wuqian 權毋潜, whose poems are also included in this collection. For some unknown reason, Chu stayed at home for a year before a lower rank position was assigned to him. He served the rebel camp in a similar post during the uprising of An Lushan. This lack of loyalty to the ruling dynasty was viewed as shameful, and for his “misconduct” Chu lost face, fame, and favor. He now went to the Zhongnan Mountains to live the life of a recluse near the country house of Wang Wei, the best landscape poet of the High Tang period. Later on, he was exiled to an obscure place south of the Grand Yu Ridge, as were Shen Quanqi and Song Zhiwen, the two poets introduced earlier in this book. But unlike Shen, and thanks to a general pardon from the new emperor who succeeded Xuanzong, Chu was allowed to return home to die the year after.

Chu Guangxi’s home was White Pagoda Village in a county called Yanling during the Tang Dynasty but Jintan now, in Jiangsu Province. Located south of the Yangtze River, it was west of the great lake of Taihu, and about 350 kilometers west of Shanghai. The location of his “homestead” has been identified and is now being promoted as a tourist hotspot, though I think it’s like the House of Seven Gables in Salem, Massachusetts: a product of the imagination of the county’s Chamber of Commerce. That doesn’t, however, mean the location is not meaningful in the understanding of Chu’s poetry, his attitude toward life, and his sense of place. Yanling was a very old town, even in a country where every place can date its history several hundred years back. It is best known not for the eighth-century poet Chu Guangxi, but for Prince Jizha 季札, the famous politician and honest man who was active in late 500s and early 400s BC. The eldest, but the youngest, son of the King of Wu during the Warring States Period in Chinese history, Jizha declined his father’s offer of the kingdom and supported the ancient tradition that it was the eldest son who should succeed to the throne. He retired from the court after his father’s death and worked in the fields of Yanling. Jizha died in 485 BC and was buried by the fields in which he worked. A monument stands there now, high above the farmland, with ten huge characters written on it, supposedly by Confucius himself: Wuhu, You Wu Yanling Jizi Zhi Mu (Sigh! at the Tomb of Prince Jizha of Yanling of Wu State). This must have influenced Chu Guangxi, who, critics agree now, stands at equal height of achievement with Wang Wei and Meng Haoran as one of the best pastoral poets (literally, “poets of fields and gardens”) of Tang. In his poems, we can see that he performed manual labor in the field and took pride in it. That’s probably why Professor Zhang Zhongmo calls Chu the “farming poet of Tang,” and argues that his farming poems “are more and better than those written by Wang Wei and Meng Haoran” (“Chu Guangxi Jian Lun,” in XuZhou ShiYuan XuBeao. 1989, No. 2, p. 37. Translation mine). From a personal perspective, I would argue that Ding Xianzhi (included in this collection) is as good a farming poet as Chu Guangxi, for when I read Wendell Berry – that great American farming poet and environmentalist – for the first time in the English Department of the University of Connecticut in the 1980s, I always thought of Ding and Chu together, equal in their presentation of the land and their interaction with it. What an interesting thing to see two original Chinese poets and an original American poet making similar life experiments one thousand years, one ocean, and two continents apart.
Yanling, the modern Jintan, is a warm place with four clearly-defined seasons. It has about forty inches of rain during the year and crops grow well there without too much labor required. People – the oxen herder as well as the fisherman – can live there happily without the accumulation of a great deal of material wealth. The factor that destroyed such a paradisiacal place was war, as exposed in the satire of Chu’s poems. But war is guaranteed when the man of absolute power can start a war at whim. In sum, Chu’s sense of place includes love of home, love of nature and work in natural rhythms, and a criticism of the factors that threaten to disturb that rhythm.

A Fisherman’s Song

Swamp fish love the rattling falls. Creek fish love the rapids upstream. When luck doesn’t favor me at the weir, I row through the tangle of floating hearts to fish under the new reeds that hide my boat, or throw my hook from the sandbar down the stream.

From beginning to end I hold my mind at peace. Up and down I watch the cork bob in quiet ease.

My white hair floats in air and dances with winds, a banner of my thoughts that travel farther than clouds, following the ebb to the distant sea.

Wherever my thoughts go, my mind stays free from the enslaving body. It finds pleasure in doing what I do, in not doing what I don’t.

An Oxen Herd’s Song

The bamboo hat protects my head from the sun. The long rush cape shelters my body from the rain. I care not whether the meadow is far or near, the pond shallow or deep, the cattle tame or wild.

The animals moo to cheer each other – cows and oxen climb over the slope, calves take the short-cut through the woods.

Looking at them I sing a wild song, happy for the moment, not caring for beat or tune.
The Song of a Fearful Tiger

Though cold I do not worry about the snow
Even hungry I would never eat a person
Isn’t human flesh said to be sweet
I will not eat them unwilling to offend the gods

Taishi mountain is my house
Mengmen Gorge my neighborhood*

Animals by the hundreds serve as dishes on my table
Dragons from the Five Oceans are my dinner guests

Covered with tiger-skin the war horses of Prince Jin frightened his enemy†
Swimming across the Yangtze my kind leave the kind people of Jiujiang in peace‡

My coat’s bright patterns reflect the morning sun
My powerful paws and fangs provide metaphors for generals

The force of my breath makes clouds float high
My roaring voice shakes the earth

If you dare to buy a little of my left-over courage
I’ll forever be your intimate friend day and night

* Taishi Mountain is the east peak of the Song Mountain Range in what is now Henan Province, while Mengmen Gorge is a narrow passage for the Yellow River through the western foothills of the Lüliang Mountain Range. The area in between is vast, covering almost half of central China.

† In the year 632 BC, when faced with a superior coalition army of the states of Chu, Chen, and Cai, a general of Prince Jin covered his army’s horses with tiger coats to upset the enemy’s war horses. It is said to be the first recorded battle in the history of China in which an inferior army defeated a superior enemy by means of artful deception.

‡ In the First Century AD, the prefectural magistrate Song Jun noticed that the local government had hired hunters to trap tigers. He dismissed the hunters, saying: “In the wild south, tigers and cougars in the mountains are just like chickens in the coops on northern farms. There’s no need to kill them. What we really need to worry about are the cruel officials who harm the people more than the tigers.” Thus, he filled all the traps with earth, and appreciating his kindness, the tigers in Jiujiang swam across the Yangtze River, leaving the kind people of Jiujiang in peace.
In the morning I ascend the Terrace of Cool Wind.  
In the evening I start my journey to the city of Handan.  
How violent the sun throws its burning heat.  
Not a blade of grass is green in all four fields.  
The Marshal gathers a great army here in the north,  
while our Emperor, the Son of Heaven,  
sits on the throne in the West Capital.  
Our women are charged to protect  
the prefectures and counties.  
We strong men engage in offensives  
in foreign lands.  
Day and night we hear people cry –  
parents bid farewell to their children.  
Crops are wasted, tramped into dirt,  
rivers and lakes dry to caked bottoms.  
My worries persist in prolonged struggles.  
May they reach the Four Wise Men  
who centuries ago abandoned their recluse life,  
descended the Mountain of Shangshan.  
They gave up their peaceful life in woods  
to stop a war among princes of the Han.*

*The story of the Four Wise Men happened in early Han Dynasty, about 195 BC.
Imitation of the Ancients, No. 2

The east wind blows on the Grand River.*
The river seems to flow backward.
Dust and sand blow up on the islands,
sending yellow columns into the floating clouds.

Scarlet clouds burn up the great lakes.
The mighty sun scorches the mountain tops.
Old men in the field cry and sigh:
“No shelter is to be found against this drought.”

A visitor from the Imperial Academy hears them and asks:
“Am I the only one who worries with the people”? 
He paces back and forth late into the night
unable to think up a relief plan.

But what’s the use even if he has one?
The palace walls are so high and fierce,
he’ll sprain his ankle before he kneels down
to present the case to Heaven’s Son.†

* “Grand River” is another name for the Yellow River.
† The emperor is believed to be the “Son of Heaven.”
Chu Guangxi 储光羲

An Extempore Poem on Country Life

Cattails grow longer day by day,
Plum flowers bloom moist and full.
An old peasant must watch these signs –
the seasons tell you when to plow and plant.

I rise early to feed my two oxen,
harness them side by side to till the eastern terrace.
My plow loosens the earth,
earthworms come out, take a fresh breath.
The crows follow me back and forth along the furrow,
wheeling, croaking, landing, and feasting on the worms.

A man of a soft heart I feel a sad dilemma,
throw my lunch basket to the crows,
hoping they leave the worms alone.

I come home exhausted in the evening
with an empty basket and an empty stomach.
Friends and family laugh at my silliness.
My heart is set. I’ll never change who I am.
Qiu Wei 丘为

Qiu Wei was born in 694 and died in or around the year 789. He lived in Jiaxing, in the modern Zhejiang Province. He took the imperial examinations several times and failed as many, finally passing in the year 743 when he was almost fifty years old. Though a late starter, he climbed the ladder of officialdom with decent speed, and eventually became the teacher and advisor of the crown prince. He was known in his time for taking good care of his step-mother, and legend has it that as a reward from the gods Lingzhi 灵芝, a mystical fungus thought of as an agent to immortality, grew in his courtyard. Coincidentally or not, he did live to see his ninety-sixth birthday. Thus, he is the second longest-living Tang poet, surpassed only by the semi-legendary Hanshan (Xin Wenfang, *Tang Caizi Zhuan*. Shanghai, the Press of Ancient Literature, 1957, p. 30).

He was friendly with contemporary poets, such as Wang Wei, Zu Yong, Chu Guangxi, and Liu Changqing. In the year of Qiu Wei’s last failure of the imperial exam, 742, Wang Wei and Zu Yong wrote poems to comfort and encourage him. For his part, after flunking the 742 exam, Qiu Wei took the time to travel in what is now Zhejiang Province, where he wrote a poem about the famous Ruoye Creek, which Qi Wuqian also celebrated in his poem included below.

In the poem translated here, we can see that Qiu Wei has a typical Daoist attitude towards life. Although he missed his friend during his visit, he got whatever a friendly reunion can offer to both parties. He believes that a philosopher can inspirit the atmosphere of his dwelling, and he admires his recluse friend who keeps close contact with the earth by working on it.
Visiting the West Mountain Hermit but He Is Not in His Hut on the Summit

On the mountain summit stands your hut.
I hike a dozen miles up there to call.

I knock – no servant answers the warped door.
I look – to see your desk in order and clean.

You must be tying up your firewood cart on the ridges high and steep, or fishing by a mountain tarn that's crystal clear and deep.

You're not at home but I feel your presence here in the grasses freshened by the rain, in the pines that rustle by the wattle gate. Your soul has mingled with the mountains, trees, and stream, lifted mine to higher planes of being.

You've played no host and I no guest, but we've exchanged pure ideas.
So satisfied am I that I descend the mountain happier than if we had met.
Li Bai (Li Po) 李白

Li Bai (in Mandarin Chinese) or Li Po (in Cantonese, which seems to be closer to how Chinese was pronounced during the Tang), was probably the only poet in the Tang Dynasty who did not even try to take the imperial examination. But, because of his excellent poetic talent, for a brief period at least he became a favorite for Emperor Xuanzong and was granted the high position of Hanlin gongfeng 觀文殿學士, the equivalent of a distinguished chair professorship.

According to Guo Moruo's research – research supported by other scholars, such as Yu Shucheng and Yin Menglun – Li Bai was born in Suiye City, on the western frontier of the Tang Empire. The city has been reduced to a giant pile of rubble on the steppe of what is now Kyrgyzstan, the ruins lying east of the city of Tokmak and west of the great lake of Oz Issyk-kul'. Still found in the sands there are city walls built by the Tang army and brass coins minted during the Tang reign periods Kaiyuan (713–741) and Dali (766–779). During the Tang Dynasty, the city was the seat of the far-west military governorate, whose control extended farther west, far into the territories of what are now Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, and Afghanistan. Li Bai's grandfather had been exiled to the far west and Li Bai's father worked as an iron merchant who traded iron from their ancestral hometown in Sichuan Province in the southwest of China. Li Bai's younger and older brothers managed family business branches along the Yangtze River. Li Bai, however, as a child prodigy, was treated specially. Having begun training in the Chinese Classics when very young – supposedly when he was just four years old – he is also reputed to have spoken several languages of Central Asia. Some historians – Chen Yinke and Zhan Ying, for example – have even argued that Li Bai was actually a “foreigner,” not a Chinese (Lu Weifen, Zhang Yanjin et al., eds. Sui Tang Wudai Wenxue Yanjiu. Beijing, Beijing Press, 2001, pp. 769–74).

Li Bai’s reputation preceded him, and he was summoned to the court, with different scholars giving different years: 731, 738, 741, or 742. Whenever he arrived there, at court he became a popular presence among fellow poets and courtiers. The poet He Zhizhang – included in this collection – nicknamed Li Bai zhexian 諷仙, “a god demoted to the human world from heaven” (Chen Wenxin, Liu Jiafu, et al., eds., Zhongguo Wenxue Biannian Shi: Sui, Tang, Wudai. Changsha, Hunan People’s Press, 2006, p. 393. My translation).

Compared to the total number of his poems, Li Bai’s contemplations on nature, land, and non-human species are few. Yet, from the few poems translated below, we can see that he has something special to offer people concerned about the environment in the twenty-first century. He is a true Daoist who believes that the laws of people are modeled after the laws of heaven, the laws of heaven are modeled after the Dao, and the Dao, ultimately, is modeled after the laws of nature. So, in his scheme of the world, nature is the supreme power. That is why he questions the human mythologies about the god of the sun and his driver who drives a chariot that carries the sun across the zodiac. He further challenges the position his contemporaries hold for humans in the physical world. He himself, as he confesses, is but a small particle in the Grand Lump of Earth.
Sunrise and Sunset (An Ancient Song in Andante)

The sun rises from the eastern bend,
as if emerging from the bottom of the earth.
It travels through the sky and falls into the sea.

Where is the room for the six mythical dragons
that pull the sun chariot from the beginning till the end of time?

How can man, being no part of the original void of Qi,
expect himself to drive forever along its cyclical path?

Grasses and flowers don’t show any gratitude for the spring.
Trees don’t blame autumn for their falling leaves.
All things rise and fall according to the law of nature.
Who needs someone to drive the four seasons with a whip?

Oh, Xi He, Xi He! How can you drive in boundless waves?
Oh, Lu Yang! What virtue, what power do you have
to stop the traveling sun by rattling your lance?
Tales about you are against the Dao and Heaven.
They must be abandoned as wrong and false.

I will return my spirit to the Grand Lump of Earth
to be one with the vast and mighty Universe.
A Song for the Honking Wild Geese

The geese from the north honk and honk.  
They honk their goodbye to the Yan Mountains,  
leaving the desert yester-night,  
flying into China over guarded passes.

Formation perfect, wing-tips touching, they  
disperse south between earth and sky,  
with twigs and reeds between their bills,  
looking for a home in the rising mist  
gyrating over the marshes along the Yangtze.

Their feathers quickly lose the healthy glow  
to biting frost and floating flakes of snow.  
Some fall on hearing sounds of arrowless strings,  
some honk in fear at the sights of nets.

Why do men shoot at birds in distress?
Grasses in a Tree

A bird pecks on seeding grass and drops the seeds on a dying mulberry tree. The guests send their tender roots, revived soon by warm spring days.

The tree should have no sympathy for the seeds of random grasses, yet it allows them to live their sojourner's floating life.

I wonder why some leaves would die while others prosper side by side, on the same branch of the same old tree.

An Autumn Song at the Waterside

Hundreds upon hundreds grow the heather bushes. Thousands upon thousands stand the glossy privet trees. On hill after hill extend colonies of nesting egrets. Gullies beyond gullies echo the howl of hoary monkeys.

Mr. Traveler, don't come to the waterside in autumn. The crying monkeys alone can break your heart to pieces.
Traveling along Pure Creek

Distinguished by its water, Pure Creek purifies my heart, as I see its pebbled bottom through the gliding stream. The famous Xin’an River, celebrated by so many poets, cannot compare with such unworldly purity.

The boatmen who ferry across seem to glide on a mirror. The birds that fly above its banks give life to a perfect picture.

But after sunset in dusk, gorillas howl in the hills, and sadden the heart of me, a lonely wayfarer.

A Dialogue in the Mountain

You ask me why I stay so long in green mountains. I smile but do not answer, enjoying my heart’s content. The peach flowers float away on the swirling streams. We live with heaven and earth beside the human world.

The Tower of Lord Xie

The sight of this tower reminds me of the past when the famous poet parted with fellow poets. They had scattered, leaving the moon in the blue sky to me the empty mountains and the ever-flowing streams.

On the same pond the lotuses bloom like hundreds of small suns. The same bamboo leaves rustle in the evening wind of fall. By those we are connected, the poets of the past and today, so I chant long and loud in memory of my friends of yester-year.
Visiting but Missing a Daoist in Mount Daitianshan

Dogs bark beyond gurgling brooks.
Peaches bloom fresh, heavy with rain.
Deer appear and then disappear in deep groves.

At noon, no bell tolls from the temple upstream, where bamboos grow wild, greener than the green mist, waterfalls tumble down blue peaks like white silk.

Where are you, my dear old friend? Nobody knows.
Sadly I lean against a pine, and a pine, and yet another pine.

Sitting Alone on Mount Jingting

All the birds, flocks of them, fly away high above the clouds.

The Clouds, too, have disappeared to I know not where.

The only thing that is not tired of my company, and of whose company I would never tire, is Mount Jingting – Here.
Huangfu Ran’s ancestral home was in what is now Xingchuan County, Gansu Province, only a hundred and twenty kilometers northwest of the capital of Tang, Chang’an. His great-grandfather had, however, moved from the northwest of China to the southeast, and settled down in Danyang, Jiangsu Province. Huangfu Ran was born four generations after the family relocation, in the year 718. He began to read early and started writing at the age of ten; his younger brother was also known as a child prodigy.

An earlier Tang poet, Ding Xanzhi 丁仙芝, had lived in the Danyang area, and Chu Guangxi 储光羲, discussed just above, lived only thirty kilometers south of the town. It is a general belief among the Chinese people that the lakes, rivers and mountains of Jiangnan 江南 (literally meaning “south of the Yangtze,” but actually referring to the area of the lower reach of the river, the southeast coastal area in China) have generously endowed the area with literary talents. The Five Great Lakes discussed in the note on Ding Xianzhi — whether one big lake or five — are also in that area.

The poet premier Zhang Jiuling 张九龄 was impressed by the talent of the Huangfu boys and supported their official careers as well as their poetic creativity. Huangfu Ran passed the imperial examination in 756 and gradually climbed up the official ladder. During the chaotic years of the An Lushan rebellion, Huangfu Ran stayed at home to till the land. From these poems we can see that though Tang poets may soar high in their poetic imagination, they always stay close to the land on which they live, deriving strength from it like Antaeus, as Thoreau would put it. From the two poems translated below, we can see that the poet feels connected to the place, where many animal and plant species such as dogs, deer, chickens, birds, bamboos, grass, mulberries, and apricots co-exist in harmony by the rolling hills and gurgling streams.
You will till the fields by the seashore
still covered with last year’s snow.
Or you’ll fish in the sun’s setting glow
sitting on the sandbar in mid-stream.

But I’ll remain a sojourner
whose only pastime is
to watch the grasses grow
longer and longer in spring.

In deep ravine the stream gurgles
all day long.
In the back mountains grasses grow
late in spring.
Here and there one hears
dogs bark and chickens crow
and wonders –
who are these people
that grow plums and graft mulberries
Here?
Wang Wan 王湾

Since neither of the major histories of the Tang Dynasty – “The Book of Tang,” (also called the “Old Book of Tang,” Jiu Tangshu 旧唐书) nor the “New Book of Tang” (Xin Tangshu 新唐书) – has a biography of Wang Wan, it is impossible to identify the place and time of his birth and death, or exactly where or when he lived his life. However, the modern scholar Fu Xuancong has convincingly postulated that Wang Wan probably passed the imperial examination in the year 712 or 713 (Tangdai Shiren Congkao. Beijing, Zhonghua Books, 1980, p. 50), and around that time traveled along the mid- and lower-reaches of the Yangtze.

This poem was written during this journey, during a lull in the production of poetry in the Tang: the Great Four of the Early Tang and Chen Zi’ang had died; Shen Quanqi and Song Zhiwen had been banished; young poets, such as Wang Zhihuan, Wang Changling, and Meng Haoran, had not yet written their best poems; while the poets of the greatest generation – Li Bai, Du Fu, Gao Shi, and Cen Shen – were still but children. That’s probably why the poet Prime Minister Zhang Shui was so fond of this poem, especially these lines:

With the wind behind me
I glide towards the sun that leaps out of the sea.
In the final hours of the dying night,
I watch spring spread along the river
to replace the gray remnant of the old year.

Writing these lines in large characters he hung the calligraphy on the wall in his office, in part as a way of providing young aspiring writers with a model.

Mount Beigu 北固山 is best known as a fortress on the mighty Yangtze River, near the city of Zhenjiang. It was especially important in the third century during the War of the Three Kingdoms, when Sun Quan, the head of the the State of Wu in the southeast, agreed to join with Liu Bei, the leader of Shu in the southwest, against the aggressive Cao Cao from the Central Plains in the north of China. Wang Wan, unlike many other poets, downplays the allusion to war which was the focus of many poets before and after him; he does not, in fact, even mention these famous events. What he emphasizes is the diurnal and seasonal cycles in nature, and the most basic human emotion of missing home while traveling far away.
Written at the Mooring under Mount Beigu

I find myself sailing around a bluish hill
on the swift bend of the green Yangtze flood.
Unable to sleep I watch the tide rise to full.

The boat’s so high I see expansive fields
on either bank of the mighty stream.
With the wind behind me
I glide towards the sun that leaps out of the sea.

In the final hours of the dying night,
I watch spring spread along the river
to replace the gray remnant of the old year.

Ah, spring! I wish to catch the first returning goose,
tie a letter to her foot, and hope
she’ll drop it to my family when passing
the city of Luoyang in the North.
Although experts have not been able to determine the exact years of his birth or death, Rong Yu was an important poet during the mid-Tang period. The best clue is one of his early poems, which reveals that he was a youth during the chaotic wars along the Yellow River set off by the rebellion of An Lushan. Fu Xuancong’s excellent research shows that Rong Yu died some time after 798, the year in which his last known poem was written (Tang Dai Shiren Cong Kao. Beijing, Zhonghua Books, 1980, p. 342).

*An-Shi zhi luan* 安史之乱 (the disorders of the 750s and 760s caused by the uprising of the imperial generals An Lushan 安禄山 and his lieutenant Shi Siming 史思明) was a gaping wound in the imagination of many of the Tang poets who unfortunately lived through the national catastrophe. Rong Yu is such an unfortunate example, whose poetic talent was shaped by these events. The rebellion started in 755, the fourteenth year of Emperor Xuanzong’s “Heavenly Treasure” (Tianbao 天宝) reign era, when the general An Lushan, a key Tang military leader trusted by Xuanzong, started an armed rebellion, apparently because of his quarrel with the emperor’s brother-in-law Yang Guozhong, who was the prime minister at that time. An Lushan even occupied the capital city of Chang’an the year after he started the rebellion. His military assistant Shi Siming at first followed him and then started his own rebellion. This set off a series of wars, fought along the Yellow River for years, until finally suppressed in 763 with the help of troops from Inner Asian nations. The devastating rebellions demarcated the turning point in the life of the Tang Empire, whose central control of China became weaker and weaker after the event. For ordinary Chinese people, including most of the poets, the rebellions destroyed their lives.

Rong Yu’s home town was Jiangling, in what is now Hubei Province, on the south bank of the Yangtze River. Though far to the south of the main arenas of the civil war, this region was also affected, and the troubles did not end with the rebellions. Famine soon led to new uprisings and wars in the Yangtze River Valley. The disasters in human society made Rong Yu appreciate the feeling of attachment to everything around him.

The time of composition of the first poem has not been identified, but while in the process of translating it, I sensed from between the lines that he wrote it during his years serving in Hunan Province, on the south side of the Dongting Lake – according to Fu Xuancong, probably in the years 775–776 (p. 349). Those were the years between wars along the Yellow River and the wars along the Yangtze, when he had a brief moment of peace and the luxury to develop a sense of place, something especially precious at the point of parting with it. Soon a new war started, and the general under whom he served was killed by another general. The peace Rong Yu had briefly known was over. He went farther south, into what is now the Guangxi Zhuang Autonomous Region, to serve as the secretary to yet another general, where he wrote the second poem, in the year 777 or later (Fu, p. 349). In the chaos of wars, what can poets write about their ever-disappointed sense of place?
**Farewell to My Cottage on the Lake**

Good is my cottage on Spring Wind Lake.
Willow twigs tie my feelings here – how can I leave?
Yellow orioles are used to my face – an old friend.
They warble four or five times – a sad song at our parting.

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**New Year’s Eve in Guilin**

I sit staring at the lamp until the wee hours,
three thousand miles from my home in the north.
I fail to cover the distance in my cold dream,
disturbed by snow flakes falling on bamboo twigs.

Morning trumpet replaces the night watcher’s hollow drum.
Vibration of the sound shakes down lamp petals,
broken ashes from last night’s wicks.
Two New Year’s Eves I’ve spent like this.
Two long years I’ve followed the General to the edge of the earth.
Gao Shi 高适

Gao Shi was probably born in the year 700 and died in 765. His family was from Cangzhou, in what is now Jing County, Hebei Province. The modern scholar Fu Xuancong believes that in 749 Gao Shi was recommended to take the imperial examination by Zhang Jiugao, younger brother of the poet and prime minister Zhang Jiuling (Tang Dai Shiren Cong Kao. Beijing, Zhonghua Books, 1980, p. 163). He passed the exam and was assigned to a low-rank office in Fengqiu County, in Henan Province. He was definitely a late bloomer in Tang officialdom.

The three poems translated below happen to parallel the three stages in his career. The first one was written in the fall of 747, before Gao Shi took the examination and before he started his ladder-climbing in the officialdom. He was visiting a friend, a famous scholar and poet, Shen Qianyun, the fourth male child in the Shen family, who had failed several times in the national examination. Shen was originally from Jiangsu Province in the southeast of China but now lived as a recluse on the south bank of the Pu River in what is now Henan Province, where Gao would soon become a county sheriff, though he did not know this when he wrote the poem. The Han poets obliquely referred to in the Chinese original and mentioned in my translation are the Huainan xiaoshan 淮南小山, a group of poets in the court of the Prince of Huainan in the Han Dynasty. In their poem “Inviting Hermits to the Court,” the life of seclusion in deep mountains was described as somber and scary, in contrast to the free and pleasant lifestyle that Gao depicts. The second poem was written when Gao Shi was serving as the sheriff but unhappy about the nature of his job. The third poem was written in the period when Gao won his fame as a frontier poet, while he was helping General Geshu Han (d. 757) guard the western frontier of the Tang Empire. His official achievement and poetic talent reached their peak in this period and he became an important courtier with serious responsibilities. At this time, he wrote poems that show a strong flavor of the frontier.

If not familiar with the species of flower whose petals are scattered all over the frontier, Western readers may miss the irony of the last poem. Meihua 梅花, plum flowers, bloom profusely south of the Yangtze River, but are rare, if not non-existent, on the north-western frontier. Meihualao 梅花落, “The Falling Plum Petals,” is the title of a musical piece composed by Li Yannian, a court musician of the Western Han (202 BC–9 AD). So, what are falling all over the frontier are musical notes rather than actual petals. Furthermore, because the flowers prosper in southern China, it is reasonable to assume that the music was engendered there and that the composer, Li Yannian, was a man from the south as well. The “barbarian flute” is an instrument of the northern tribes. The player of the flute is a huren 胡人 (foreigner or “barbarian”), but he could be a soldier fighting on the side of the Chinese, for the Chinese army was quite diverse back then; the famous general under whom Gao served in that area, Geshu Han, was himself a huren. Or he could be a soldier of the barbarian army. The ambiguity of the soldier’s identity and the fact that a northern instrument is playing a southern piece about a southern flower showcase the cultural mixing happening on the battlefield. As a poet and a frontline general, what is Gao Shi’s attitude towards the war he is fighting?
A Chant, Composed for My Friend
Shen the Fourth, the Mountain Man

Return to the mountains, I chant.
Return to the high sky, setting sun,
and deep cold mountains.

Seeing you off I understand your heart.

In the short human life
at our age
we should follow where our heart goes.
I see you find your life project –
to bow, or to lift your head high,
or to do whatever you like
in the mountains is your own choice.

Spring leaping over rocks, spraying and splashing
like rain soughing in winds.
Osmanthus and pine seeds
carpet the glade floor all year round.

Gathering herbs, selling herbs,
you may have some money in your pockets.
Boiling herbs, eating herbs,
you may have a long life in the mountains.

White clouds are your drinking partners.
Bright moon is your bed-fellow in woods.
In sleep your soul asks you about what waking people do.
Thus you find in yourself another friend.
Written in the Sheriff's Office of Fengqiu County

I was a woodchopper
a fisherman
in the wild Swamp of Mengzhu.
A free man of leisure my whole life
I enjoyed
bursting into crazy songs
in the bulrushes of marshlands.

How can I bear to be
a minor officer in this
petty windy dusty office?

All because I thought I didn’t have to do much
in this small town
where everything would fall in place — smooth routines.

But kneeling and kowtowing to superiors have broken my heart.
Whipping peasants and peddlers has made me
a sad man.

Seized by sadness
I ask my wife, sons and daughters.
The whole family laugh and say:
“The world of today is just like that.”

I sigh to realize that
livelihood should be found in southern acres,
while the “world” should be dumped into the east-flowing rivers.

Serving the Emperor
I come home late every day.
Only in dreams have I time to figure out where my old swamp is.

I know for sure that Mei Fu, my fellow sheriff back in Han Dynasty, was wrong to have great plans for his empire.

I turn and sing the Home Returning Song by Tao Qian the Jin poet who abandoned his office and fled to the family farm.


**Hearing Flute on the Tower of a Frontier Fortress**

Having finally stopped and melted away, the snow leaves a clear sky.

I return with pasturing horses in bright moon shine. 
The fortress tower issues the melody of a barbarian flute.

“Plum Petals Fall” is the title of the piece.

But where do the plum petals fall? At home in the South.

With the help of the wind may the petals cover all the mountains near this northern frontier.
Neither the Book of Tang nor The New Book of Tang has a biography of Liu Changqing. But in the “Arts and Literature” chapters of the New Book of Tang, there are two lines about his life. Unfortunately, according to the modern scholar Fu Xuancong, those two lines contain more misinformation than truth. Painstakingly combing through archival sources, Fu convincingly establishes that, despite the location of his ancestral town in the north, Liu was born and raised in central China, in the city of Luoyang, the “eastern capital” of Tang; the year of his birth probably 725. He passed the state examination some time after 747, and began to serve at the lower ranks. In 758, he was serving as sheriff of Changzhou County, in what is now Jiangsu Province, an area rich both in material goods and cultural tradition and at the time not yet directly impacted by the An-Shi Rebellions (755-763; the rebellion of the Tang general An Lushan 安禄山 [d.757], which was continued after An’s death by his deputy, Shi Siming). His frankness, however, offended his supervisor and he was demoted to the county of Nanba, in Guangdong Province, far south of the famous Grand Yu Ridge (see the notes to Shen Quanqi and Song Zhiwen), in the southwest corner of the southernmost region of Tang (Fu, Tang Dai Shiren Cong Kao. Beijing, Zhonghua Books, 1980, pp. 238–68).

He gradually worked his way out of the “southern barbarian” area to become an officer of transportation in the mid-reaches of the Yangtze, in the central city of Wuhan. That’s when he wrote the first poem translated below. As officer of transportation, he saw with his own eyes the damage the An-Shi Rebellions had done to the country, especially in the north, where even the sun felt cold as it looked upon the tragedy. In the Chinese original, there are four place names in the first four lines - Muling, Sanggan, Youzhou, Chu – three of which I included in the English version. Muling is in what is now Shandong Province; Sanggan and Youzhou are in Hebei; and Chu was the name of the largest state in the Warring States Period (475 BC–221 BC), which includes parts of today’s Henan, Hubei, Hunan, Jiangxi, and Anhui Provinces. These four places covered the better half of the Tang Empire. As Arnold Toynbee pointed out, during the ten years between 754 and 764 – in eight of which wars started by the An-Shi Rebellions ravaged central China – the Tang Empire lost two-thirds of its population (Arnold Toynbee, Mankind and Mother Earth: A Narrative History of the World. New York: Oxford University Press, 1976, Chapter 53, last paragraph). Similar feelings and scenes are present in the second poem as well. The poem was probably written in 761, when Liu was returning to central China from his southern demotion. Minor wars started in response to or as aftermath of the An-Shi Rebellions had devastated parts of southern China. Yugan County in what is now Jiangxi Province had been reduced to mins. In both poems we can see that Liu’s expanded sense of place covers more than half China, and as “experienced landscape,” it is sad, lonely and hopeless.

Liu was demoted for a second time some time between 773 and 777, though this time to a place not as remote as the Grand Yu Ridge. On this occasion he was sent to Jiaode County, now in Zhejiang Province in southeastern China, deep in the green mountains. In Zhejiang he met the famous poet-monk Lingche and wrote several poems for him. As he lived in Jiaode, his son-in-law – Li Mu – sent a poem-letter to him, informing the father-in-law of his visit. Liu was so excited that he wanted to sweep his yard to welcome his son-in-law, yet, the moss and fallen leaves were so thick that he didn’t know where to start. Given the historical situation and the physical environment devastated by irresponsible human behavior, the reader may find it easier to understand Liu’s ideal lifestyle as depicted in the last poem – a small farm somewhere away from the human chaos, in poverty, yet in peace. Unfortunately, his dream, or rather the collective dream of Tang pastoral poets (literally, “field and garden” poets), was doomed by the unsustainable polity and policies of the empire.
Farewell to Master Lingche

The monastery looks green
in the middle of the bamboo grove.
The evening bell* reverberates long and slow.

Alone, bamboo hat on your back,
the setting sun on your shoulders,
you walk away,

into the distant mountains – blue, oh, far and blue.

*Buddhist monasteries in China usually have only one bell.

Written North of Muling Fortress
for a Traveler Heading Home
in the North

I run into you on the road to Muling,
you heading home by River Sanggan,
a single traveler on a single horse.

The mountains here
are as green as they were
in the ancient State of Chu.

Descending on the gate of You Prefecture
near your home in the north,
the sun is pale as if cold, touching the
cold earth.

Few have survived the hundreds of battles.
Castles and moats lie in ruins, reclaimed
by weeds,
where towns, villages, and houses were.

Homecoming travelers like you see them
through tears.
Farewell again to Assistant Undersecretary
Pei Who Was Demoted to Ji County

The sun sets on the river
to the chorus
of howling monkeys.

The farewell party disperses.
The stream flows on,
indifferent to our broken hearts.

We both are demoted,
you
to a farther county.

Among thousands of blue mountains
meanders your single boat.

In Response to the Poem
Li Mu Sent to Me

You come to visit me by a small boat
at the end of this lonely world.

Your journey is doubled
by the winding river
through mountain folds veiled in clouds.

To welcome you, a guest from afar,
I try to sweep the dirt floor
of my long-closed front yard.

Alas, the yard is choked
by green mosses and yellow leaves
strewn to my shabby door.
Ascending the City Wall of Yugen County

The castle walls are so tall 
almost touching the white clouds, 
lying in ruins in ten-thousand-year desolation, 
west of the River Chu.

In the fall green weeds grow rampant 
all over the empty official buildings.

Evening crows moan in cacophony, 
landing on the broken battlement.

Drift sand has taken over the fields as far as I can see.

The migrating geese, 
indifferent to the changes on land, 
fly back and forth across the sun rising, setting on Yiyang Creek.

Visiting Elder Yang at the Dragon Well

Your thatched cottage and wattle fence 
ward off dusts and winds from the busy world. 
In this deserted valley you till the fields, 
hiding from power and fame like the sage in the Han Dynasty.

The gurgling spring winds its way through deep mountains. 
Here you are free from cruel rulers like Qin the First.

The pines you planted grow greener every year, 
as you spend quiet seasons in your favorite peach grove.

A “poor” man, you eat flaxen seeds instead of chicken and millet. 
The white clouds, your steady friends, never mind your poverty.
Du Fu (Tu Fu) 杜甫

One of the very greatest of the Tang poets, Du Fu (in an older romanization, Tu Fu) was born in 712 in the city of Xiangyang, now in Hubei Province, at the center of China. Later, the family moved north to the County of Gong, in northern Henan Province, near Luoyang, the eastern capital of Tang. Gong was the center of chinaware production in Tang Dynasty and the famous tri-color ware was produced there. However, Du Fu showed no interest in commerce or industry, but impressed his friends and relatives as a gifted scholar. In his early twenties he traveled to the southeast coastal areas of China, where Chu Guangxi 储光羲, Ding Xianzhi 丁仙芝, and Qi Wuqian 秦不溡 (all included in this collection) lived and wrote. He was recommended to take the imperial examination but failed. So, unlike many other poets, he got himself into the officialdom by presenting three rhymed essays to the emperor. His low-rank office took him to Chang’an, the capital city. The An-Shi Rebellions severely interrupted his peaceful—though somewhat poverty-stricken—life and he had to run away from the troubled areas. Eventually he settled down in Chengdu, now the capital of Sichuan Province. Towards the end of his life, he moved eastward, first to eastern Sichuan, in the Three Gorges Area, and then downstream along the Yangtze, turning south to Lake Dongting. He died in Hunan Province in 770.

Du Fu wrote about the landscape and animals in his earlier years, though these natural scenes and beings served mainly as prompts to present his life philosophy and ambition. For instance, the focus in his poem about Mount Taishan is not the mountain itself, but his mountain-top epiphany about climbing to the peak of the very highest, which turns other mountains into dwarfs. His poem about an eagle centers around the way this fierce bird inspired him to overcome other minor birds—the lesser minds that would mislead the emperor—so as to realize his own ambition of helping the emperor to reach the moral height of ancient sage-emperors. My reading of Du Fu suggests that it was the An-Shi Rebellions that sent him on the road and forced him to look at natural items as they were, in fresh views not taken from the Zen contemplation of mountains and rivers that characterizes the poetry of Wang Wei and Meng Haoran.

The first poem translated below was written in 754, the year before An Lushan started his rebellion. In a prose narrative written in the same year, Du Fu wrote: “This autumn I lay ill in a hotel in Chang’an. It rained and rained until the courtyard became a pool and fish appeared in it. Green moss grew up to my bed...” (Du Fu, Qian Zhu Du Shi, ed., Qian Qianyi. Shanghai, Shanghai Press of Ancient Classics. 1979, p. 677. Translation mine). The modern scholar Qian Qianyi provides an important piece of information in a footnote to the poem: “In the fall of the thirteenth year of Tianbao [754], it rained incessantly for sixty days. The emperor worried about the crops, but Yang Guozhong [the emperor’s brother-in-law and prime minister] selected the best sample of the crop and showed it to the emperor, saying: ‘Despite the rain, the crops are not damaged’” (p.677). Du Fu apparently heard of this and wrote three poems in response. I chose the first of the three to show that for Du Fu in this early stage, cassia is mainly a symbol, and not yet seen as a life form in and of itself.

After moving to Sichuan in flight from An Lushan’s rebellion, Du Fu had to grow some of his own food, and therefore began to pay attention to the plants themselves. Professors Cheng Qianfan and Ge Xiaoyin indirectly support my reading by arguing that the travels that Du Fu made
Du Fu in order to flee the troubled areas helped him see the land as it is with his own eyes rather than in the poetic tradition of landscape presentation: “Du Fu focused on the real scenes along the road and rendered them in original ways in his poetry” (Cheng Qianfan, quoted in Du Xiaqin, Sui Tang Wudai Yanjiu. Beijing, Beijing Press, 2001, p. 916). Du Fu also “stresses his psychological experience of the scenery... and makes his language in harmony with the actual image” (Ge Xiaoyin, ibid. p. 917).

Three Sighs in Autumnal Rains, No. 1

Incessant rains kill hundreds of herbs, herbs that rot in the chilly fall. Cassia bushes by my doorsteps prosper in fresh, bright green. Their leaves are full and healthy like feathers of a kingfisher, their petals small yellow like round and shiny gold coins.

Autumnal wind blows stern and harsh. I wonder how long you can prosper alone.

A scholar with graying hair, all I can do is to smell your fragrance – thrice – and cry.
A Homeless Man’s Farewell

The war was over when battles were lost.
At last I trace the way we came.
I find what’s left of my home,
the garden in the overgrowth
of wormwood, ranks of hellebore.

What happened to my old neighbors here?
Dispersed east and west!
Where are the hundred families and
more?
Scattered or buried in wilderness!

Except for a couple of old widows,
survivors like myself are most rare.
So skinny, depressed and weak am I
that I almost drop and die on the
threshold –
to become supper for foxes and raccoons.
They bark at me, with hair standing on
their backs.

Like a bird that looks for last year’s
branch
I decide once more to settle here.
In ruins and poverty I start to till
and prepare the field in early spring.
Alone I dig a ditch with a rusty hoe
to water the plot until late at night.

The sheriff hears of my return,
summons me to drill and train –
this time as a drummer for county guards.

Once again I prepare to leave for war,
although this trip is not as far.
I look around my house to find
no items I can pack in the bag.
This tour I’ve only my body to care,
for any farther tour I know
I would be lost or die – somewhere.
Now that my home is all but gone,
who cares if I go far or near?
What I regret was my mother dear,
who’s dead for five long years.
From pain and illness she suffered alone.
She was thrown into a ditch when she
died.

She’d given me my powerless life.
I gave her nothing but sour tears in both
eyes.

Hard is the life of the poor masses,
for they have none to say goodbye
when they leave and leave again
the home they had but no longer have.
Du Fu

A Song: Fishing Observation

On the eastern side of the Mianzhou River triangular breams leap and splash, more brilliant than pieces of shining silver.

Fishermen come in eager phalanxes, dragging behind their boats a giant net across the mighty stream. With one pull they catch a thousand leaping fish.

The ordinary ones they throw away as they lock their gaze on a red carp that leaps high above the water as if it were the god of the roaring flood.

The scene enraged the river dragon. He dives deep and lies silent in the depth, expressing his anger in a whirlwind that stirs up dust on the gravel-bar.

A Song: The Second Fishing Observation

In early morning fishermen gather on a bluish stream. With nets and lines on boats they scare the fish insane.

Some row the boat fast – faster than the wind. Others thrust their harpoons into dancing waves.

The chef wields his knife left right, sending slices of fish flesh flying that fall in a pile on a golden plate – white and shiny as fresh flakes of snow.

I know the ordinary fishes they abandon are not worth of missing, and the top fish reserved for royalty swim freely far away. Of all the fishes that people consume these breams are the best I’ve ever tasted.

So I enjoy the feast and eat to my heart’s content. Yet what we do somehow upsets me: Would we have any fish in the river tomorrow? Even the ordinary fish have been scared and hide beneath waves several fathoms deep.

Small fish escape and hide in the deep – only half alive. Big fish are wounded and hang their heads low, some so angry that they stand up in mud.

It’s the second time I watch them fish. I can no longer accept fish slices from the host. So I drink only rice wine – bowl after bowl.

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The Mianzhou River's eastern side, where triangular breams leap and splash, more brilliant than pieces of shining silver. Fishermen come in eager phalanxes, dragging behind their boats a giant net across the mighty stream. With one pull they catch a thousand leaping fish.

The ordinary ones they throw away as they lock their gaze on a red carp that leaps high above the water as if it were the god of the roaring flood. The scene enraged the river dragon. He dives deep and lies silent in the depth, expressing his anger in a whirlwind that stirs up dust on the gravel-bar.

In early morning fishermen gather on a bluish stream. With nets and lines on boats they scare the fish insane. Some row the boat fast – faster than the wind. Others thrust their harpoons into dancing waves.

The chef wields his knife left right, sending slices of fish flesh flying that fall in a pile on a golden plate – white and shiny as fresh flakes of snow. I know the ordinary fishes they abandon are not worth of missing, and the top fish reserved for royalty swim freely far away. Of all the fishes that people consume these breams are the best I’ve ever tasted.

So I enjoy the feast and eat to my heart’s content. Yet what we do somehow upsets me: Would we have any fish in the river tomorrow? Even the ordinary fish have been scared and hide beneath waves several fathoms deep.
At sunset the flood dragon would move to other caves under the deep water up the stream. The sturgeons follow him and splash against the current louder than thunder bolts.

We humans wage wars against each other drive away Phoenixes and unicorns, mystical animals and auspicious signs. Why should we find pleasure in massacring fish and in wasting nature’s gifts?

What we do should make ancient sages sad.

A Song for the Bound Chickens

My young servant ties up the chickens to sell at market. They struggle and squawk against the tightening ropes.

My family hates seeing the chickens eat worms and ants, but fail to imagine the boiling pot waiting for the sold chickens.

What’s the difference between chickens and insects for humans? So I scolded the servant and asked him to untie the birds.

Unable to evaluate the lives of chickens and insects, I lean against the mountain pavilion and stare at the cold river.

A Spring View

The nation is broken. Mountains and rivers remain. When spring returns to ruined cities, trees and weeds turn green again.

Surveying the seasonal flowers I shed a single tear — shocked to learn that I’ve survived to see the birds coming back here.

For over three long months the fire of war has burnt the country cold. A letter from home now is worth ten thousand taels of gold.

I comb my hair to feel its thinning length — I have too little to hold the pin.
Qujiang River

When one petal falls, you know, you have less of the spring.
Now thousands swirl in the wind. Can I help but cry?

Let me just enjoy
the floating flowers passing by.
How could I ever refuse
health-ruining wine.

The humble peasants by the river share
their shelter with kingfishers under the eave,
beside the sculptures of mystery beasts tipped over near lofty tombs.
What vanity it is to chase after fame
while the truth of life
is enjoying life’s joy.

Visiting My South Neighbor

Mr. Black Cap, a neighbor south of me,
lives at the end of Jinli Lane.
His taros and chestnuts prosper so well that he claims to be no longer poor.

His children smile to see me come –
they’re used to visitors who invite themselves.
Even birds don’t seem to mind
my climbing the steps where they feed.

We row together a boat so small,
it seems to tip with a load of two,
along a cold autumn creek
no deeper than four feet five.

When dusk descends on bamboo groves,
he sees me off at his wicker gate.
The magic light of a crescent moon
turns the sands to silver grains.
River Village

The river bends at the village,
a tight embrace of summer days,
an everlasting pleasure in grace.

Some come and go uninvited – swallows under my roof.
Some nestle and love in oblivion – gulls at the river side.

My wife draws on paper to prepare a board game with me.
My youngest bends a needle to attach to a fishing line.

What else can I ask from this humble life of mine?
Herbal cures for my declining health.

Visiting Xiujue Monastery Again

I love crossing this bridge again,
recalling scenes I viewed last year.

The rivers and mountains seem to be
waiting for me.
The blooms and willows share the spring
in peace.

In the morning, the field awakes in a mist
so thin
I suspect it’s just a summer haze.

The sand on beach becomes velvet warm
heated by the day’s increasing length.

My homesick heart is almost set at ease
by the sense of place the temple offers
me.

What do I enjoy other than these?
Welcoming a Guest

South and north
the spring flood
surrounds my thatched hut.

Day after day
the gulls come
in groups, my only visitors.

I have never swept the path
that fallen petals cover in piles,
that leads to the very gate
I weaved with wicker twigs.

Today I open the gate to you –
a rare and pleasant surprise!
The market flooded, far away,
we can share a single dish at home,
together with the wine I’ve kept
in the house since last year.

You like my neighbor as much as I,
so let me holler to him to join our toast
over the fence.

The Tall Laurel

An ancient laurel stands expansive and tall
by the river, a green umbrella of giants.

I grow an herbal garden near its roots
and build a pavilion under its leaves.

The heavy shade protects me from the slanted
impaling heat of the summer setting sun.

The lightest breeze can stir leaves and twigs
in aerial music so endearing, sweet.

I’m often sleepy, often drunk, but after
I lie and nap beneath the tree,
a little while, I wake up sober and sharp.
A Sigh for the Laurel Tree
Uprooted by a Storm

For two hundred years, the elders say, the laurel has stood by the river bend. It’s for this tree that I built my hut beneath its mighty branches and shade. They offer coolness in summer heat.

By nature I love this ancient giant – a green umbrella over the green stream, a travelers’ shelter in frost and snow, a music hall for peasants and me.

Yet storms from the southeast came last night to shake the earth and flood the bank with thunders and rains of striking strength.

By mandate of heaven the tree toppled.

My tears and blood have stained my chest – my tree among the thistles lies, a fallen dragon or collapsed lion to be devoured by vultures and crows.

My shadeless hut no longer a home! My poems no place to find my voice!

Delighted by the Rain in Spring

Good rain! You know the change of season. You come at the right moment in spring.

Following the wind you secretly fall in night and quietly you bring the needed water down to the land.

Over the wild path the clouds pile up dark. On the river boat a lone lamp shines bright.

In the morning I look towards the city – profuse and wet. I see flowers around city walls – heavy and red.
Impromptu, No. 3

The River Swallows!

They know my hut is small and low.
Yet they come again and again
dropping dirt on my books and harp.

Pursuing flies in the house,
they hit me in the face
with the tip of their wings.

Impromptu, No. 7

The willow catkins from the yard
stuck on the wet and winding path
unroll a strip of white carpet.

By the roots of the bamboo
a grouse chick pecks at a shoot—
no one sees it but I.

The emerging lotus leaves float on the
creek,
as tiny and green as ancient bronze coins.

On the sandbar
nestling against their mother
the ducklings sleep in perfect peace.

Walking along the River
in Search of Flowers

By the house of Aunt Huang the Fourth
the flowers crowd the narrow path—
they bloom in clusters, thousands upon thousands,
that branches bow under their weight.

While playful butterflies dance around,
the merry orioles warble behind the leaves.
《水槛遣心二首》
（《全唐诗》卷 227）

其一
去郭轩楹敞，无村眺望赊。  
澄江平少岸，幽树晚多花。  
细雨鱼儿出，微风燕子斜。  
城中十万户，此地两三家。

Written on the Waterside Pavilion to Dispel Boredom
(The First of Two Poems)

Away from the city, I can afford  
to build my windows tall and broad.  
No villages here block my view  
of land extending far and wide.

The lucid river rises so high  
that dikes are almost lost to the eye.  
The trees are shady with flowers in spring,  
fish, through drizzle, leap out of the stream,  
against the breeze that tips the swallows’ wings.

Ah, thousands make their profit in town.  
Two neighbors and I live here alone.

Occasion

Moon in the river  
only a few feet from me  
Paper lantern  
illuminates the breeze in late night

Snowy egrets  
curl up in sleep on sand  
Splash  
fish leap into the stern of my boat
Du Fu 杜甫

《日暮》（《全唐诗》卷230）

牛羊下来久，各已闭柴门。
风月自清夜，江山非故园。
石泉流暗壁，草露滴秋根。
头白灯明里，何须花烛繁。

Dusk

It's been some time
since the cows and sheep came down the hills.
The locals too
have long closed their wattle gates.

Pure breeze, pure moonshine,
the night itself even purer,
pure rivers and mountains
far away from my home.

I sit up late, white hair lit
by the dim flame.

Expecting no happy news
I wonder why
the wick has burst into a bloom.*

I lie down in bed but can't fall asleep.
I listen to the brook gurgling down
the dark rocky cliff,
and dew drops falling on
the roots of autumn weeds.

*In Chinese folklore, when the candle-wick bursts into the shape of a flower, visitors are expected to come next morning.

《白小》（《全唐诗》卷231）

白小群分命，天然二寸鱼。
细微沾水族，风俗当园蔬。
入肆银花乱，倾箱雪片虚。
生成犹拾卵，尽取义何如。

White-and-Small

White and small
by mandate of nature
you're cast into the bodies
of two-inch fish.

The rude tribes by the river
treat you, a clan of water animals,
as garden vegetables.
They catch you by the thousands,
dump you into crates to display
at market like silver flowers.

They serve you on the table
as snowy herb-leaves.

The sages of the past
condemned the bird-egg hunters
for exhausting what heaven offers.
What are they going to say
about your extinction in the future?
Written for the Swallows Nesting on My Boat

On the Lake of Dongting far in the south,
I've sailed alone for two long years.
The swallows have twice carried mud
to my boat to build a nest on the mast.

In my old garden they knew me well.
Today they watch me with doubtful eyes.
I've pitied them for building nests
all over the country, both north and south.
How does my life on rivers and lakes
differ from theirs against the winds of fate?

I listen to their chirp on top of the mast,
watch them fly away to river banks.
Touching the water with the tip of shiny wings,
they flit through flowers lining the rapid stream.

My tears well up to fill my blurry eyes.
They fall to wet the front of my coat.
Written on the Boat, the Day before Cold Meal Festival

Such a good day!

I make myself drink some wine,
eat some food delicious but cold.
Wearing a Daoist’s crane-feather hat,
I sit alone – a typical recluse.

The spring flood is expansive and blue
my tiny boat seems to be floating in the sky.
My vision has blurred so much as I age
that flowers seem fogged on the clearest day.

Graceful, graceful,
butterflies dance by my curtain.
Bravely, bravely
gulls challenge the rapids.

The bluish mountains capped with clouds
extend for thousands of miles.

I look to the north towards the imperial city.
In vain I murmur the name of Long Peace.*

* The capital city of the Tang Empire was Chang’an, with the literal meaning of “Long Peace.” When Du Fu wrote this poem, the city had been ravaged by war for years during the An-Shi Rebellions.
Li Hua 李华

Li Hua was as excellent a prose writer as he was a poet. He wrote many epigraphs for his contemporaries: for poets, scholars, and fellow officials. Ironically, using these epigraphs, scholars are able to chart Li Hua’s life with considerable accuracy. He was born in 715, in Zhaozhou, in what is now Hebei Province. In his lifetime, that place – inhabited mostly by “foreign” tribes from the north – was a big melting pot of several nationalities. In 736, he passed the imperial examination and eight years later he passed a newly established “Erudite Literatus Exam” (boxue hongci ke 学科高级科), a more advanced examination that allowed him to be appointed directly to the state secretariat as a drafter of state documents. In 752, he became one of the fifteen disciplinary superintendents (jiancha yushi), a position at lower rank but of tremendous power for its responsibility to watch over and discipline government officials at all ranks and positions (Chen Wenxin, Xiong Huili, Min Zeping et al., eds., Zhongguo Wenxue Biannian, Vol. 4, p. 291). In the same year he traveled to an area near his hometown and wrote a famous essay, “Memorial Oration on an Ancient Battlefield,” in which he expressed a strong criticism of wars that wasted lives. Three years after that piece was written, An Lushan started his rebellion, and wars devastated the Yellow River Valley, especially Li’s home prefecture. On June 8, 756, Li Hua himself was captured by the rebels and was forced to serve in an office for An Lushan’s government (Ibid. Vol. 5, p. 7). During this period he wrote the poem translated below.

The excursion took place in Yiyang County, in western Henan Province on the south bank of the Luo River, about ninety kilometers southwest of Luoyang, the “eastern capital” of the Tang Empire. Lianchang Palace, the most famous travel palace of the Tang emperors, was located in Yiyang, in the foothills of Niji Mountain, near the Temple of the Orchid Fairy. The place was a natural garden where rare birds made their home among ancient trees and fragrant herbs. But An Lushan’s rebellion and the wars devastated northern China and the imperial travel palace was no exception. Standing on what used to be “the imperial road,” Li Hua realized that the world of nature goes on with or without human presence, an epiphany similar to what Du Fu conveyed in his famous lines: The nation is broken. / Mountains and rivers remain.
Grasses grow lush and green by palace walls.
A stream meanders east and west along Orchid Fairy trails.
Fragrant peaches on their own come into full bloom
or shed their petals in absence of men.
Along the road birds twitter in chorus,
their warbling echoed by surrounding hills.
Cen Shen 岑参

Cen Shen was born in 718 or 719, in Nanyang, southern Henan Province, in central China, about a hundred kilometers north of Du Fu’s ancestral hometown in Xiangyang, in modern Hubei Province. He was a child prodigy and started reading at the age of five. At nine, he was already writing articles. When he was fifteen years old, after his father’s death, his elder brother moved the family north, to Songyang, near Luoyang, the eastern capital of Tang, just as Du Fu’s family had. Cen Shen passed the imperial examination in the year 745, yet was not assigned a position until 748. When the assignment finally came, he wrote in a poem about it: “I received my first appointment at thirty, / when my interest in officialdom was almost gone” (Quan Tang Shi. Vol. 200, poem #52. Translation mine). In 750, he was sent by the empire to its western frontier, near the place where Li Bai was born (see note to Li Bai). It was fortunate for Cen Shen that the general in charge had suggested the emperor abandon the far-west fortress of Suiye, Li Bai’s city of birth, and move the troops back east a thousand kilometers to the town of Yanqi. Because of this change, Cen Shen was stationed a little closer to the familiar world of central China. He served as a clerk in the imperial army, and traveled far and wide in China, especially in the northwest. He died in 769, in the city of Chengdu in the southwest.

The first poem translated below was probably written before he received his first official appointment. The next two, “Written In Desert” and “Spring Dream,” were written during his first tour of duty at the western frontier.

The Garden of Liang in the last poem is a famed private park, built by Prince Liang (Liu Wu, 184? – 144 BC) of the Western Han more than a thousand years before Cen Shen visited the park. Located in what is now Shangqiu County, Henan, with a circumference of a hundred miles, the park included famous scenery such as Lark Hill, Fallen Ape Cliff, Resting Dragon Cavern, Wild Geese Pond, Crane Islet, and Wild Duck Sandbar. In its heyday, the Garden of Liang entertained famous poets such as Mei Cheng and Sima Xiangru, as well as powerful princes and elegant court ladies of the Han Dynasty. It was especially popular in the springtime. After the wars waged by An Lushan, the Garden was devastated and abandoned, yet Cen Shen presented in this poem a sense of place defined by the laws of nature that remain indifferent to the rise and fall of princes, or poets like Cen himself. This seems to be a recurrent motif for Tang poets after the rebellions led by generals An and Shi.

《虢州后亭送李判官使赴晋绛（得秋字）》
（《全唐诗》卷201）

西原驿路挂城头，客散红亭雨未收。
君去试看汾水上，白云犹似汉时秋。

Written in the Pavilion in the Backyard of My Guozhou Office
For Mr. Li Who Was Leaving for Jiangzhou in Shanxi

Our friends dispersed before the rain stopped.
Only you and I stand here by the red pavilion.

We look up to see the road to West Plateau
that hangs in mid-air
from the tower of the city gate.

When you get there, my dear old friend,
please look on River Fen for me
to see if clouds are still as white
as the ancient poets of Han described them to be.
Cen Shen 岑参

Written in the Desert

On horse back,
I travel west
till I almost touch the western sky.

Since I left home twice have I seen
the moon become full again.

Not knowing where to sleep tonight,
I look around.

Alas what have I
found?
endless sands –
expansive, flat –
no sign of human life,
not even a column of cooking smoke.

Spring Dream

Last night in my cave dwelling,
on the northern frontier,
where the spring wind never
reaches,
in a dreamy moment on my pillow,
I traveled thousands of miles
to the south of the Yangtze.

I dreamed of spring far away
by the southern source of
River Xiang,
of my beautiful friends and lovers.

Spring Scenes in an Abandoned Garden (II)

Crows in commotion wheel over the Garden of Prince Liang.
Beyond them sets the sun on desolate houses and a few old trees,
that unaware of the passing of people, send forth
the same flowers that inspired the ancient poets and their prince.

《春梦》（《全唐诗》卷 201）
洞房昨夜春风起，故人尚隔湘江水。
枕上片时春梦中，行尽江南数千里。

《山房春事》（《全唐诗》卷 201）
梁园日暮乱飞鸦，极目萧条三两家。
庭树不知人去尽，春来还发旧时花。

《碻中作》（《全唐诗》卷 201）
走马西来欲到天，辞家见月两回圆。
今夜不知何处宿，平沙万里绝人烟。
Pei Di 裴迪

Pei Di was probably born in 716; no information about the year of his death has been found. His hometown was near the capital city Chang’an and he climbed up the ladder of officialdom, reaching a ministerial position. In his late years he lived in the Zhongnan Mountains, a close neighbor to Wang Wei and arguably his best friend. After Wang Wei retired from the court, they visited each other frequently, playing musical instruments and chanting poems at Wang Wei’s villa in the Wangchuan Hills. Huazi Hill is one of the places in Wangchuan Valley about which both Pei and Wang wrote poems; they even shared titles, such as “Huazi Hill,” “The Hut in a Bamboo Grove,” “Deer Lodge,” etc. Pei Di’s poetic style is also close to that of Wang Wei; unfortunately, he was often overshadowed by the better-known poet.

According to a gazetteer (Shaanxi tongzhi) compiled by scholars of the Ming Dynasty and first published in 1543, almost eight hundred years after Wang Wei died Wangchuan Valley was “located in the south of Lantian County, at the pass of Yao Mountain, eight li (two and a half miles) from the county seat. The Valley begins at the gorge between two rocky cliffs, which is about five li (one and a half miles) in length. The road leading to the valley is narrow and dangerous. Then the gorge opens to the valley where villages and villas are scattered about, in view of each other, among fertile fields of mulberries and hemp, enclosed by hills that seem to have no way out. Yet winding through these hills and heading south, the traveler will find thirteen smaller valleys that are even more exquisite and beautiful. That’s where Wang Wei built his villa, with twenty famous viewpoints such as Mengcheng Col, Huazi Hill, Jinju Hill, etc.” (quoted in Qiao Yi and Lei Enhai, eds., Dali Shi Lue. Tianjin, Tianjin Press of Ancient Classics, 2008, p. 101. Translation mine). The gorge is called gu kou 谷口 (“valley mouth”) and is mentioned several times in the poems of Qian Qi, the next poet in this collection.

An interesting clue about Pei Di’s “country life” can be found in a poem of Wang Wei, “To Pei Di,” in which Wang describes the pleasant time they spent together drinking and writing poetry in Wang Wei’s country dwelling. However, when the time comes for tilling the field in spring, Wang frankly tells his pseudo-farmer friend Pei Di to go home so that Wang, the “true” farmer, can focus on his labor:

Pray get your horse and whip ready,
my dear poet friend, and go back to your home.
Today I start my farmer’s year.

Pei Di himself seems to have had no problem with his pseudo-mountain-man status:

I’m no woodsman
I claim no woodcraft.

Yet he still enjoyed life in the woods following the trails left by the doe and stag.
Huazi Hill

The sun sets on the pines, and wind
arises through the needles, drying drops
of remaining dew and stirring clouds in the sky.
The clouds chase my footsteps, and turn
the path vermilion, while the roadside leaves
brush my shoulders and dye my clothes green.

Deer Lodge

Day and night I view
the cold mountain
now alone
I hike into its wooded side
I'm no woodsman
claim no woodcraft
I only follow the trails
created by doe and stag

Composed in the Hut in a Bamboo Grove

I come and stay in the bamboo grove
to be close to Dao in daily affairs.

In and out flit the mountain birds
seeing no “man of the world” so deep in green.
Qian Qi 钱起

Qian Qi was probably born around 710 and died around 780 (Fu Xuancong, *Tang Dai Shiren Cong Kao*. Beijing, Zhonghua Press, 1980, p. 437). His hometown was Wuxing, in what is now Jiangsu Province, in the warm, mild and fertile lower reaches of the Yangtze River. From his poetry we learn that he traveled once to Jiangling, at the center of the floodplain between the Yangtze and the Han Rivers, in what is now Hubei Province. There he met Zhang Jiuling and probably Meng Haoran. Like many of his contemporaries, he traveled several times to the capital city Chang'an for the imperial examinations. And several times he failed them. The depression he felt for the failures, and longing for his home down by the Yangtze are reflected in this couplet:

The old mountain at home is far, far away even in dreams.  
The new year brings many, many thoughts of home.  

(*Quan Tang Shi*. Vol. 238, poem #22. Translation mine.)

He finally passed the examination when he was already a middle-aged man, in 750. I'm not sure whether he ever returned to his home in southeast China between the failed exams, but after he passed the examination he seemed to have decided to stay in or near the capital for good. Unfortunately, little is known about him before the infamous An-Shi Rebellions started in 755. With the onset of the rebellions, however, many clues about Qian Qi’s life began to emerge in his poems. Qian was now appointed sheriff of Lantian County, next to the capital city of Chang-an, and close to the famous valleys in the Zhongnan Mountains where Wang Wei and Pei Di lived in semi-seclusion, just two and a half miles south of Qian’s office.

Qian Qi loved that valley, especially the “valley mouth” (*Gukou*), the gorge that led into the valley. There he built a cottage. In the first poem translated below, Qian Qi celebrates the new cottage he had built and the simple, self-sufficient lifestyle the habitat promised. In the second poem, he expresses guilt for having an official salary to complement the “meager” living the land offers him; and he also expresses sorrow for the simple peasants who are forced to use every single inch of land in order to meet the tax deadline.

In real life, in 763, the year after the devastating wars against An Lushan and Shi Siming had finally come to an end, Tibetan troops invaded western China, briefly occupying Chang’an. Qian Qi, and many other government officials like him, fled for refuge to the valleys of the Zhongnan Mountains. Perhaps it was such experiences that helped him develop a sense of home in a place that had previously been a strange land, thousands of miles away from his old home on the Yangtze. Thus, in the third poem, he talks about the mountains near *Gukou* as if they were his “home mountain.”

In the traditional collection of Qian Qi’s poems were also included one hundred short pieces about sailing up the Yangtze River. Recent scholarship, however, has shown that these were most likely written by his grandson, Qian Yu, during his demotion trip to southwest China (Fu Xuancong, p. 445). Nevertheless, I translate three of them here just to offer some idea of the family traditions of the Tang poets.
Sent to Friends of My Home Province in the South From My New Cottage at the Gukou Gorge

I plant some broomcorn millet by a misty creek,
beside the shaggy brambles, thistles, and thorns.
The living this place provides is meager, I know.
I love it nevertheless – ideal for my hermit style –
among the oaks and chestnut trees that grow on a rocky ridge, accessible through a path, under berry bushes and moss.
All now is flooded.

Watching Villagers Work the Field

The imperial repository is not quite full,
So peasants on plains in hills by swamps all struggle hard in the fields.

Forever lacking the grain for taxes they till the most barren land to make crops grow in cold clouds that linger over hard mountain rocks.

Autumnal rains delay the harvest until frosts turned the sickles white.
The cold sun sets behind the empty village the men still busy on the terrace.

A low rank official I feel so ashamed for the small salary that I receive for no positive contribution to this world.

I want to follow the advice of the great historians of ancient times. If I do no good for people or king, I should now resign from office.

Here, in the chilly season of autumn I enjoy a mountain life untrammeled by worldly affairs.
I dig a well fed by a lovely spring, and build my hut against an ancient tree. Gulls and clouds seem to love my house. They dance, linger in front of my door as if to offer a promise of eternal company.

I bid goodbye with this poem to my friends at home who desire to fly and hover high with noble egrets –
I enjoy my playful life with the lowly gulls.

Qian Qi 钱起

《谷口新居寄同省朋故》
（《全唐诗》卷236）

《观村人牧山田》
（《全唐诗》卷236）
Late Spring, Returning to the Cottage in My Home Mountain

At the mountain pass the spring wanes –
canaries gone,
magnolias fallen,
plum petals floating, dancing in the air.

Oh, how much I miss the bamboo grove
by the windows of my cottage,
unchanged, forever green, waiting
for my return to its pure shade.

Sailing Up the River (the twelfth of a hundred short poems)

Tall trees, so many,
block the light of the setting sun.

I tie my boat to a trunk,
cut a few twigs
to build a supper fire.

In the quiet of dusk
I overhear old men talk,
locals by the river –
they hate the war
as much as I,
a lone man who travels by.
Sailing up the River (the fourteenth of a hundred short poems)

Mountain rain
fill the river to the brim
last night.

Happy fish
leap now
all over the river.

Sand banks
so low and flat
almost lie at the level of my boat.

Drooping knotweeds
reach out to me through the window.

Sailing Up the River (the twenty-first of a hundred short poems)

Still water
reflects autumn tints.
The setting sun
lights up high clouds.

My addiction to poetry
can't possibly be a disease.

So let me once more
moisten my short writing brush
with the tip of my tongue.
Neither *The Book of Tang* nor *The New Book of Tang* has an exclusive biography for Lang Shiyuan. But the “Arts and Literature” chapters of the latter include a volume of his poems with a brief note on his life. Despite his ascension to the higher ranks of Tang officialdom, he was known as a talented poet of the *Dali* Era (766–779) rather than a bureaucrat. He was born in the ancient dukedom of Zhongshan, which is now Ding County of Hebei Province. He passed the imperial examination in 756, along with thirty-two other scholars, including fellow poet Huangfu Ran. Little is known about him during the first few years after he passed the exam—which coincided with the An-Shi Rebellion—but in 762 he was appointed sheriff of Weinan County in the Wei River valley, the next county south of Lantian, where poet Qian Qi was serving as the sheriff. He immediately started a friendship with the poets there, including Wang Wei, Pei Di, and Qian Qi. He exchanged poems with them on shared subjects, such as the Wangchuan Valley and his new cottage built in Half Day Village (surrounded by mountains, the day-light time of the village was only half as long as that enjoyed by villages in open areas).

In December, 777, twenty years after he started his official career, Lang Shiyuan was promoted to the office of Deputy Prefecture Chief in Ying City, along the mid-reaches of the Yangtze in what is now Hubei Province. Lu Lun, one of the ten greatest poetic talents of the *Dali* Era, wrote a poem bidding farewell to Lang Shiyuan. It’s most likely that in the spring of the next year Lang wrote the first poem translated below, “Chanted on the West Tower of the Castle of Ying.”

Ying City had been the capital of the Kingdom of Chu during the Warring States Period (475 to 221 BC). Located at a strategically crucial area—the crossroad between Sichuan, Hunan, Jiangxi, and Henan provinces—Ying City was known for the many devastating battles fought in and around it. According to *Fang Yu Sheng Lan*—a geographical gazetteer written in 1239 and first published in 1269—the city was surrounded by eight mountains and hills (Mount Jin, Mount Long, Mount Ji, Mount Ba, Jiugang Hill, the Hill of the Painted Fan, and Xirang Hill) and five rivers (the Yangtze, the Han, the Ju, the Zhang, and the Xia Rivers). It is therefore “a strategic key to four kingdoms and the focus of armed forces. He who occupied this place can control central China” (quoted in Qiao Yi and Lei Enhai, eds., *Dali Shi Lue*. Tianjin, Tianjin Press of Ancient Classics, 2008, p. 190).

After his experience of the chaotic years of the An-Shi wars and the Tibetan invasion, Lang Shiyuan seems to have treasured the peace this place offered, proud of being uninterested in the military importance of the walled city from which he governed. But the euphoria he felt there was short lived, for in the fall of 779, he ascended the same tower looking westward and wrote a short ode of dejection—“In Autumn, Looking into the Distance From the West Tower of the Castle of Ying”—in which his homesickness was exacerbated by the honk of geese flying towards the warmer south. These two poems were based on conflicting feelings he experienced in a real place while the senses of place reflected in the other two poems below are idealized by his poetic imagination. He died in 781.
Chanted on the West Tower of the Castle of Ying

Above the plains of ancient Chu
a chain of mountains surrounds a town.
Where mountains end rivers wind
about the castle upon a hill.
Beneath a scarlet fence a hundred feet
in height, a school of fish enjoy the warmth –
the sun shines on their brilliant scales.

In past, men guarded their lofty castle
with care, but I, the new prefecture chief,
enjoy a peaceful leisure over the floods,
maples on the sandbar free of the presence of man,
the greening grass and reddening flowers,
chirping birds as free as mountain air.

In Autumn, Looking into the Distance
From the West Tower of the
Castle of Ying

My white head thinks of returning, but I
can’t.
I hear the sad wild geese on the empty
mountain.

Standing on the top of the high castle, I
watch
the sun set in the northwest. Again I see
the wind chasing the river water to me.
Looking South from Bailin Temple

Over the creek I hear remote bells chime.

Tying my boat I hike the trail through a deep grove of pines.

The rain has stopped, the clouds linger on to outline the blue peaks in the southeast – four, or five?

Hearing My Neighbor’s Reed Pipe

A phoenix singing on the other side of the burning clouds?

Whose house is it on the other side of the thick wall?

Separated by gate after locked gate, how can I find who and where?

Could I be wrong imagining a musician in a grove of a thousand blooming peach trees?
Gu Kuang 顾况

It is unsure in which year Gu Kuang was born or in which year he died. According to a contemporary of his, Gu Kuang led a long life but all researchers can ascertain is that he was born during Xuanzong’s Kaiyuan reign era (713–742) and died sometime around 806 (Fu Xuancong, Tangdai Shiren Cong Kao. Zhonghua Press, Beijing, 1980, p. 385. Translation mine). However, there is one thing that is clear about him: born and raised in what is now the famous city of Suzhou, in Jiangsu Province in southeastern China, his life was defined by the chaotic wars that began with An Lushan’s rebellion. The year after An Lushan occupied the capital city Chang’an, the new emperor (Suzong, r. 756-762) arranged that the imperial examinations be conducted in the coastal southeast rather than in the capital city as had been done for a century. And so in 757 Gu Kuang was able to take the examination without having to travel thousands of miles to central China. He passed and began serving in the low ranks, but when his friend Li Mi became prime minister, he was promoted to the position of Zhuzuolang, the officer in charge of compiling the court’s ongoing chronicles. It is at this point he moved north to Chang’an, which had been reestablished as the capital of the Tang Empire soon after the end of An Lushan’s occupation.

Being a gifted poet-painter and known for his sarcasm, Gu Kuang was far from being respectful to his fellow officials in the court. He was therefore soon demoted from the court to become a mid-rank official in Jiangxi and thereafter retired to Mount Mao Shan, a famous Daoist mountain near the town in which he was born. He deliberately kept a distance from the officialdom and came closer and closer to the working people in the fields. Although he didn’t actually till the fields and plant the rice as did Wang Wei and Ding Xianzhi, his close observation of the farmers lends his poetry a flavor of life close to the land. In the poem “Rattan on the Rock Wall,” the poet anticipates Shakespeare by centuries in his attempt to read “books in brooks and stories in stones.”

Passing by a Mountain Farmer’s House

Over the board-bridge the traveler crosses a gurgling stream.

Under the thatched eaves the hens cackle at high noon.

Don’t complain about the smoke from roasting tea leaves.

Just enjoy the sunny day as grains dry on the threshing ground.
Rattan Vines on the Rock Wall

Empty mountain, not even bird tracks!
What makes me happy here?

Winding, curling, drooping, hanging, vines practice calligraphy on the rocks.

On the Level Lake

On the Level Lake, I harvest lotus roots, wash the mud from them in clear lake water.

I guide the shadow of my boat through fragrant leaves with care. I don’t want to break a single lotus stem.
Wei Yingwu 韦应物

Wei Yingwu was born in Chang’an (now Xi’an), the capital city of the Tang Empire. His life is legendary by any definition of the word and his poetic career truly amazing. In a poem written in his late years, “Meeting Yang Kaifu,” he confesses that he became an arrogant young guard for Emperor Xuanzong at the age of fifteen and was privileged, spoiled and totally illiterate:

I served the Emperor in my early years,
A haughty boy presuming on the personal favor
from the Emperor …
Not knowing a single written word I
Indulged in drinking and other stupid deeds.

(Quan Tang Shi. Vol. 190, from poem # 65. My translation)

It was after Emperor Xuanzong’s death that Wei began to feel the pressure of real life. No longer protected or invincible, he instead felt “bullied by many,” and that it was “too late to study.” But study he did, beginning in his mid-twenties. He excelled and was soon recommended to lower-rank positions with considerable power in central China, and then assigned to higher offices in eastern, southeastern, and southern China. What is more impressive is that he made his reputation as one of the greatest Tang poets despite his late start (Luo Liantian, Tangdai Shiwen Liujia Nianpu, Taibei, Xuehai Publishing Company, 1986, pp. 75–143).

According to tales in the Daoist tradition, some practitioners had become immortals with the help of a diet of boiled quartz. There is even a recipe in the Daoist classic Yunjiqiqian (Vol. 74) that prescribes the method of boiling quartz to ensure immortality. In the poetic tradition, white quartz became the symbol of a simple and spiritual lifestyle, in a manner very similar to Thoreau’s bread without yeast. This is the food he imagined his recluse friend to have in the free but poverty-stricken life.

Wei Yingwu became involved in the officialdom at age fifteen and, in his forty-year career, he only had two short breaks from the official circle. He longed for the quiet and leisurely life of a recluse, as demonstrated in the poems translated below, but his vision of the carefree country lifestyle of a hermit was challenged by the reality he encountered in his duties as a county magistrate. From the working people he learned the hardship of life close to land and began to re-examine his role as an official who was supposed to take care of the people. The last two poems translated here demonstrate the profound lesson he learned from a world unimaginable from the perspective of his early, protected life. The real “empty mountains” where the old man worked along tiger-paw trails have an essential difference from the imaginary “empty mountains” depicted in poems of contemporaries such as Wang Wei, Meng Haoran, and Qi Wuqian.
Wei Yingwu

《秋夜寄丘二十二员外》
（《全唐诗》卷 188）

怀君属秋夜，散步咏凉天。
山空松子落，幽人应未眠。

Written to Qiu the Twenty-Second in an Autumn Night

Strolling, in search of a poem, to celebrate the cooling sky,
I can’t help but think of you this late autumn night.

In your empty mountains you can hear pinecones fall.
Dear hermit friend!
You must be as awake as I.

《寄全椒山中道士》（《全唐诗》卷 188）

今朝郡斋冷，忽念山中客。
涧底束荆薪，归来煮白石。
欲持一瓢酒，远慰风雨夕。
落叶满空山，何处寻行迹。

Sent to a Daoist Friend in Quanjiao Mountains

This morning, feeling the first chill of the year, I worried about my friend the mountain man.

He must be collecting thistles along the gorges, or returning home to boil white quartz.*

I want to send him a gourd of wine brewed with my own rice, to help him ward off the evening cold brought by the wind and rain.

Where does my courier begin to look for his tracks when the empty mountains are buried under fallen leaves?

* In the Daoist tradition, white quartz is believed to be a mystical food for longevity.
Observations on a Farming Village

Light drizzles send grasses and weeds upward fast and fresh.

The first clap of thunder wakes hibernating reptiles, bugs that crawl out of the earth.

They end the few resting winter days, restart the cycle of tilling and planting for the farming families.

With gardens cleaned up and thrashing grounds mended, all the young and strong go and work on the fields.

When they return the sun is already low and they stop to watch their oxen drink from the creek. Tired, cold, hungry yet too busy to indulge in self-pity, they chat happily about the rain that keep the land fertile and ready.

The magistrate knows that their barns have no food left before the harvest, and they’ve not finished the “volunteer” work for the state.

He feels shame, the shame of a man who has never tilled the fields, to realize that his pay has come from peasants like these.

An Old Man Cultivating a Mountain Plot

Alone he wanders in the pathless woods, following the tracks of tiger paws.

He picks up frozen leaves and broken twigs, burns them to ashes to fertilize a plot on this rocky hill. He works hard here in the empty mountains but where’s the home that he returns to for the night?

I ask but get no answer from this quiet man, whose graying hair stirs thinly in the cold mountain breeze.
On Seclusion

The aristocrat and the laborer differ
in many ways.

They both leave
their home behind
in search of a living or fame.

Only the recluse enjoying a life
of simple solitude
is free
from the shackle of those worldly pursuits.

In the night a slight drizzle
passes his hermitage,
helping grasses grow
without his knowledge.

The sun
of a sudden breaks
the lingering clouds, the birds
warble around his house in the green mountains.

Occasionally he accompanies
a Daoist friend, or walks
with the woodchopper in the morning mist.

He holds it natural to accept
his inferior luck and wit, never jealous
of the glory of those who try and succeed.
Lu Lun 卢纶

Lu Lun was born to a large clan in what is now Yongji County, Shanxi Province. His family had been well known among scholars and high officials since the Han Dynasty (206 BC–AD 220) (Lin Shiyi, Tianyuanshi Jinghua. Beijing, Jinghua Press, 2001). But Master Lu Lun was a sickly child and started schooling later than many of the Tang poets. When he was finally strong enough to start formal schooling at the age of eight, northern China was no longer safe due to the rebellion lead by An Lushan. In 755, Lu and his family moved south to Poyang, a small town in what is now Jiangxi Province, south of the Yangtze River, on the eastern bank of the great Lake Poyang. In a poem sent to a fellow poet, Cao Zhao 曹钊, he reviews his earlier life and describes how the move affected him and how his new schoolmates laughed at him because his knowledge was considerably below standard for a nine-year-old (quoted in Fu Xuancong, Tang Caizizhuan Jiao Jian. Beijing, Zhonghua Press, 2000, Vol. 2, p. 2). Lu Lun’s luck was as bad in imperial examination as in formal schooling and he failed several times during the Dali Era (766–780). However, his poetic talent was soon recognized by the people around him and as he failed the examinations, his poems placed him among the ten top poetic geniuses of the time. Gaining the respect of a high official – Prime Minister Yuan Zai 元载, who showed the best of his poems and essays to the emperor – he acquired a position in the officialdom. He later worked in several positions in and near Chang’an, then followed a field marshal to the northwestern frontier as a military secretary. His poetic talent was much appreciated by Emperor Xianzong 宪宗 (r. 805–820), who included thirty-two of his poems in a collection of Tang poems that has a total of three hundred and eleven poems.

In his earlier career, Lu imagined the mountain life as isolated in remote areas, but made warm and pleasant by barking dogs, gurgling creeks, and lights in farm-house windows. Despite the warmth and pleasantness, in the last poem, when he met an elder acquaintance who had survived another chaotic war, he lost the heart to stay overnight in this ravaged community where children and grandchildren were remembered but never again met alive.

The time of composition of the last poem is unknown. My educated guess is that it must have been written after the year 783, for in October of that year, another rebellion started, this time led by general Zhu Zi 朱泚 and for a second time the Tang capital was occupied by rebels. It was then that Lu Lun was called to serve as a military secretary under field marshal Hun.

The county of Zhouzhi is located in the heartland of the fertile Guanzhong Plains, seventy kilometers west of Xi’an (Chang’an), by the northern foothills of the Qinling Mountain Range and on the southern bank of River Wei. If people in Zhouzhi found it hard to survive, then it’s hard to imagine what might have happened to the people who lived in less-favored lands. Zhouzhi was the site of a long cultural tradition, going back to the Zhou Dynasty, established in the 1100s BC. Between his many failed attempts at the imperial examinations, Lu Lun lived in a cottage in the Zhongnan Mountains, about fifty kilometers east of the Zhouzhi area. He probably visited Zhouzhi then and made some friends there. He likely visited that area again as he served in the military, recovering territories that had been lost to the rebels since 783.
Mountain Inn

High on the peak, the mountain trail comes to an end.
Barking dogs, gurgling creeks, leaves rustling
in the wind greet the traveler.

Beyond the autumn clouds,
behind branches of pines,
glow the three windows
of a single house.

Life in the Mountains

When hungry I eat the pine nuts raw.
When thirsty I drink from the spring cold.

When for no reason I hike
from the mountain’s front to its back slope,
where grasses grow, thick as a carpet,
I lie down to sleep among deer and elk.
Boating on the Eastern Pond in Early Spring

Rowing the boat across the lake
I turn around to look for my house.

Sitting on the brimming tarn
I seem to mark the end of the earth.

In sunset the lake shines bright and white –
Snow? willow catkins? or flying gulls?

A Frontier Song

The moon, black.
Geese flying high.
Chanyu, the enemy chief, has escaped.*

I want to lead
the light cavalry to chase him down,
but the snow!
The snow has buried my sword and bow.

*The desert is so barren, cold, vast and unpopulated that the Chanyu’s escape was a deadly gamble.
An Evening, Visiting an Elder in Zhouzhi County

The elder I met so long ago recognizes me.
He leads me by hand out of his wattle gate
to the village up stream. In words that hurt
we talk about our lives since we’d parted –
where have I been wandering in all these years?
How many families have survived here?

In cold rain we check the crops. As we meet
acquaintances I try to recall the names
of their sons and grand-children.* We push away
overgrown vines to disclose an abandoned well.

Water swells to overflow the path,
disappearing under a fence. I sigh
to admit that I can’t bear to stay overnight.

The moon’s dim disk had climbed
up the empty mountain.

* The historical context of this poem is a war between the Han Chinese and
the Tibetan invaders. The children and grandchildren they try to recall didn’t
survive the war, for some reason, as the old men did.
**Li Yi 李益**

Li Yi was born in 748 into a family that took pride in their ancestor, Li Guang (?-116 BC), a famous general of the Western Han Dynasty (206 BC-25 AD). Li Yi’s father was also a general in the Tang army which, under the leadership of General Geshu Han, was winning victory after victory against the Tibetans and other northwestern peoples. It’s small wonder then that from his earliest years Li Yi showed a strong patriotic leaning. This was further fueled by the chaotic wars set off by the An-Shi Rebellion (755-762). Li started military training at the age of fifteen and wrote in a poem warning friends against laughing at him as the poet-son of a general (quoted in Bian Xiaoxuan and Qiao Changfu, “Li Yi,” in Lu Huijuan et al., eds, Zhongguo Lidai Zhuming Wenxuejia Zhuanping. Vol. 2, Jinan, Shandong Press of Education, 1983, p. 360. Translation mine). The first poem translated below, “A Frontier Song,” was probably inspired by his early training in the military.

When he was seventeen years old, the Tibetans invaded northwestern China, briefly occupying the capital city Chang’an. This changed his life. Fleeing the Tibetan occupation, he now left home to go to central China to study for the imperial examination. There his reputation as a poet grew. The second poem translated here, “Sent to Miao Fa and Sikong Shu...,” was written when he was twenty years old. His early militant patriotism seemed to have left no traces in the delicate imagination of the poet, who was hyper-sensitive to his environment, subtle in his sense of place, and careful about friendship.

At the age of twenty-two he passed the examination, but was not assigned any position until three years later. In the year 780, at the age of thirty-two, he started to work as a member of the staff of a general on the northern frontier. In this capacity he visited many sites in the far north, including strategic forts in what is now Ningxia and Inner Mongolia. He is best known as a mid-Tang poet of the frontier. The third poem translated here, “Listening to a Flute,” was written during this trip and is considered by some the best short poem of the mid-Tang. Comparing this poem with the one about his early military training, readers can find a much more sober, perhaps more mature, perception of frontier life. The castle that Li Yi wrote about lay between the modern cities of Baotou and Tuoketuo, Inner Mongolia, while Castle Ling, where the emperors of Tang accepted the surrender of the northern tribes, is located in what is now Lingwu County, in the Ningxia Hui Autonomous Region, about six hundred kilometers southwest of Baotou. By merging these two places, the poet dramatizes the price that common soldiers pay for the emperors’ brief moments of triumph.

In the year 800, the Tang court sent Li Yi on an official trip to the southeast. He wrote many poems about the sceneries along the Yangtze River. “The River Song on the Grand Canal” was written while traveling on the section of the canal known as River Bian, which went from Xingyang, now in Henan Province, to Xuyi, now in Jiangsu Province. This stretch of the canal was actually built under Emperor Yangdi of the Sui Dynasty (r. 604–618). Though the Grand Canal has been considered an engineering miracle, many thousands died during its construction. Li Yi’s critical tone of the emperor’s ambitious achievement based upon common people’s sacrifice is consistent with his critical tone in the poem about listening to a flute on a castle.
A Frontier Song

Troops train hard with discipline on the Northwest Frontier. From morning till dusk they drill and gallop by the Yellow River Bend.

After, they sing, loud and high. Their roaring songs make the wild geese fly. Their horses neigh in harmonious response from the tall grasses, luxuriant and green.

《塞下曲》（《全唐诗》卷283）

蕃州部落能结束，朝暮驰猎黄河曲。燕歌未断塞鸿飞，牧马群嘶边草绿。

Written to Miao Fa and Si Kongshu on the Occasion of Hearing the Wind Rustling through the Bamboo Twigs by the Window

I sit by a window, set my mind free. Evening wind surprises me with cool delight. It stirs bamboos and opens the door the same way my old friends used to do. It shakes the leaves and dew drops fall to moisten mosses on rocky steps. I wish it would advance farther, into my house, to sweep away the dust covering my green harp.

《竹窗闻风寄苗发司空曙》

微风惊暮坐，临牖思悠哉。开门复动竹，疑是故人来。时滴枝上露，稍沾阶下苔。何当一入幌，为拂绿琴埃。
Listening to a Flute on a Castle, Where Emperor Taizong Accepted the Barbarians’ Surrender

Beyond the walls of Castle Ling the moon illuminates the desert – white as snow, cold as frost. A reed flute – someone plays somewhere – keeps the soldiers awake, their eyes turned towards their home through the long night.

A River Song on the Grand Canal

The Grand Canal flows east into the boundless green of spring, the river a traveler doesn’t have the heart to view from the winding, endless dike. The wind stirs, the willow catkins dance as snow flakes in the air, over the palace rubble of the Sui Emperor who forced peasants to make a river.

Hearing the Geese on a Boat

In a long sleepless night I pulled myself up, surprised to see the sudden descent of autumn on my window – oh, the wind and waves! Two wild geese, a pair, took off with a splash. The stars, the moon, fill up the empty river.
Meng Jiao 孟郊

Meng Jiao’s ancestral home was in a town in northern Shandong Province, though the family had moved to Luoyang, Tang’s eastern capital in central China, a few generations before Meng Jiao was born. Having become a lower rank government official, Meng’s father had taken the immediate family with him to his office in Kunshan, now in Jiangsu Province, near the Yangtze Delta. It was in Kunshan that Meng Jiao was born, in the year 751. It was also in Kunshan that the father died, whereupon the widow moved Meng Jiao and his two brothers to Deqing, a town in northern Zhejiang Province, south of the Yangtze. In Deqing, Meng Jiao began to emerge as a child prodigy, both in poetry and scholarship. He was, however, unlucky in the imperial examinations and, despite many tries, did not pass until he was forty-six years old. Even after passing, he was not assigned any position for four years.

He probably wrote the first poem translated below in the course of his repeated failures at the official examination, showing disillusionment with the world of officialdom before he had had the opportunity to enter it. He admired the simple but healthy lifestyle of people in the mountains and felt upset by the stress of a life in pursuit of fame. He also traveled to the far northwest before he passed the examination, where he wrote the poem inviting his friend to go and appreciate the flowers rendered rare by the severe climate of the area.

Meng Jiao was finally assigned the position of county sheriff in Liyang County, in what is now Jiangsu Province. Though a minor position, it was just a few hundred kilometers from Deqing, where his mother still lived and so allowed him to serve both family and empire. But though a talented poet, Meng Jiao was a poor sheriff, who neglected his duties in pursuit of his poetic endeavors, spending most of his time wandering around a semi-wild place that a poet friend recommended to him:

About five li (one-and-a-half miles) south of the county seat, Gold Throwing Rapids, and eight li further south from there was the site of the ruined Pingling Castle. The site has a circumference of over a thousand yards, elevated three or four feet above the ground and by no means even. The vegetation there is luxuriant, with many tall and thick oak trees and green bamboo groves. Water has pooled in the lower parts of the site and in the deeper pools fish and turtles have made their home. This place is secluded and quiet, visited by no other people than wood choppers and anglers (Lu Huijuan, et al., eds., Zhongguo Lidai Zhuming Wenxuejia Pingzhua. Vol. 2, Jinan, Shandong Press of Education, 1983, p. 381. Translation mine).

Meng Jiao fell in love with this place; unlike Thoreau who built a hut in his favorite place by Walden Pond, Meng Jiao visited the semi-wild spot daily and wrote many poems there. However, because of his negligence of his duty, his superior had to hire a deputy to work for him, paying the deputy with half of Meng Jiao’s already meager salary. Unable to support himself with what he was paid, Meng Jiao soon resigned and moved back to Deqing to take care of his aging mother. One has reason to imagine that Meng Jiao wrote the “mountain man songs” during his visits of the ruins.

Meng Jiao died in 814, at the age of sixty-four, near Luoyang, where some of his family still lived.
Hiking the Zhongnan Mountains

The Zhongnan Mountains fill heaven and earth. The sun and moon rise behind the rocky ridge. At twilights the sun lingers on the jarring peaks. At mid-day the deep canyons are in eternal shade. A long wind strikes the pines, a harpist’s finger on strings. It makes pure sounds echoed by purified valleys.

Those who live here are naturally upright, always at ease though walking on perilous trails. Thinking of this I regret having studied books all my life, chased floating fame morning after morning.
Inviting a Friend to See Flowers
(I was in the far north then)

In the frontier of the far north
the spring is always starved –
you have to walk ten miles
before you see a single bloom.

Let’s start early and travel far
for dusty storms rise in the desert dusk

After the First Rain in Spring

It rained last night,
a brief moment
of heaven’s will
to wake up all things.

Who knows the will of heaven first?
In my empty yard,
weeds push each other,
standing up through dirt.
A Song Chanted by an Old Mountain Man

I plant the terrace plots up on the mountain top
I never walk the road in valleys of towns

I pull the ax from my belt
to chop off pine twigs
use my hand-cut gourd
to fetch water from springs

I ignore the power of words be they written or spoken
nor ever bothered to record the passing days or moons

Like a twisted and knotted tree
I have no use for the Greats
They leave me alone to complete my natural life in hills.

A Humble Hermit's Song

I drink but never get drunk –
four or five cups of cold spring.
I make merry – but quietly –
a harmonious tune on strings.

To temper my natural character
I rest peaceably among the clouds.
To cleanse my emotions and desires
I meditate on Dao in depth.

Unlike other scholars who fall in pursuit of power and fame
easy prey to greed and passion
I strive to become whole.
Not only do we not know the birth or death dates of Chang Jian, but from the Yuan Dynasty (1206–1368) his homeland was mistakenly identified as Chang'an, the capital city of Tang (Xin Wenfang, *Tang Caizi Zhuan*. Shanghai, the Press of Classical Literature, 1957, p. 22). This misinformation was corrected with excavation of a tombstone in Hebei Province in August 2006, on which was an inscription stating that Chang Jian and his clan lived in Xingtai, Hebei Province for generations (http://blog.sina.com.cn/s/blog_57036a6b0100fbu7.html). Chang Jian passed the imperial examination in 727, the same year as Wang Changling, a poet also included in this collection. Chang went on to work in the lower ranks of officialdom, serving for a few years as the sheriff of Xuyu County, now in Jiangsu Province. Since no poems Chang has left describe anything about the An-Shi Rebellions, it's reasonable to assume that he died before 755, the year the rebellions began.

Poshan Monastery 破山寺, originally known as Xingfu Monastery, was built during the Southern Qi Dynasty (479–502). Its name was changed to Poshan during the reign of Emperor Taizong (626–649). Chang Jian’s poem made the temple famous, and Mind-Cleansing Tarn 空心潭 is named from a line from the poem. The place is now a tourist hotspot, mostly owing to Chang Jian’s poetic genius.

Passing the examination in the same year, Chang Jian and Wang Changling became life-long friends. It’s probable that after retiring from his sheriff post, Chang Jian traveled northwest along the Yangtze River for about a hundred and fifty kilometers to visit the cottage where Wang Changling had lived in seclusion before he finally passed the examination at the age of thirty-seven. But when Chang Jian visited that cottage, Wang was no longer a hermit; he was serving at a low rank similar to that of Chang. That’s probably why, determined to live in seclusion, Chang Jian implicitly invited his friend Wang Changling to turn his back on officialdom as well and join him and the immortal cranes in the “West Mountain” in Ezhou, Hubei Province, about five hundred kilometers further west.

It seems that Chang Jian found the peaceful and leisurely lifestyle he had been looking for in the West Mountain. The poem of that title shows that he has merged his body with a small, leaf-like boat that helped connect him with the mighty stream, the long sky over the Yangtze, the egrets and geese on the sandbars, and the reeds and bulrushes along the banks.

In the last poem translated below, the Tang poet’s experiment with returning to nature was going through its ultimate test. Kongling Mountain, also known as Kongling Gorge or Kongling Bluff, is located sixty kilometers southwest of Xiangtan County seat and therefore about five hundred kilometers southwest of the West Mountain where Chang Jian lived in seclusion. The far south is the limit of Chang Jian’s environmental imagination and, when confronted with truly wild and unfamiliar peoples, the advocate of nature was frightened and resorted to ethnocentrism in order to cope with the unknown. Turning his back on the wild southwest he walked homeward, staff in hand. Though Chang Jian’s limitations were shared by some of the Tang poets who chose nature as an alternative to the empire, not all were as narrow-minded. The poet Du Fu saw the same place in a different light. In his poem “Mooring near the Banks at Kongling,” Du Fu admired the way the setting sun highlights the rugged cliffs, realizing that the green season of spring has no selfishness, for the brilliant sun lights up the remote corner of the central kingdom as it does elsewhere (Du Fu, “Mooring near the Banks at Kongling,” *Quan Tang Shi*. Vol 223, poem # 24; paraphrase mine).
In early morning when sun rays
gild the top of trees,
I walk into this ancient temple.
The bamboo-lined path leads me deep
into the grove
where flowers and leaves hide the simple
Zen room.

The mountain light pleases the birds.
Reflections in the tarn
empty my mind and heart.

Thousands of trees and bamboo stand in
silence,
letting me hear bell chimes echo in the
valley.

The creek, pure in its unknown depth,
led me far into the mountains to your old cottage,
where the only resident now is a lingering cloud.

Through pine needles, the moon cast its pure beams on the house.
The flowers you planted slept by the thatch-roofed pavilion.
Streaks of moss grew across the herbal garden.

I too have bade goodbye to the impetuous world
to befriend cranes and herons in mountains of the west.
The West Mountain

My body unites as one with the tiny boat, 
the sun merging with mountains in the west. 
I follow the shadows of the flying sails 
along the Long River* and the longer sky. 
In the remaining hours the clear stream collects all scenes 
along its banks, reflecting in sharp contrast 
evening beauties of hills and trees. 
Soon the sun falls lower, touching the bar of sand, 
illuminating the clouds that linger over the lake. 
When the woods become darker, showing the true 
colors of south, they close the gate at the castle 
that guards the river city on the bank. 

The wind from the north swirls sharply in the night, 
cleaning everything in the rotating sky. 
On a sandbar geese and herons fall asleep, 
sheltered by bulrushes and reeds. 
I play my harp alone to the shining stream. 
The moon dances on water to my beat. 
We entertain each other all night through, 
my coat moistened by the morning dew. 

*In China, the Yangtze is better known as the Long River.
In Response to Old Man Tian at Kongling Mountain

South of Dongting Lake
villages are unknown to local tribes.
They live in houses of yellow thatch
perched on tree-tops like nests of birds.
People are honest and simple here
as they were in remotest antiquity.
Cow-herds would sing barbarian ballads.
Wild elders would offer satirical songs.

I moor at the river-mouth and ask
for directions but I don’t know
a word of their gibbering dialect.
Then I meet Old Man Tian who too
is from the Central Kingdom. He says
people here grow no crops
nor distinguish the fertile from the barren
land.
The Yao barbarians hunt for food,
the River Wanderers boil the fish.

He too is a hunter, better than any locals,
offers me an elk, kept fresh in dewy
leaves:

“I respect you,” he says, “a man from the
Central Empire
and want to present the elk to you and
your beloved ones.”

With gratitude I leave the old man, and
turn
my back to the setting sun. I hear tigers
roar in woods,
mountains echo the wild commotion.
With good faith I could live with people
here in peace,
but talking to barbarians is beyond my
scope.
I can cleanse my heart with clear water.
I can quench my hunger with wild herbs.
But I have to turn my back to the setting
sun
over this place, staff in hand against the
howling winds.
Zhang Ji was born in 766 in Suzhou City, now in Jiangsu Province, then moved with his family a hundred and eighty kilometers northwest to the town of Wu, in what is now the County of He (Harmony County), Anhui Province. He went to Shandong to study the classics and there he met twenty-year-old poet Wang Jian, who became his life-long friend. They would thereafter continue to send poems in support of each other, in good years and in bad. I don't think it was by mere coincidence that Zhang didn't take the imperial examination until the year 799, at the age of thirty-three, in the same year that Wang Jian left his mountain life and became a secretary in the military.

Zhang Ji was friendly with many other poets of his time. The famous “chilly” poet Meng Jiao finally passed the imperial examination at the age of forty-six in the year 797, and, as he traveled by the County of He he visited Zhang Ji in Zhang’s river cottage by the Dock of Peach Blossoms (yet another allusion to the famous work of the fifth-century poet Tao Qian). There they wrote several poems and Meng Jiao later recommended Zhang Ji to the poet Han Yu. Zhang Ji would also become close friends with the famous younger poets Bai Juyi (Po Chü-i) and Yuan Zhen. The Dock of Peach Blossoms thereby became a well-known literary gathering place. Hundreds of years later, in the Song Dynasty, He Zhu wrote a poem in remembrance of this poetic meeting. And more than a thousand years after Zhang Ji, the Qing Dynasty writer Xiao Mu wrote this about that literary place:

walking out of the Grand West Gate of the county seat, we followed the stream for about two li (a li being about a third of a mile) and crossed a large bridge, which was called Peach Blossom Bridge. Walking scores of steps we came to open land of an acre or two, where peaches came into full bloom and hills rolled higher up. Next to the bridge lay the ruins of the Dock of Peach Blossoms... I tried to envision poets Zhang Ji and Meng Jiao, their smiling faces and their wine glasses, yet couldn’t get a clear picture (quoted in Luo Liantian, Tangdai Shi Wen Liu Jia Nianpu, Taipei, 1986, p. 167. Translation mine).

Zhang Ji was known as a realist and preferred the poetic form of ancient times to the more stylish lushi 律诗 (“regulated verse”) popular in the Tang. In his time, many poets celebrated the mountain man’s life, exploiting the structure of the Chinese character xian 仙 (immortals, gods) which is made up by combining the radical (the significant element of a Chinese character) for mountain 山 and the radical for man 人: immortal gods live in the mountains and people go to the mountains to get away from the sordid reality of the human world to achieve a more fulfilling life. In contrast to his contemporaries, Zhang often dwelled on the harsh life of the working people, especially those who live in the less fertile, mountainous areas to avoid heavy taxation. As Zhang shows in this poem, taxes followed people wherever they went. Critics commended the seeming lack of transition between the main body of the poem and the final two lines, for the conspicuous absence effectively dramatizes the gap between the have and the have-nots. It is interesting to notice that Henry David Thoreau celebrates a “natural” lifestyle by informing the reader that a part of his diet comes from berries and nuts; yet Zhang Ji’s mountain man eats acorns not because he prefers the natural diet but because his meager harvest was taken away by an unjust government. More than twelve centuries ago, Zhang Ji was already asking a question that now concerns twenty-first century environmentalists: can we really talk about environmental harmony without addressing the issues of social justice? In the next poem, Zhang Ji continues this theme by de-romanticizing the scholar’s fantasy of the pastoral life of a cowherd boy.
Zhang Ji’s family remained in their homeland for generations; after his death, they stopped entering officialdom and became full-time farmers until his great-grandson five generations down, who again took the examination and became a scholar-official. His great-grandson seven generations after him, Zhang Xiaoxiang, became a famous poet in the Song Dynasty.

《白鼍鸣》（《全唐诗》卷29）

天欲雨，有东风，南溪白鼍鸣窟中。
六月人家井无水，夜闻白鼍人尽起。

When White Alligators Bellow

No family in June of this year
has a well that’s not gone dry.

People get up in mid-night
on hearing loud and deep bellows –

Ah, relief!
The east wind is stirring.
The rains are coming.

《野老歌（一作山农词）》
（《全唐诗》382）

老农家贫在山住，耕种山田三四亩。
苗疏税多不得食，输入官仓化为土。
岁暮锄犁傍空室，呼儿登山收橡实。
西江贾客珠百斛，船中养犬长食肉。

A Mountain Peasant’s Song

An old peasant with a poor family
I live on the rocky terrace
cultivating my half-acre plot.

I pay taxes upon taxes with grain
leaving little for myself and mine.
They dump my grain into the Imperial Silos
to rot away like dirt.

Late in the year, by my empty house,
I still till my meager plot,
my sons sent to the mountain top
to collect acorns and nuts.

They say that the merchants on the West River
trade jewels by the bushel.
They feed their dogs in the boat
with choicest meat all year round.
An Ox-herd’s Song

To herd the oxen I walk many miles away from fields around the village where crops are growing thick and well.

At the lakeside hungry crows land on the back of my lead ox to peck at the spine – impossible for me to play on the field ridge.

I shoo the birds away to let oxen disperse. They disappear in the tall reeds on the marsh.

I know where they are Listening to the pale calves moo.

Love of Flowers

The beginning of spring is already late spring. It always is in mountains this deep. Late spring flowers are always sparse, especially so in mountains this deep.

Boys on the other side of the lake blow shrilly on reed leaves, I respond with three cracks of my whip, holler with all my might –

Oxen and calves behave yourselves. Make sure you graze the tender grass. I will tolerate no fight among you beasts. If you push each other with your horns The Emperor’s men will catch you and saw them off.

I don’t want to come again in another day to find petals scattered on the ground. I camp right here among the trees instead of going home for a night of sleep.
《山中酬人》（《全唐诗》卷386）

山中日暖春鸣鸠，逐水看花任意行。
向晚归来石窗下，苔蒲叶上见题名。

白张籍

《山中酬人》（《全唐诗》卷386）

山中日暖春鸣鸠，逐水看花任意行。
向晚归来石窗下，苔蒲叶上见题名。

Sent from the Mountain

Deep in the mountains
turtledoves coo in warm sunshine.
I view flowers along the river
wherever my fancy guides my feet.

Late in the evening
I finally get home, pleasantly surprised
to see your name on a bulrush leaf,*
attached to my stone window sill.

* Zhang Ji believes that bulrush has twelve joints in every inch of its stem, and the stems and leaves are longevity foods that keep a person’s face spotless and hair black. See Zhang Ji, poem #61, volume 382 in Quan Tang Shi (The Complete Tang Poems).

《山禽》（《全唐诗》卷386）

山禽毛如白练带，栖我庭前栗树枝。猕猴半夜来取栗，一双中林向月飞。

White Pheasants

A pair of mountain birds,
feathers whiter than a satin ribbon,
have made a home in the branches of the chestnut tree in my yard.

At midnight the rhesus monkeys come
to fetch their dinner from my trees.

They frighten the couple in their sleep –
the pheasants whir out of the twigs into the silver moon.
Wang Jian 王建

Wang Jian is an interesting anomaly among the Tang poets. Born in 766 into a clan that had been declining both in power and in number, he had no interest in joining the officialdom and held a general contempt for those who spent long years preparing for the imperial examinations in order to acquire a position in the government. In the year 783, a general in the army rebelled and took Chang’an. Just seventeen, Wang Jian now left his home in the fertile Guanzhong plains surrounding the capital and went east to Confucius’ homeland in Lu, now part of Shandong Province, to study with masters of the Chinese Classics. There, three years later, he met the young poet Zhang Ji, who “followed him around on Mount Que and along the River Zhang” in what is now Hebei Province (Quan Tang Shi. Vol. 385, Poem #25. Translation mine). Zhang became his life-long friend, sympathetic with both his poetic pursuit and his critical worldview. After about five years of study and travel, Wang Jian decided to search for an alternative to worldly pursuits, and for the decade between 789 and 799 in the mountains around the River Zhang he experimented with Daoist ways of achieving immortality through a disciplined life and a diet taken from legend. When a friend and fellow practitioner left the mountain to take the examination in the capital city, he “burned the thatched hut” they had shared and declared that he never again wanted to see that man, who, he believed, had betrayed their ideals (Quan Tang Shi. Vol. 297, Poem #22. Translation mine). It was during these years in the mountains that he wrote the first and second poems translated below. Unfortunately, at the end of his ten-year experiment, he ran out of money to support his life in voluntary poverty, and had to serve as a military secretary on the northern frontier so as to feed himself.

A couple of years after he joined the military, in 801, he moved to the far south, crossing the notorious Grand Yu Ridge to serve in the military staff there. On his way to Grand Yu Ridge, he stopped by Jingzhou on the mid-reach of the Yangtze River and wrote many poems reflecting pleasant sceneries on the southern bank of the mighty river, including the third poem translated below.

But Wang Jian’s poetic talent caught the attention of Hong Zheng, a marshal in charge of the northern frontier who happened to be a moderately talented poet himself, and invited Wang Jian back to the north. Wang was grateful for this opportunity to leave the “barbaric south” and willing to settle for the rest of his life on the bank of River Zhang in central China, where he and his friend Zhang Ji had spent their best years together. Ironically, at this moment Hong Zheng and another important official, Pei Du, recommended him to the emperor and he was promoted to the office of a county magistrate near the capital where Hot-Spring Palace was located. It was a lower-rank but important position from which he climbed up the official ladder and eventually ended up in a upper-middle rank position of Shanzhou Sima, the chief of staff for a general who guarded the key pass between the East Capital, Luoyang, and the West Capital, Chang-an. Wang retired from that position to his home area on the Guanzhong plains and wrote, among other things, Thirteen Poems about My New House on the Terrace.

I find it amusing to contemplate the limited power of voluntary poverty, and how the non-conforming Wang Jian was forced by what Thoreau called the “necessities of life” to give up his ideals and in the end join with the bureaucrats. But considering the circumstances under which he had left his home in Guanzhong, one may easily understand his disappointment with officialdom and its lack of ability to protect people and their homes. Could this be the reason why Wang Jian refused to take examinations but was willing to serve in the military?
Passing a Mountain Village in Rain

Behind the bamboo grove,
across the plank bridge,
at the end of the mountain path –
cocks crow to reveal
a handful of houses in misty rain.

Girls, sisters-in-law, holler back and forth to start on the road to silkworms selection, leaving the jasmine blossoms to the empty courtyard.

Mountain Dwelling

My hut is to the west of the waterfall.
A creek meanders under my thatched eaves.
I close the gate to keep in my yard elk and deer, my neighbors, my guests.
I open my kitchen and share my meals with ruffed mountain grouses.
I gather laurel blossoms when they’re full, let the orchids grow in their own wild patterns.
I open a path leading to the cave of immortality – to go farther from there I build stone steps around ancient pines.
Offering a Meal to a Buddhist Monk

I wash my hands extra clean to pick
for you tender blossoms of wisteria,
mix them with wheat flour,
adding warm spring water.

Then I make pancakes in a shed outside –
no smoke would come into the house
where I offer the meal to you with care.

I wrap the salted fish with bamboo leaves,
then take them out and pick the leaves off;
the fish’s green, having absorbed the bamboo fragrance.

I cut from my garden celeries, chives
with a fresh, purple tint, toss them in a bowl,
offer the meal simple and clean.

After you eat, over a cup of ginger tea,
I beg of you to bless me more often
with your sage company.
Unlike the ancient hermits
I have no mountain house
where I can return.

I claim a plot on the terrace
to build a humble cottage.

In wilderness vines
grow ever so slowly,
old plum trees have
few flowers on their twigs.

With terrace clay I build
an earthen fireplace.
It helps feed my family
with cooked herbs and roots.

My only remaining wish
is how my brothers,
scattered over the country,
would come here to live
with me.

We’ll make a home on this land
in mutual dependence.
**Thirteen Poems about My New House on the Terrace**

**No. 2**

Surrounded by young elms and willows, my house stands without any neighbors near or far.

My concerns grow into sadness when one of the few family members falls ill.

To have this lone farm to live in poverty is my choice, my good fortune.

My wish is to be able to feed the ox until he’s full.

My firewood servant works hard to keep the house and my heart warm.

My worry is how to feed and clothe my family and those who work for me.

In what ways can I free my heart and mind from the needs of this body?
**A Young Pine**

A tiny sapling –
not three feet high –
grows not a single branch
straight.

I spend my leisure time
standing by its side.
I watch a lot.
It grows little.

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**Fruits in My Orchard**

Incessant rains
make my pears
and apples sick.
No tree bears more
than a hand can count.

My young son examines
the trees going out,
re-examines them coming in.
Of the few sickly fruits
half are broken
by the pecking birds.
Yu Hu

Yu Hu probably grew up in what is now eastern Hebei Province. It is unknown when he was born or when he died, but he wrote the bulk of his poetry between 766 and 804. In his early years he studied under a well-known scholar in Shandong Province, and Fan Ze was a fellow student. It seems that Yu Hu never took the imperial examination and therefore had no regular access to officialdom. However, his schoolmate Fan Ze later became a high ranking official – the head of an important government department – and was for a few years in charge of the fertile area of the mid-Yangtze. It was Fan Ze who invited Yu Hu to work in his staff, but when Fan was transferred to another strategically important area, Yu Hu didn’t follow him to the new office, choosing instead to retire to semi-poverty in his mountain cottage between the Han and the Yangtze Rivers.

Yu Hu spent most his life living in the mountains of Hanyang, on the north bank of River Han. There he probably worked in the field himself at least on a part-time basis – thus his poetic familiarity with farm work. Yu lived near his contemporary poet Zhang Ji and they were well acquainted. Both wrote poems about a woman who did not eat food for years yet lived a healthy, if not physically strong, life. Perhaps because neither Zhang Ji nor Yu Hu was well off, they were fascinated by the possibility of being free of food. In Yu Hu’s poem, however, he is resigned to the fact that a supernatural ability to live independent of food is something one is born with, or not. When Yu Hu died, Zhang Ji came to his tomb to bid him goodbye and wrote a poem, “Weeping for the Loss of Yu Hu,” in which he tells Yu’s family that when Zhang Ji began to write poetry, Yu Hu was the only poet who appreciated his effort and wrote poems in response to encourage him. According to this poem, when Yu Hu died, farmers dropped their ploughs in the field and firewood in their kitchen to come to his funeral. According to Zhang Ji, the poet “feels the Grand Empire becomes suddenly poor because of the loss of such a free mind in the green mountains” (Quan Tang Shi. Vol. 383, poem #10. Translation mine). With twenty-first-century hindsight, we can see that Yu Hu was able to keep his mind free because he didn’t get himself too involved in the imperial ideology dominating the officialdom; after a brief period of service in the staff of an old friend, he left the official world to face what Thoreau called the essentials of life. The price Yu Hu paid was living on the brink of poverty for many years. His life and poetry reveal an amazing fact: people who live in or near poverty still love to share with their neighbors, be they humans, birds, or rhesus monkeys.

《买山吟》（《全唐诗卷 310》）

买得幽山属汉阳，槿篱疏处种桄榔。
唯有猕猴来往熟，弄人抛果满书堂。

Purchasing a Mountain Lot

I bought a small hill in trees
on the northern bank of River Han.
I used wild rose bushes as a fence
planting sugar-palms in its gaps.

My visitors are few – they soon get too familiar.
The rhesus monkeys tease my children,
throw fruits all over my hall of books.
My Studio by the South Creek

I built a thatched hut a long time ago
in mountains so deep that it needs no door.
Around the well weeds grow rampant
like tassels dangling over the well bricks.
When flowers fall they cover the base of the fence
which offers no barrier for mother birds –
they lead their chicks into my yard for food.
Apes with their young climb up the cliff
along vines that crawl up the wall of my house.
A mysterious stranger once told me:
your hut resembles a house by Peach Blossom Creek.*

* For the legend of Peach Blossom Creek, please see the note to Wang Wei
and his poem of that title – drawing upon the fifth century Tao Qian –
included in this selection.

Planting a Tree

I plant a sapling and know it’s something
good,
something neighbors share in the east and
west.
What a wild man like me would love to
have
is the sense of home my old hut used to
afford
in my mountain abode many springs ago.

I know that I’ll be old before the tree is
grown.
I’d like to watch it when my hair turns
white,
watch my neighbors pick twigs from the
tree
to kindle the supper fire in their house.
Han Yu (768–824) was born in Heyang, now Meng County, Henan Province, to a family distinguished for the high positions they had held in various dynasties in Chinese history. One of his early ancestors was a lord during the Western Han (202 BC–9 AD); his great-great-grandfather six generations before had been the chief officer in charge of a southern prefecture, a position usually held by a prince; when his father was in charge of Wuchang County, all the lower rank officers and local rich and powerful families stood in awe of their strict, just, and honest magistrate. As for Han Yu himself, in 801, in response to a severe drought around the capital, he made a plea to the emperor for a deduction of taxes, and thereby offended higher officials who took care that he was demoted to magistrate of Yangshan County in the southern “barbarian” regions of China. This demotion was actually an exile, as we see in a poem written to Han Yu by a friend and fellow official demoted to the same area, who in the poem describes his fear of even getting out of his bed in the official residence because of the snakes, not to mention going out the door into the often-deadly disease-laden humidity. In response to that poem, Han Yu wrote a poem-letter, which, when read in juxtaposition with his poem “Rocky Mountain,” reveals an ambivalence towards nature and court generally shared by scholars, poets, and officials of his time. But despite his unpleasant experience in the officialdom, he achieved amazing feats: when demoted to Chaozhou in the far south, he freed the slaves, founded schools, and built irrigation-drainage systems; in 822, he went without any guards to the headquarters of a general plotting a rebellion and convinced the agitated army to give up their plan. When he died, he was given the title Lord of Culture.

Han Yu’s poetic form, considered “original” by his contemporaries but also somewhat “peculiar,” was especially influential to the poets of the next major dynasty, the Song (960–1279). The two poems selected here, however, were written in the well-established jueju 绝句 form, short lyrical poems of four lines with seven or five syllables in each line. The first one is a satire of Princess Taiping, the favorite daughter of Empress Wu Zetian and aunt to the crown prince who later became Emperor Xuanzong. Love of the outdoors is regarded in the Chinese cultural tradition as a noble and wise emotion, but Han sees a greed in the Princess’s love of the spring landscape, a desire to wall it off within her own private garden. Han Yu also loved nature, but in contrast to Taiping, found pleasure in experiencing rather than possessing it. As a busy official, he couldn’t always find time to go on excursions like the one that provided him with subject matter for his famous poem “Rocky Mountain.” And so he buried an earthen bowl in the ground to create a miniature lake. With a few frogs, fish, and lotus shoots in it, the bowl offered him a microcosm, containing plants, animals, insects, rains, and stars. For the twenty-first-century nine-to-fiver too busy to enjoy “grand nature,” Han Yu’s idea of the “small nature” could be a pleasant substitute, playing a similar role as did Thoreau’s hut and Leopold’s sandy farm.
Trip On A Rocky Mountain

Among the craggy rocks the narrow path is hard to see. Following it with stubbornness
I finally arrive at the temple at dusk.
Bats begin to dart in evening flight.
Ascending stairs to the hall, I’m pleased to see
banana leaves and jasmine buds fattened by the new rain.

A monk receives me. In torchlight he shows
a treasure on the wall – he rightly praises the frescoes of Buddha, something few have seen.

To quell my hunger he prepares a meal of brown rice and cabbage grown wild.
He sweeps the mat and makes a bed for me.

The moon beyond the ridge rises soon, and sends in its light through the open door.
Its silver rays keep me awake until all the insects cease to chirp.

I leave in morning mist, alone, unable to see the path. I wander up and down. The sun rises to paint the mountains red, aglow against the winding azure streams.

Several times I see oaks and pines – gigantic girth that take ten men to hold.
I step bare-foot on slippery boulders to cross the roaring stream, inspired by torrent force and the wind that tugs my shirt.

A life like this indeed is pleasant.
Why do we enslave our hearts and minds to men of power?

I ask my best friends, two or three: can’t we return to nature before we grow too old?
Pheasant with an Arrow

They start the fire to chase the birds from the plain that's quiet as death. Pheasants fly out of burning woods to land again in fear of circling hawks. The general bids his men to hold their bows and arrows as he pleases.

Then the general lifts his hand. The men surround the prey and shoot a hundred deadly barbs. A bird is hurled a hundred feet by missiles shot into the sky.

Scarlet feathers scatter — a rainbow falling on hunting horses. The general laughs among his men, The men praise their great lord for the subtle arrangement of his ambush strategy.

Visiting the Mountain Villa of Princess Taiping

The great princess in her great past wanted to possess the whole spring. She built pavilions on terraces higher than the castles on city walls.

The traveler wanted to know how many flowers were out there between the city and the South Mountain. Every single one belonged to Her Highness alone.
Five Poems on a Washbowl Pond,
No. 1

An old man I’m really a boy at heart.
Burying a washbowl in my yard,
I fill it with water to make a pond.

Frogs make their home there and chant all
night,
the same chant I heard when I was a
fishing child.

No. 2

They say a bowl of water doesn’t make a
pond
until I plant a single lotus shoot.
It soon sends up discs of leaves.

From now on, gentlemen, you come here
whenever it rains, to listen to drops on
leaves –
a hundred little drums.

No. 3

The water in bowl-pond is so clear in the
morning.
It doubles the nameless bugs on its
surface.
The insects suddenly disappear in air
to reveal the fish swimming in rows.

No. 4

The earthen bowl’s so small, you say,
that it can’t make a decent pond.

Frogs know this better than you, Sir –
they meet and mate here at mid-night
croaking louder than any sage.

No. 5

The shining water in my bowl-pond
shares the blue of the shining sky.

I send tidal waves to its banks
by adding three bottles of water.

I can’t wait to count the stars
held in the pond when the moon
disappears behind a passing cloud.
Pei Du was one of the most successful bureaucrats among Tang poets and because of that his life is well documented in official history. He was born in the year 765 and died on the fourth day of the third month (lunar calendar) of 839. He grew up in Wenxi, now a county in Shanxi Province, and passed the imperial examination in 790. From then on, his career was mostly an upward swing. In seven years he became the prime minister of the empire and an army marshal in charge of bringing under control the upheavals in the area west of the Huai River. It’s interesting that a politician with military experience was also a poet passionate about nature. His friend and fellow poet Han Yu was with him during the Huai River Campaign and wrote a poem when they passed Nüji Mountain ninety kilometers southwest of Luoyang. In that poem Han Yu asked the marshal to take his officers, Han included, on a hike after their sure triumph on the west bank of Huai River (see Han Yu in Quan Tang Shi. Vol. 344, poem #14). In another poem, Han Yu praised the artificial rockery in Pei’s garden and the prime minister’s genuine love for mountains:

The minister really loves mountains so  
he watches them from morning until eve.  
It’s not enough just keep them in the eyes –  
he wants to experience the rocks with feet.  
(Quan Tang Shi. Vol. 342, poem #21. Translation mine.)

As a powerful politician, Pei Du had his enemies, one of whom was fellow poet Yuan Zhen. At the peak of his career, Yuan Zhen was able to remove Pei Du from the position of prime minister. Nevertheless, Pei Du was able to remain a good friend to Yuan Zhen’s best friend, Bai Juyi. As witnessed in the crane poem below, Pei Du and Bai Juyi were good friends in their years of retirement.

《白二十事郎有双鶴留在洛下予西园多野水长松…请之》  
(《全唐诗》卷335)

闻君有双鶴，羁旅洛城东。  
未放归仙去，何如乞老翁。  
且将临野水，莫闭在樊笼。  
好是长鸣处，西园白露中。

Undersecretary Bai Has Two Cranes in Luoyang And My West Garden Has Plenty of Wild Water as Well as Tall Pine Trees,  
So I Write This Poem to Ask Him for the Cranes

I heard that you keep two cranes,  
in your garden east of the capital.  
Since you haven’t set them free  
to join their real companions,  
the legendary immortals,  
why don’t you let this old man  
beg you for their adoption?  
Don’t shut them in your cages.  
Let them live by the wild water  
in my West Garden.  
Let their extended honk  
shake the white dew off my plants.
My Dwelling on the Creek

The path to my gate overlooks the creek.
My thatched roof is tall as the top of the pines.
No worldly dust reaches my window.
Water fowl honk to break the silence.

A Stroll by the Waterside

Ah, my body feels so light!
Where am I, in this leisurely mood,
with my official gown taken off?

I'm strolling by the pond.
Gulls and herons seem to share my inner peace—
they come closer to enjoy my company.

Pei Du 裴度

《溪居》（《全唐诗》卷 335）

门径俯清溪，茅檐古木齐。
红尘飘不到，时有水禽啼。

《傍水闲行》（《全唐诗》卷 335）

闲馀何处觉身轻，暂脱朝衣傍水行。
鸥鸟亦知人意静，故来相近不相惊。
Liu Zongyuan 柳宗元

Liu Zongyuan’s ancestors lived for many generations on the northern frontier, in Yuxiang township, in what is now Yongji County, Shanxi Province, on the northeast bank at the great bend of Yellow River (Wu Wenzhi, *Liu Zongyuan Pingzhuan*. Zhonghua Press, Beijing, 1962, p. 7). But as Liu wrote in an essay, although the Great River that flowed by Yongji had inspired many scholars and poets, as did the close-by Zhongtiao Mountains, he himself had never been to his family’s frontier homeland (see *Liu Zongyuan Ji*. Beijing, Zhonghua Press, 1979, p. 606. My paraphrasing). Liu Zongyuan himself was born in the great metropolis of Chang’an, in the year 773, while his father served the empire in a low-ranking post on the south bank of the Yangtze. His grandmother raised and educated him in the family garden, a few acres that provided them with fruits and vegetables.

In the year 793, when he was twenty years old, Liu Zongyan passed the imperial examination together with his best friend Liu Yuxi. Three years later he was appointed to be an editor in the Imperial Secretariat, and in 801 was promoted to the position of the County Sheriff in Lantian County near the capital. Two years later he became an imperial inspector, an internal-affairs post of relatively low rank but a great deal of power. Idealistic in politics, he hoped to help revive the aging empire. He was promoted to the position of undersecretary of an important ministry in the first month of 805, yet his power made him as many enemies as friends and in the ninth month of the same year he was demoted to Yongzhou, a remote county in what is now southern Hunan Province, next to Guangdong Province and the Guangxi Zhuang Autonomous Region, a region of “barbarian” climate and landscape. At the beginning of his service in Yongzhou, he lived in a Buddhist temple; after he built a house for the family, it burnt down a couple of times. His life in Yongzhou was not easy. After four years or so, he apparently developed a case of rheumatoid arthritis so severe that he described himself in a poem as unable to walk to the gate of his courtyard, even with the help of a walking stick. Despite pressure from the court he would not change his political position, instead turning his interest from politics to nature. After ten years in Yongzhou, Liu Zongyuan was further demoted to Liuzhou, in what is now Guangxi Zhuang Autonomous Region. There he helped local people drill wells and freed indentured slaves by helping them pay off their debts. He died in Liuzhou in 819. In a short life of forty-six years, he wrote over six hundred excellent pieces of prose and poetry.

The poems translated here were written during his demotion in the south. The first one demonstrates a strong case of what Lawrence Buell calls the “aesthetics of relinquishment.” As Liu wrote in a letter to a friend in Sichuan, he was so sick that when he stood up his knees trembled and when he sat down he couldn’t feel his legs. He was nevertheless unwilling to cut a few sticks from a rare tree whose nature and name he loved. The second poem shows how he set up an example for the local people to learn and love a tree to which they had been indifferent. That kind of teaching, Liu admits, is not easy, yet he is happy for having succeeded in sharing that kind happiness, regardless of its difficulty. The last poem is a fine example of the tradition of *fangshengshi* 放生诗, or poems about setting captured animals free. A poem by his contemporary Lü Wen about freeing a goose includes explanation of the reasoning in the human’s mind. Liu’s poem, on the other hand, tries to imagine how the francolin – a Southern Asian partridge – feels at the moment of regaining its freedom. He also criticizes the scheming men who train birds to be live decoys in order to capture more birds of the same kind, which were known for their fat, sweet meat. In this sense, Liu is more humane than Lü. What he didn’t know, however, is that in general, animals enjoy a longer lifespan in captivity than in the wild. Is that why a bird is willing to be turned into a lure? What can we make of Liu’s moral judgment on the bird as well as man?
**My Dwelling on the Creek**

The burden of keeping my rank has long bent my back.

In secret I congratulate myself for demotion to the barbarian South.

Like a genteel hermit of the woods, I enjoy freedom and leisure, and lean against my neighbor’s garden fence.

Tonight I plan to hoe the plot by the rocky, gurgling stream. At dawn I’ll till the dewy field.

I come and go but see no “civilized” man. I feel free to sing loud and long to the azure sky of the South.

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**Passing a Deserted Village in the South Valley Early in an Autumnal Morning**

I get up early in the morning and walk through a secluded valley in the chilly frosts of late fall.

The board bridge over the creek is covered with yellow leaves. The path leads to a village peopled by ancient trees.

The stream cuts through the ville disappears in a deep ravine, on the edge of which cold chrysanthemums, a few sparse rows, in seclusion, stand still.

I thought I had long been freed from the scheming tricks of society – why does my presence here disrupts this elk or that deer?
River Snow

In hundreds of surrounding mountains
– not a flying bird to see.

On thousands of winding trails
– not a footprint to show.

I, an old man,
in bamboo hat and rush cape,

fish alone
on the river of floating snow.

Planting a “Soul-Longevity” Tree

Your white blossoms reflected in the cold
tarn
you soothe me with a matching wild mood.

I go and ask the elders –
they tell me of your propitious name.

Tricks in politics have frustrated me.
Exile away from the court
has aged my body and soul.
I’d cut no branch from you,
as ancient books suggest,
to make a walking stick.

I transplant a single sapling
to the plot near my house.
As the soft thing starts to grow
it develops hard, symmetrical joints.
When it blooms its pistils compete
with stamens –
a contest, a beauty-show.

I limp and hobble around it
never feeling tired, my steps
“springier” and lighter than before.

What idiot would cut a tree dead
and use the sticks to help himself walk?
Transplanting from Hengyang a Dozen Laurel Trees to My Study in Lingling

Demoted to the southern frontier
I wander by the clear River Xiang
that winds its way around
the spirit of South Mountain.

In the morning I step on the bank,
frost on bulrushes reflecting the sun.
I push my way through the jungle
to find a single laurel by the path.
Its girth barely a handful, how
did it survive the ax and fire?

I hate to see such a noble tree
left by the side of a trail.
How can I leave it here
in deep, barbarian hills?

So I fill a bamboo basket
with the soil at its root
to transplant it near
my hut of scholarship.
I hope some day the phoenix
would nest among its fragrant branches.

The Daoist heaven may be far away,
yet the philosophy of Nature can be
learned
in one rain.
So southerners begin to value laurels
as they see me transplant it with care.

The laurels may have feelings of their own.
They hardly communicate with men.
After all that I do and say
I might in vain have tried to share
the love from my beating heart.
Setting Free a Francolin

In the jungles of the southern wild
lives a bird known for its fat meat.
Chuck, chuck it sings in trees;
People say it's calling its own name.

One is captured by a man.
He trained the bird to be a decoy.
Now it's well fed and thinks of none
but himself, satisfied in the cage.
It obeys the man and lures fellow birds
into a hidden trap where their feathers break
as they struggle, frightened of the kitchen smoke,
of spice bottles beside the boiling pot.
Eager is the cook who looks left right.

I've heard that the King of Qi State
took pity and let go the trembling cows,
and the Lord of Zhao State
who set the turtle-dove free.
They both were lofty and powerful,
yet they both seem to understand those in distress.
Now on exile thousands of miles away from power,
how can I afford to be callous to the bird?

I break the cage. He spreads the wings:
far away he should fly, never turn around
in response to songs of fellow partridges.
Liu Yuxi 刘禹锡

Liu Yuxi was born in 772, the same year in which Bai Juyi and Lü Wen were born. To help readers put the lives of Tang poets into perspective, we can see 772 as ten years after Li Bai had died and two years after the death of Du Fu, when Han Yu was five years old and Meng Jiao twenty-two. Unlike his fellow poets, Liu Yuxi found his life important enough to justify an autobiography, in which he traced his ancestry to Prince Zhongshan of the Han Dynasty (202 BC–AD 220). Included in the autobiography is an account of Liu Yuxi’s seventh-generation great-grandfather, who had settled the family in the northern suburbs of Luoyang.

Liu Yuxi was a sickly child – he remembered well when, as a five-year-old, he was taken by his nurse to the witch-doctors to undergo painful therapy. At the age of seventeen, in order to protect himself from such painful and questionable treatment, he started to study Chinese herbal medicine, which he later prescribed for himself. In 792 he went to Chang’an to take the imperial examination. Passing at the first try he made a moderate reputation for himself, and became friendly with Liu Zongyuan – who passed the exam in the same year – and other poets in the capital city. After spending a short term with his father back at the ancestral home near Luoyang, he was appointed to be an editor of the imperial library. With Liu Zongyan he became involved in politics and in 803 was promoted by the prime minister, Wang Shuwen, to the low-rank but high-power position of Imperial Inspector. In the same month, however, he was with Liu Zongyan demoted and banished to the far south: Liu Zongyuan to Yongzhou, Liu Yuxi even further south to Lianzhou. While crossing the Yangtze, however, Liu Yuxi received a new order changing his place of demotion to Langzhou, on the west bank of the famous Dongting Lake, much closer to home and two hundred kilometers north of Yongzhou where his unfortunate friend Liu Zongyuan had been sent.

Liu Yuxi seemed to have a more positive attitude towards his demotion than Liu Zongyan, during that period learning many local folk songs on which he based new songs of his own, of which the “Bamboo Twig Song” translated below is a good example. His positive attitude is also shown in his poem praising autumn, a season symbolic of decay and death for many of his contemporary poets. For him, however, autumn inspired a feeling of soaring high with the cranes.

While Liu Zongyuan died in his place of demotion, Liu Yuxi survived and in the end was called back to the court. He gradually climbed to higher and more powerful positions, eventually retiring from a position as head of an important ministry in Luoyang, Tang’s eastern capital and his own hometown. He wrote a medicine book – Chuan Xin Fang (Prescriptions That You Can Believe and Distribute) – and many poems in correspondence with Bai Juyi during his retired years. Liu Yuxi died in 842, at the age of seventy (see Luo Liantian, Tangdai Shiwen Liujia Nianpu. Taipei, Xuehai Press, 1986, pp. 257–462).
Liu Yuxi 刘禹锡

《春日寄杨八唐州二首 其一》
(《全唐诗》3 5 5)
淮西春草长，淮水透遥光。
燕入新村落，人耕旧战场。
可怜行春守，立马看斜桑。

Sent to Yang the Eighth

On the west bank of the River Huai
the grass grows long and green,
through which, from time to time, I see
The Huai River winds and shines in spring.

The peasants have started to till the field —
battle field of the recent war.
The swallows have returned with people
to build their nests in new villages.

I, the magistrate of the prefecture,
have no power to enforce the seasons.*
I only sit on the back of my horse
to watch the shadow of the mulberry trees
grow dark, slant, and long.

* The main job of an imperial official is to make sure that farmers do their work according to what the seasons dictate.

A Bamboo Twig Song

On terraces beyond terraces, peach
and plum blossoms mix with clouds
and breakfast’s smoke from every house.

Girls wearing silver bracelets and gold hairpins come to river for their morning wash.

Boys with swords and round bamboo hats ascend the hills to slash and burn.
In ashes, they till the fields.

《竹枝词九首 其九》
(《全唐诗》卷 3 6 5)
山上层层桃李花，
云间烟火是人家。
银釭金钗来负水，
长刀短笠去烧畲。
Mourning Liu Zongyuan

Never stopping yet never in a hurry
flows the Southern Spring.

Your thatch-roofed hut,
now absent of its master,
still houses the swallow couples.

Through the curtain I see only weeds
rampant in the yard.

The mountain pomegranate blooms
as it did in olden days.
Lu Wen 吕温

Lu Wen was Liu Zongyuan’s cousin, one year older than his kinsman. Like Liu, his junwang - the place where his family was well known - was also the frontier district of Yongji County, in Shanxi, but also like Liu, Lü Wen never actually lived in that area. Born in 771, he was educated in the Luoyang suburbs. Taking the provincial examination there, in 794, he scored at the top of the class. It would, however, be four years before he went to Chang’an to take the highest level imperial exam, because his father was in charge of the tests during that time, raising understandable concerns of “conflict of interest.” Indeed, Lü Wen and his three younger brothers were named after the four important Confucian virtues: Wen means “warm” and “mild”; his brother Gong’s name means “respectful”; Jian means “thrifty”; while Rang means “willing to yield to others what is rightly theirs.” Ezra Pound would have made a good case with the idea of “virtuous rulers,” for the four brothers of the Lü family all became government officials and some at quite high ranks. Lü Wen himself was moderately successful as an official and was promoted by Prime Minister Wang Shuwen, the same powerful man who supported Lü’s cousin Liu Zongyuan. In 804, Lü Wen was appointed an emissary to Tibet, where he served for more than a year. When he returned to China, however, Wang Shuwen was out of power. In 808, Lü Wen was demoted and banished to the “barbarian south,” in Daozhou, Hunan Province, even farther south than his cousin Liu Zongyuan. In 810, he was transferred to Hengzhou, still in Hunan, but somewhat closer to home - three hundred kilometers north of Daozhou. He died in Hengzhou in the next year.

The poem translated here was written during his banishment in Daozhou. Southern Hunan is on the north slope of the famous Grand Yu Ridge, which demarcates the southern boundary of the Tang poetic imagination. Daozhou, where Lü Wen was sent, and Yongzhou, to which Liu Zongyuan was banished, were inhabited by minority tribes, regarded as barbarians by the Chinese. That’s why Liu Zongyuan felt extremely out of place living there, although he loved the beautiful mountains and rivers. Lü Wen, as his name suggests, was a “mild” fellow and dealt with his frustrating life at Daozhou in a mild way: he set a goose free so it could fly back north to its homeland and thus acquire a temporary relief from homesickness. His lack of “appetite for a roasted friend” seems to prove that humor worked for the poet in distress.
Setting Free a Goose on the Northern Lake

I'm no calligrapher
who sees the neck of a swan
as a graceful model for his brush.

You're no swan,
who honks and lifts its head
with elegant pride.

What I try to achieve
is to help you avoid the roaring fire,
and let you swim quietly
on this clear lake.

My motive is homely, nothing profound –
since I've known you alive,
I've no appetite for a roasted friend.

You of course can fly away
but beware of the trap
covered with a handful of grain.

我非好鹅癖，尔乏鸣雁姿。
安得免沸鼎，澹然游清池。
见生不忍食，深情固在斯。
能自远飞去，无念稻粱为。
It is unknown when Lu Tong was born or when exactly he died. Scholars recently abandoned an incorrect earlier consensus that he died in 835; instead, they now tend to agree that he probably lived into his late forties and died either in 812 or 813 (Fu Xuancong, *Tang Caizi Zhuan Jiaojian*. Zhonghua Press, Beijing, 1999, Vol. 2, p. 271). He grew up in central China, near Luoyang in northern Henan. It is said that his family was poor and when he lived in Luoyang all he could afford to rent was a few shabby rooms, with no furniture but with a great heap of books piled to the ceiling. He never took the imperial exam. Instead, he lived an obscure life in the Shaoshi Mountains near Luoyang, or at times within the city itself. Known for his “strange” poetic style, he became friendly with the famous poet Han Yu, whose style contemporaries also regarded as peculiar.

Han Yu wrote several poems about Lu Tong, and the two exchanged poems as letters, a popular practice in their time (the exchange of poetic letters between Bai Juyi and Yuan Zhen itself becoming an important subject for research on Tang poetry). I don’t think Lu Tong was really as poor as claimed, or that he was a scholar-farmer who really worked in the fields, as seems to have been the case with Ding Xianzhi and Zu Yong. Describing his friend’s “poverty,” Han Yu said Lu could afford only two old servants: an elderly woman with no teeth or shoes, and an old man known for his long beard and bare, cap-less head. Han Yu did find it necessary to send Lu some rice from time to time.

Lu Tong seemed to be a very kind and fair man. He was taken advantage of by local bullies, who threatened his family and tried to steal from him. It happened that Han Yu was the county magistrate of Lu Tong’s town, and when Lu’s servant reported the mistreatment to Han, he made plans to protect his friend by punishing the bullies in the market place, in a manner both public and severe. Lu Tong, however, talked Han out of it by suggesting that those people, though annoying, did not deserve such severe punishment. This kind nature of Lu Tong is best shown in the three poems translated below. In our time, we can more readily appreciate his effort of trying to understand the egrets from the “birdy” perspective and his rather tolerant attitude towards fish, magpies, and apes.

Because he never served the empire, neither *The Book of Tang* nor *The New Book of Tang* has his biography. He is remembered only by his poems and his friendship with a few of his contemporary poets.
《观放鱼歌》（《全唐诗》卷387）

常州贤刺史，从谏议大夫除。
天地好生物，刺史性与天地俱。
见山客，狎鱼鸟。坐山客，北亭湖。
命舟人，驾舫子，漾漾荡荡。
酒兴引行处，正见漁人鱼。
刺史密会山客意，复念网罗婴无辜。
忽脱身上殷绯袍，尽买罟櫵尽有无。
鳗鱧鲇鱦鳅，涎恶最顽愚。
蹲舫见幽凤，质干稍高流。
时白喷雪鲫鲤，此辈肥鲜为绝尤。
老鲤变化颇神异，三十六鳞如抹朱。
水苞泓窟有蛟鼋，饵非龙饵唯无鲈。
丛杂百千头，性命悬须臾。
天心应刺史，刺史尽活诸。
一一投深泉，跳脱不复拘。
得水竞腾突，动作诡怪殊。
或透藻而出，或破浪而趋。
或掉尾子子，或奋鬣愉愉。
或如鸥掷梭，或如蛇衔珠。
四散渐不见，岛屿徒萦纡。
鰨鰰鰤鰡鰩，喜观争叫呼。
小虾亦相庆，绕岸摇其须。
乃知贪生不独顽痴夫。
可怜百千命，几为中肠脍。
若养圣贤真，大烹龙髓敢惜乎。
苦痛如今人，尽是鱼食鱼。
族类恣饮啖，强力无亲疏。
明月刺史心，不欲与物相欺诬。
岸虫两与命，无意杀此活彼用贼徒。
亦忆清江使，横遭乎余且。
圣神七十粒，不及泥中鳅。
哀哉托非贤，五脏生冤仇。
若当刺史时，圣物保不囚。
不疑且不卜，二子安能识。
二子倘故譊，吾知心受诛。
礼重一草木，易封称中孚。
又曰钓不纲，又曰远庖厨。
故仁人用心，刺史尽合符。
昔鲁公观棠丘，
遂被孔子贬而书。
今刺史好生，德洽民心，谁为刺史一褒誉。
刺史自上来，德风如草铺。
衣冠兴废礼，百姓减暴租。
豪猾不豪猾，鳣孤不鳣孤。
开古孟渎三十里，四千九泥坑为膏腴，刺史视之若瓦。
讼庭雀噪坐不得，湖上拔茭棱菜。
胜业庄中二桑门，时时对坐谈真如。
因说十干天子事，福力当与刺史俱。
天雨曼陀花深没膝，四千九真珠珊瑚堆高楼。
此中怪特不可会，但慕刺史仁有馀。
刺史敕左右兼小家奴，慎勿背我沉毒钩。
念鱼承奉刺史仁，深僻处，远远游。
刺史官职小，教化未能敷。
第一莫近人，恶人唯口腹。
第一莫出境，四境多矰罝。
重伤刺史心，表尔微贱躯。
Composed upon Watching the Magistrate
Of Chang Prefecture Set Fish Free

Once the Emperor’s adviser,
He’s now the Magistrate of Chang Prefecture.
Heaven and earth love living things,
the magistrate by nature
reflects the virtue of both.

The magistrate invited me, a wild man from mountains,
to be his guest in the pavilion on the North Lake.
Having ordered his men to load
the boat with sweet rice wine,
he asked them to row the boat along
the bank through wild rice and bulrushes.

Our boat followed our mind
as our mind followed the wine,
which led us by chance to a group of fishermen.
The magistrate saw my color change –
the wine-red drained.
Out of his own blessed heart
that always sides with the innocent and weak,
he took off his purple silk gown
and traded it for all the catch.

Then he set all the fish free –
gross and slimy eels, finless eels
catfish, snakehead and loaches,
the more prestigious trout and bream
mentioned in the Book of Odes,
and the best-tasting at all seasons,
including carp, crucian carp
famous for their flesh – fat, crispy, white as snow.

Among these, some ancient carp
are well on their way to metamorphosis,
evolving into some mystical being
shown by their thirty-six red scales.
There’s even a white Yangtze crocodile,
but no Perch for the lure was less delicate.

All together there must be hundreds or more
whose life is on that thin line held by the fishermen.
But heaven’s love of life has found
its counterpart in the heart of my friend.

As he threw them one after another
into the depth of the boundless lake.
the fish leapt over the lake surface,
free from tangling nets and barbed hooks.
Landing in the water they behave strangely –
they dashed over the waves or swam through reeds,
wagging their tails and fins gracefully,
shaking their whiskers in grateful delight,
like a dragon playing with a shining pearl
or an oriole flying through willow twigs.

Then they disperse under the deep water
disappearing behind isles and slippery rocks.
The wood ducks, wagtails, gulls and grebes
scream and cackle in great happiness.
Tiny shrimp also seem to celebrate
by swimming around the cape, waving their whiskers.

Ah, from them I learned that stupid men
are not the only creatures that value their lives.
Look at these – hundreds of lives –
they almost became meat pulp
in the stomach of foolish men.
If meat can really make humans saints and sages,
I wouldn’t hesitate to cook the marrow of the dragon
and offer it to all men foolish or wise.
But upon closer inspection I’ve found
these men are nothing but fish eating other fish.
Power makes them indifferent to friends or foe
and they’re not above eating each other’s flesh
or drinking each other’s blood to quench their thirst.

I understand the Magistrate’s heart –
he doesn’t want to cheat or bully people or things.
There is no point in killing a swimming life
to feed another that walks on two legs.
I thus remember the courier of the river god,
captured by a legendary fisherman –
The messenger tried seventy illusionary forms
but couldn’t get away better than a loach in mud.
Tragic fate, even the gods can’t escape your hands!
All grievances and revenge come from you.
But had the messenger run into the hand of the Magistrate,
his godly virtue would have been soon detected.
He in any form would’ve been set free.

I have no doubt and have little need
to consult the fortune teller for the god in fish.
I know the fisherman and courier had not lied.
If they had lied damned is my mind!

The Book of Rituals urges us to respect
a single blade of grass and a single sapling tree.
The Book of Changes praises fair and sincere men,
Who cultivate the roots of growing plants.
Confucius laid out more interesting rules –
“If you have to fish, fish with a single hook.
The net should be banned, for it would catch
more than one can eat. If you have to eat meat,
stay away from the butcher and the kitchen.”

The Magistrate’s kind heart matches
Those of ancient sages –
In ancient times the Lord of Lu State
indulged himself in shooting fish with bow and arrow
against the advice of his wise councilors.
That’s why Confucius reprimanded his Lord
and recorded it in detail in The Book of History.
Now the Magistrate loves life.
His virtue comforts the hearts of men,
Who is going to sing his praises?
Our Magistrate comes from a higher plane.
Like wind bending grasses
he bends us all towards virtuous deeds.
Scholars now restore the ancient moral codes
so that common people are free from excessive taxation.
The sly bullies quit bullying,
the widows and orphans taken back into the communities.
He dredged the ancient Meng Waterways for thirty miles.
He turned the mud hole into four thousand hectares of
fertile land.
Under his rule, the court house is deserted.
None presses charges there where sparrows chirp, hop around.
He also had the reeds pulled up,
lotus planted in their place.
When people went happily about their business
he would go and visit his two Buddhist friends,
discussing the meaning of life by hours.

The Buddhists insisted that the Magistrate's power of
virtue equals those of ten thousand ancient kings combined.
As they talked the magical petals of wisdom fell
and piled up on the ground as high as the knee.
Forty thousand shining pearls appeared from nowhere
to form a pagoda hundreds of feet high.

I, unable to believe the Buddhist miracles,
would rather admire the Magistrate's kind heart
and what he said to his servant boy:

"Never, behind my back, use the hook for fun."
Upon hearing that I offer a piece of advice for the fish –
the Magistrate rules over but a small prefecture.
His virtue hasn't reformed every man.
So my scaled friends please swim and live quietly
in the remote areas of the lake.
Follow closely these two rules:
first stay away from people
who value their palates more than their virtue.
Secondly you stay within the area under
the guidance of the Magistrate
for outside of it are many nets and hooks.

When they hurt you, they hurt the Magistrate's heart
and take away your precious life.

To a Snowy Egret

As if carved from pieces of jade
You, snowy egret, stand on the sandbar,
for hours and hours
on a single foot – doing what?

The poets admire you for your leisurely life.
Only you know the anxiety
of waiting for the next meal.

《白鹭鸶 》（《全唐诗》卷 387）
刻成片玉白鹭鸶，欲捉纤鳞心自急。
翘足沙头不得时，傍人不知谓闲立。
Walking Out of the Mountain

Walking out of the mountain I forgot
to close the door to my mountain hut.
I left my fishing rod
in the hollow trunk
of an ancient mulberry tree.

Nobody saw me leave it
but a few mountain magpies.
If my servant boy couldn’t find it,
it must have been taken away
by Father Ape.
Yuan Zhen and Bai Juyi are two of the most important figures in late Tang poetry. They were also best friends and their long-lasting friendship produced touching poems on both sides that have influenced many of pre-modern Chinese and Japanese poets. What interests me from an eco-critical perspective is the ethnic origins of these two friends and the complicated senses of place their origins engendered.

Neither of these two great poets were Han Chinese, “Chinese” in the narrow ethno-linguistic sense. As I will explain in the next note, Bai Juyi’s clan descended from a royal family of a kingdom in the far west of China, a kingdom that disappeared in the stream of time and the sand of the Gobi Desert. Regarding Yuan Zhen, the epitaph on his sister’s tomb-tablet states that their family descended from the imperial family of the Northern Wei (386–534; followed by brief rival successor regimes, Eastern Wei 534–550; Western Wei 535–556). The name of this line of rulers had originally been the Inner Asian Tuoba. After a century of rule, however, in 493, the dynasty relocated its capital from the northern frontier to Luoyang, deep in the interior of China. Three years after that a Chinese surname was adopted: Yuan (see Fu Xuancong ed. Tang Cai Zhi Jiaojian, Zhonghua Press, Beijing, 1999, vol. 3, p. 22). Yuan Zhen was born in 779 (Fu, p. 25) in Wannian County near Chang-an, the West Capital (or Upper Capital) of the Tang (Fu, p. 23). Both the Old Book of Tang and the New Book of Tang, however, insist that he was from Henan Province rather than Shaanxi Province where Wannian County and West Capital are located. This is because of the interesting concept of “local prestige” junwang (郡望), which complicates the idea of place in Chinese culture. Junwang literally means the place where the clan or family has made their reputation or fame, or where the family is best known. That is a more important factor in terms of home for the individual than where she or he was actually born and brought up.

Bai Juyi and Yuan Zhen became great friends, in a manner comparable to Wordsworth and Coleridge. There is no evidence they did this because of their ethnic backgrounds, but the concept of junwang made their sense of place more flexible than a modern reader in the west can imagine.

When Yuan Zhen was born, his family was already in decline. When he was eight, his father died and the family became poor. His mother, according to history, was both able and intelligent. She took her son’s education into her own hands and, at the age of nine, Yuan Zhen had already become a proficient writer. He passed the imperial examination at the young age of fifteen, though he was not assigned a real position until nine years later. At the age of twenty-four, Yuan became an editor in the Imperial Secretariat. As he climbed the bureaucratic ladder, however, he offended powerful people who had him sent out of the court to be an Imperial Inspector in eastern Sichuan Province. He died in 831 in his office in Wuchang, now in Hubei Province.
The Back Lake

Out side the city wall
of Jing Prefecture in the south
lies a large muddy pool –
that locals call the Back Lake.

Five miles around
dead water has made a pool there for
years.
With no wild rice or bulrushes to freshen
it
dead turtles and fish float and rot.

During his three-year term
Lord Zheng united his people
in a warm and pleasant community
that attracted neighbors from everywhere,
overcrowding the market and the streets.

The Magistrate started to clean up the
lake-side
and posted his plan there for people to
read:
“We people should improve our
circumstances
by our own efforts. I myself, your
magistrate,
will not hire workmen to do my share.”

Working people heard him in the narrow
lanes
and back streets and started to work
together.
Hundreds labored,
grandfathers and grandchildren alike,
together with mothers-in-law and
daughters-in-law.

The strong ones carried rocks and gravel.
The old and weak transported twigs and
straw.
Women helped sharpen axes
which shine like bright snow flakes.
Children cared for the hammers,
Lining them up like giant pearls on a
necklace.

They broke their fast in early morning,
together, under a giant cloth tent.
They slept in comfort that night
under the roof of the new public market,
completed with large windows and gates.

Excited neighbors tell each other the
news,
relatives walked far to inform other
relatives.
They came to the new market to trade,
to share a happy, communal drink.
Many chickens and dogs made the market
abundant.
These thousands almost started a new
city.
For centuries this place was a sewage dump. 
Now it’s been dredged, deepened and cleansed, 
offering a large area for trade, 
a sense of place and community.

Under the Magistrate I managed the land and the lakes. 
Writing about it is my pleasant duty.

For lakes are large and many in the provinces of Chu and Wu. 
Extending thousands of miles these provinces are marshes where everyone lives in damp dwellings, even those built on higher ground. The “rich” here don’t have a tight roof, the poor not even enough shelter to cover their bodies. That’s why I wrote this song of how people can improve their surroundings and life. 
People here value action. 
In words they value the true. 
The Magistrate looks down upon flattery. 
Therefore I’m not trying to brag about his achievements as magistrate. 
I record and praise the event, hold it up as my guiding example of the work to be done in the country of lakes.

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**The Birth of Spring**

Where was spring born the earliest?
It was born in the mind of birds – magpies move out their old nests, say goodbye to the old year.

Hawks and falcons hover high, circle above the high wind.

On sandbars wild geese feel the sudden return of warmth.

Woodducks begin to make love in smooth water beside melting ice.

I love most the couple of kingfishers who suddenly leave the river and fly into plum twigs among tiny buds.
Bai Juyi (Po Chü-i) 白居易

According to both *Book of Tang* and *The New Book of Tang*, Bai Juyi (Po Chü-i in older transcription) was from Taiyuan, Shanxi Province. Recent research shows, however, that he was actually born near the east gate of the seat of Xinzhen County, now in Henan Province (Fu Xuancong, ed., *Tang Caizi Zhuan Jiaojian*. Beijing, Zhonghua Press, 1999, Vol. 3, p. 1). This seemingly insignificant correction reveals a typical phenomenon in the life of a Tang scholar-official: they and their families were relatively privileged people, who enjoyed significant mobility. Thus, in the traditional Chinese terminology, Taiyuan was Bai Juyi’s *junwang* 郡望, the place where the clan had made its fame. But it was not necessarily the place where each member of the clan was born or raised. Bai Juyi’s great-grandfather seven generations back had been Bai Jian 白建, a powerful general of the Northern Qi Dynasty (550–577), who made the family’s fame in northern China and settled down near the city of Taiyuan. Subsequently, however, serving in various posts for the Tang, Bai Jian’s descendants had dispersed. Bai Juyi’s grandfather, Bai Huang 白渙, for example, served as magistrate of Gong County in what is now Henan Province. Seeing the beautiful landscape of a neighboring county, Xinzhen, he settled his branch of the Bais there. And so this was the place of Bai Juyi’s birth.

Recent research by the modern scholars Gu Xuejie and Wei Changhong goes further, suggesting that Bai Juyi’s family was not even Chinese, but were originally a branch of the royal family of the Guizi Kingdom in what is now Kuqa, in the arid lands of the farthest northwestern corner of modern China (quoted in Lu Weifen and Zhang Yanjin, eds., *Sui, Tang, Wudai Wenxue Yanjiu*. Beijing, Beijing Publishing Company, 2001, p. 1001). American critics nowadays, especially eco-critics, find “sense of place” a promising site for literary investigation. Bai Juyi’s story suggests, however, that for the Tang poets, such analysis had an additional layer of exploration. While attached to their homes, they were also always on the road in pursuit of official rank, carrying the honor of their clan, their *junwang*, with them wherever they went.

As both career bureaucrat and talented poet, Bai Juyi was much more successful than most of his fellow poet-officials. Starting as sheriff of Zhouzhi County, he gradually moved up the ladder of ranks. He did have reverses: his honesty and outspokenness caused him to be demoted to Jiangzhou, now Jiujiang in Jiangxi Province, where the marsh-like landscape of the mid-Yangtze region both depressed and inspired this northerner. He was, however, subsequently recalled to the central government and when sent again to a provincial post went to be prefect of one of the wealthiest and most beautiful prefectures, Hangzhou, where he wrote many poems celebrating the land south of the Yangtze.

He retired to the eastern capital Luoyang, where he built a garden and raised animals such as cranes and fish. The garden and its animal residents became the subject matter of many of his poems. His close observation of his garden and its inhabitants led him to contemplate the independent minds of animals.

In the poems of Bai Juyi we see a kind-hearted, honest, and caring man. He made many friends with his contemporary poets. His best friend was Yuan Zhen, with whom he promoted a literary movement known as *xin yuefu* (new folk songs), which advocated the notion that literature should address real issues in the real lives of real people. Their friendship has been the subject matter of literary studies in China for over a millennium. He was also friendly with Liu Yuxi, and even Han Yu, who had an opposite theory about the role of literature and who had an obscure style drastically different from the plain style that Bai Juyi and Yuan Zhen tried to promote.
To the Herb Man Who Digs the Rehmanniae*

No rain during the spring.
All the wheat died.
Frosts too early in the fall.
Much rice is lost.

It’s late in the year
when food runs out.
Preparing for the coming winter, you
comb the field for rehmanniae roots.

I ask what you’re going to do with these roots.
You reply, “Of course I trade them for food.”

You get up early every chilly morning,
with a hoe on your shoulder, you search
and dig all day long. Despite your hard work
you’re unable to fill the basket until the sun sets.

Then you carry it to the mansions of tall red gates.
The roots are good for the eye – of man or horse.
So you sell them to the fat men of fair complexion.
They feed their horses with your medicinal roots
so that the horse see well when they ride at night.

What you get in return is the grain from the horse fodder –
you hope to get enough of it
to appease your growling stomach.

* A genus of flowering plants in the order Lamiales, endemic to China.
Chinese traditional medicine believes that it may cool down overheated blood in the human body.
Watching the Wheat Reapers

Peasants in the field have no idle months.
They are doubly busy in the month of May.
The wind from the south arises last night,
to turn the wheat on the ridges brown and ripe.

At dawn wives and daughters shoulder foods in baskets.
Boys and young men carry jars of water,
together they ascend the hill in the south
to feed the men who toil on the terraces.

They walk bare-foot on the hard, baked earth.
They work with back bent in the scorching sun.
Exhausted laborers don't even feel the heat –
they grudge the shortness of the long summer day.

A woman in poverty carries her child to the field.
She follows the working men, a few yards behind,
picking up stray ears with her right hand
to fill a broken basket dangling from her left.

The explanation she gives to the men
seizes my heart with pain and shame.
"The harvest from my half acre was already done.
It's barely enough to pay taxes with the grain.
To feed the hungry child and myself,
I depend on these stray ears from your field."

Her words make me reflect upon myself –
I've never worked in the field or by mulberry trees,
but have extra food by the end of the year,
thanks to the three hundred bushels from the emperor –
my annual income for working in the court.

In private I can hardly face myself –
contrasted to the working men.
for days I can't erase the child
or the woman from my mind.
The Night Song of a Filial Crow

A mother crow died – a natural thing in nature.
Her son cawed and cawed, until his throat was hoarse.
For a whole year he stayed on the very tree –
he never left it for more than a single day.

Every night at midnight he’d caw so sadly
that everybody who heard it would weep profuse tears.

He must be telling a story of unfulfilled love,
unable to take care of his mother in old age.
All birds have mothers. Why does this one
have to cry and mourn in sorrows so deep?

The mother must have loved him so much
when she was alive, he was young,
that the young one, now grown, can’t stand the loss.

There was a “great” general in one of the warring states,
who in order to obtain the king’s trust forwent his mother’s funeral
held in the land of the enemy.
Alas, such a being was called a human whose heart does not compare to the crow’s!
I can’t help but exclaim and sigh.
What a filial crow, what a filial crow!
In the eyes of humans, you’re a Saint among birds!
A Poem for the Swallows in My House

In my house, upon the roof beam
two swallows, husband and wife, have made a home.
They fly in and out with grace and care to build a nest of twigs and mud.

Four chicks are born there,
four grow up day and night.
They chatter and scream for food, for parents’ everlasting love.

The chicks’ beaks grow larger everyday, with larger appetite to match.
The worms are tiny and hard to catch.
The parents wear out their beaks and claws yet never give up hunting, tired as they are.
Ten times they come, ten times they go, all within an hour, every hour of the day.
After thirty days of hard work the mother is reduced to bones. The chicks are grown.

Then the mother teaches them how to speak,
how to brush their new feathers with their beaks.
When their wings are strong enough, she escorts them onto the top of the tree.
The four flap their wings for the first time, vanish, dispersing with the summer winds.

The couple scream and circle in the sky.
The chicks may have heard them but never come back.

The couple finally return to the empty nest to chant their sad songs day and night.

I’ve been touched and tried to tell the swallows to control their sorrow, to reflect on life: when you were young chicks didn’t you fly away from your own parents who summoned you in vain? You didn’t know how they felt at that time. Now you’re parents, your parents you understand.
My servant rises with the sun.  
He brings back in a bamboo basket 
the freshest catch from the market.

Under the green celeries and greener 
fiddleheads 
Two big white fish curl up in a pile, 
moving and breathing – very much alive! 
Their mouths open and shut – 
no sounds ever come out. 
Are they breathing moisture to each 
other’s face 
so as to stay alive longer together?

The boy dumps them onto the ground 
to show the two-foot full length of each. 
They leap and turn on the earthen floor. 
Without water they can make no splash. 
They must be scared of the knife and pan, 
most directly the gathering ants.

Although they’re out of the river for a while, 
I still can save their life with a water bowl. 
I transfer them then into a pool nearby 
to keep them away from certain death. 
The pool being small, they bump into the banks 
with a slight shake of tails and fins. 
They may stay alive for a little longer 
but there’s not enough water for their natural span.

I pity them for being out of place, 
so I take them to South Lake to set them free. 
The lake is fed by the famous West River 
where they may swim without hesitation or fear.

There you go, fish, with a free will of your own. 
I’m not the kind of man who expects rewards for every little help I provide. 
Feel free to forget the legend of the dragon carp who, to reward its savior, searched the ocean floor to find and bring him the largest pearl.
Redeeming Chickens

Early in the morning
I stroll by the broad river
To view and hear the cackling fowls:
grebes, wild geese, gulls, herons and egrets
Wheel in the breeze
And chase each other in play,
Against the rising sun.

Then I’m accosted by a chicken peddler
Who comes to market from a village far away.
The fourteen chickens in his cage,
Are bleeding against the barbed wire,
Their crowns rubbed raw against the bamboo lid.
They haven’t had any food
For a full day and night.
When the sun rises higher
They’ll be offered to the butcher.
Faced with imminent death, they try
to devour one another, for chickens are no saints but victims of hunger and thirst.

Oh, how happy are the fowls who fly and scream at large!
How sad are these chickens that starve to death in cage!
A bookish scholar I always love
The lofty ethics of ancient sages
Who extended their kindness to fish and pigs.

Out of sympathy I purchase them – fourteen in all –
To let them free in the Garden of Double Trees.
Before I let them go I offer them advice.
Chickens, chickens please listen:
You mustn’t follow the example
Of the legendary sparrow
Who searched all over the world to find a precious ring,
To offer it to the man who set its life free.

I only paid the peddler
Three hundred brass farthings.
The small help is not worth your lasting gratitude,
Let alone your searching up and down the world
For that silly reward – the legendary ring.
Hiking up the Creek of Rock Gate

The old trail to the Rock Gate is nowhere to be found.
I push through the bushes hoping to see traces left by poets in the past.
What meets my eyes and ears?
Autumnal mountains and gurgling brooks radiating a pure light as they did in ancient days.

I've heard that Master Huiyuan, with other Buddhist poets, wrote poems on the cliff rocks, somewhere near, hidden behind clouds and under mosses.

To a Mountain Pheasant

Five steps you stop to peck some grass seeds.
Ten steps you stop again to drink from the creek.
Oh, the sage of a mountain pheasant that lives happily on the ridge!
Your guide is your own temperament, your life whatever you please.

There grow a few bamboo – skinny and wild.
Million-year old rocks stand – eroding away.
Nobody has visited this place since the poets of the East Jin Dynasty. But I hear a unique chanting in the autumn creek – in the empty day, empty night.

No net or poison on mountains where you live.
No hawks or falcons hunt over your ridge. Cocks, hens, new-born chicks all live out their natural lives.
Thinking of you I sigh for chickens in cages and the geese kept by men on ponds. For them a handful of grain’s assured daily – before the birds are served on the table.
Planting Willow Trees on the Banks of the East Creek

I'm a man of nature and field.
I love to plant and grow
especially willows on river isles.

I trim them in the spring
with an ax and scissors.
Soon they'll grow into mature trees.

I'm not picky with saplings –
long and short, big or small.
Whatever shape they come, I simply
find them the right places
on banks high or low.

Pines and cypresses take too long to grow.
Phoebe Nanmu* is hard to transplant.
It's best to plant more willows
that can prosper on shallow roots
and offer shade in three years,
before my term expires as magistrate
in this remote prefecture in the south.

After planting I rest by the waterside,
reflect upon my own life.
As a man I expect neither fame nor wealth.
What else should I do but plant these willows
mid-stream in East Creek?

*A hardwood tree that grows in southern China, often used for building imperial palaces.
Hiking the East Hill

I hike the East Hill in dawn.
I hike the East Hill in eve.

What attracts me so on the East Hill?
I love what I planted there – the newly grown trees.

It was the beginning of this auspicious year,
in the moist and blooming later spring.

I randomly planted these saplings
with no rows or number in mind.

As the season progresses green
shades emerge with the mounting sun
to wave and shiver in fragrant breeze.

Wild birds descend among new leaves
as butterflies flit away from withering flowers.

Whenever I have some leisure time
I’d hike the hill in my hemp sandals,
with the help of my spotted-bamboo stick.

If you have to know how often I come here,
please look at the white trail I wear
with my feet in the green carpet of grass.

《步东坡》（《全唐诗》卷 4 3 4）

朝上坡步，夕上坡步。
东坡何所爱，爱此新成树。
种植当岁初，滋荣及春暮。
信意取次裁，无行亦无数。
绿阴斜景转，芳气微风度。
新叶鸟下来，菱花蝶飞去。
闲携斑竹杖，徐曳黄麻履。
欲识往来频，青芜成白路。
Releasing a Migrating Goose

Over Jiujiang, the River of Nine Rivers, it snowed heavily in the winter of the Tenth Year of the Reign of Original Harmony.

Ice congeals the river and breaks the trees. Hundreds of birds, hungry, flew east and west in search of food.

Among them I heard the saddest cry of the most hungry migrating geese. They pecked at the frozen grasses in snow, slept on the cold surface of the ice. Wings stiffened by the wind they couldn’t fly fast enough to flee the net of river boys, who captured a goose, brought it to the market alive.

I’m a northerner demoted to the south a sojourner facing the sojourning bird. Oh, bird! The sight of you saddens my heart
I now redeem you, and release you into the clouds.

Sweet goose wherever you’re to fly, you stay away from the Northwest. West of River Huai, my childhood home, the rebels are still fighting for their lives. Millions of armored troops are still stationed there, some “official,” others called “bandits.”

Trapped in a deadlock for years and years, running out of supplies, they would readily prey on you. Strong soldiers are good marksmen. They wouldn’t hesitate to shoot you down to make a supper of your meat and attach your feathers to their arrow-tails.
On Receiving a Letter from Minister Yuan

I'm a dark-faced peasant handling a hoe
In the middle of the rice paddy, among fresh seedlings.

Your messenger nevertheless recognizes me
and delivers a letter to the field –
a letter from you, my friend,
Lord Prime Minister Yuan.

To the Snowy Egrets

In his late forties
a man
should not be totally weakened by age.

I, because of many worries,
feel old in mid-life
with long and hanging white hair.

The couple of snowy egrets,
standing by waterside
must be worry free.

Why do they also
have long silver threads.
He plants a litchi tree
in the courtyard of his official residence
now.

It'll bear fruits in ten years
here.

Where
would the old man be
then?

Planting the Litchi Tree

Giant pearls of coral,
so red and lovely!

The magistrate in exile,
so old with white beard!

To A Parrot

Bird of far west, how did you
get here to the east of the Yangtze?

After a year in captivity
your beak gradually turns red –
ready to talk.

Your master loves you and is afraid
of losing a favorite pet.
He cuts off your remex feathers,
keeps the little cage-door locked
after he feeds you in morning and evening.

His love for your words seems real and profound.
Your love, bird, is always devoted
to the days of high, free flight.

He treats you the same way
he treats sing-song girls –
deep in the harem, behind locked doors.
The Wind of Spring

In the Imperial Garden,
they say the wind of spring
first opens with its warm breath
plum buds followed by
cherry, apricot, peach and pear.

Growing wild
in remote villages
the shepherd’s purse and elm pods say,
“Spring wind comes for us.”

Mid-Night, Sitting in a Boat

After rain, the sky clears up
to reveal pleasant views
by the freshened lake.

Under the bridge,
the current moves fast
making cool wind.

Autumn, one man, two cranes,
on one tiny boat,
keep each other company
in bright moonshine.
When April Fills the Pond

When April fills the pond
turtles swim,
fish splash into the air.

I love the full pond
as well as they, and build
a hut on its banks.

I know fish and men
belong to different groups.

The happiness we share is the same –
we live together as friends and spend
the same relaxing days.

You no longer admire the ocean,
comfortable with bulrushes and algae.
I forgot the ambition for fame in clouds,
settling in my thatched shack.

It's easy by this pond to live
a humble life. You and I
are no match for dragon gods*
either deep or high. When they make
clouds and rains in rivers and sky,

we remain lowly
dwellers of this pond.

*In Chinese mythology, dragons control clouds, rain, and snow.
Two Extempore Poems on the Pond

No. 1

On a Stone Bridge
two philosophers Zhuang and Hui debated whether
Zhuang really knew the happiness of fish or not, in vain.

The human mind doesn’t understand feelings of animals.
A fish leaping out of water may not be happy but is frightened of the otter after him.

No. 2

The snowy egret stands by the shallow rapids, where fish are few, water cold, for long hours in apparent ease, with eyes wide open.

A posture poets often admire – how leisurely!

What human knows whether it’s leisure or hunger that the egret feels?
Little is known about Zhangsun Zuofu. All we know is that he was from northern China and was a very good poet. A Song Dynasty poet, Wang Anshi (1021–1086), included him in an early anthology of a hundred Tang Poets and what little is known about Zhangsun comes from the brief introduction provided by Wang Anshi in the anthology. That’s probably because Zhangsun Zuofu failed the imperial examination the first time he took it and never tried again. Nor did he serve the empire as a government official. His younger brother, Zhangsun Gongfu, however, was once the governor of Jizhou Prefecture, in what is now Jiangxi Province, in south-central China. Zhangsun Zuofu lived with his younger brother most of his life. Judging from the poems he wrote, we can say that Zhangsun Zuofu was active from the 760s through the 780s, and was probably still alive in 794. He left behind a collection of poems titled Gudiao Ji (Songs to Ancient Tunes).

To A Dead Tree by the River

Your top branches burned off by wild fire.

Soil between your roots washed away by flowing water.

Wide trunk half gone,* there is no way for you to celebrate the bounty bestowed by sunshine and rain.

Yet you’ve managed to capture spring’s freshness with the moss on your dying trunk.

*The species of the tree is unspecified. The trunk in the Chinese original is so large that it takes several men to encircle with their arms outstretched.
The Trail to a Mountain Village

One trail, worn by human feet, leads to the village of five houses, where spindles' vague sounds buzz.

Quietly hemp and mulberry trees emerge from thin mist.

Heavy with large rain drops the grass blades bend by the ferry.

Brilliantly wild flowers dance in wind all over the graveyard.

Sadly I pull myself away from the peaceful village on the back of a skinny horse, followed by a few black dots in the air – crows returning home to the woods.
Li Deyu 李德裕

Li Deyu was born in 787 to the house of Li Jifu, who was at the time prime minister of the empire. The ninth son of the family, he was raised in what is now Hebei Province in northern China. He didn’t take the imperial examination but was invited into the court as a token of the emperor’s appreciation of his father’s service. Li Deyu himself was an able politician who served in the important position of Defense Minister and then eventually himself became prime minister. During the seven years he served in that position, he stripped the eunuchs of excessive power at court, and directed defense of the empire’s frontiers. According to his friend and fellow poet Li Shangyin, he was “a great prime minister whose reputation will last for ten thousand years” (quoted in Xiao Difei, et al., eds., Tangshi Jianzhang Cidian. Shanghai, Shanghai Dictionary Press, 1983, p. 987). While serving the empire, he traveled extensively in China, on the western frontier, the southeastern coast, and in southwest Sichuan. When a new emperor came into the court, he was demoted to what a later poet called “the edge of heaven and corner of sea” – Qiongzhou on Hainan Island. He died there two years later. The poem translated below very likely reflects his longing for home while living on a remote island in humiliation.

《忆平泉杂咏·春雨》
(《全唐诗》卷475)

春鸠鸣野树，细雨入池塘。
潭上花微落，溪边草更长。
梳风白鹭起，拂水彩鸳翔。
最羡归飞燕，年年在故乡。

The Memory of Rain in Spring

Spring.
Turtledoves coo
in wild trees.

Rain,
in fine threads falls
over the rippling pond.

Fallen petals,
two or three,
bob on water.

Growing grasses
by the feeding creek
double their height over night.

Soft breeze
combing the feather of the egrets
sends them up the sky.

Wood-ducks
reflected by the water
fly in colorful brilliance.

But I admire most
the migrating swallows
who return to their home
every spring.
Li She 李涉

Li She was the second of five brothers of a family that originally made its fame in western Gansu Province, in northwest China, but later moved and settled near Luoyang, where they remained for generations. Late in his life, Li She was recommended to become *taixue boshi* 太学博士 – the equivalent of “doctoral professor of the imperial academy” – at the same time serving in senior clerical positions in the court. There is, however, no record that he ever took the imperial examination and so Li has no official biography. We can, however, learn something about him from the biography of his younger brother, Li Bo, which is included in both *The Book of Tang* and *The New Book of Tang*. Li Bo was born in 773, and since he was the fourth of the five, it is reasonable to assume that Li She was born in the late 760s or early 770s.

Li She and his brothers grew up in Luoyang, during a time when one general after another rebelled against the court. Famines, wars, and upheavals filled his teenage life. So the family moved south on the bank of Yangtze River in what is now Jiangxi Province and the brothers immediately fell in love with the beautiful mountains, rivers, and lakes along the Yangtze. For several years Li She and his brother Bo led a hermit life on Mount Lushan, famous since the Eastern Jin (317–420) for its literary history. Legend has it they lived in a cave where they raised a very tame white deer that followed them around, after which they named their dwelling “White Deer Cave.”

For unknown reasons, the two brothers later moved from the Yangtze region back to northern Henan, in central China. There they continued their hermit life in the Shaoshi Mountains, where the famous Shaolin Temple is located. From their mountain life, Li She was called by the empire to serve as a clerk in the military; he gradually moved up to be one of the messengers for the crown prince, a low-ranking but powerful post. He was, however, then demoted to Xiazhou, at the mouth of the famous Three Gorges, as an assistant manager of the imperial silos. He stayed at Xiazhou for ten years, as his hair turned grey and his health deteriorated. When finally called back east to “civilized” China, he was happy to visit Mount Lushan where he and his brother had once lived.

His demotion to the Three Gorges made it possible for him to contact ordinary folk, and it is likely that he wrote the two poems translated here during his banishment to Xiazhou. While visiting his old haunts, his boat was stopped on the Yangtze by a band of river pirates. When they learned that his name was Li She, the head pirate said: “if you really are who you say you are, then I’ve heard of your name for a long time. I won’t rob you but I won’t be satisfied until I get a poem from you” (quoted in Xiao Difei, et al., eds., *Tangshi Jianshang Cidian*. Shanghai, Shanghai Press of Dictionaries, 1983, p. 937). Li She, of course, obliged the fellow, and on the spot wrote the following:
Meeting Night Visitors on Jianglan Sandbar

In a noisy downpour I meet in a river village
brave guests from the green woods. They made
their names known to me late in the evening. I
admire their style: nor need they hide their names
when we meet again elsewhere and in some other time,
for half the world now share their ancient trade. (Translation mine)

Modern readers may be surprised by the pragmatic roles that poetry played in Tang Dynasty life: it allowed Meng Haoran to be introduced to the emperor; Lu Tong to be supported by a better-off fellow poet (Han Yu); and Li She to get past a Chinese Robin Hood!

After his decade of banishment, Li She returned to northern Henan, to his cottage in the Shaoshi Mountains. At about this time his wife decided to become a nun and left home, for which occasion Li She wrote a poem sadly contemplating the occasion: if they ever met again, he thought, his wife would be to him an “autumn moon in the lake.” He remarried, not to a second wife, but to a concubine, a secondary working wife who wove and provided the family with clothes. Li She himself worked the fields; his seven-year-old son collected and split firewood. Together they built a working family quite like that of the cowherd Li She had earlier described in the two poems translated below. He now understood better why those “peasant fathers” were still hard at work in the field at midnight.

It was from this situation that he was recommended by the prime minister to become a professor of the imperial academy. Yet this was not necessarily a good turn in his life, for soon after, in 825, he was again demoted – exiled, actually – to Kangzhou, on the southern coast of China, in what is now Guangdong Province. On his way to Kangzhou, he passed Guilin and became fascinated by the limestone landscape and the karst terrain in the southwest. He might later have returned north to the Shaoshi Mountains; it is unknown when or where he died.

《山中》（《全唐诗》卷477）
无奈牧童何，放牛吃我竹。
隔林呼不应，叫笑如生鹿。
欲报田舍翁，更深不归屋。

In the Mountain

What can I do with the naughty cowherds
who just let the animals eat my tender bamboo shoots?

I holler at them all over the woods, but they just ignore me, laughing and shouting, like playful fawns.

I go tell their peasant fathers, but find their houses empty at mid-night – are they still working in the fields?
A Cowherd's Song

In the morning
I herd the cows down the river bend.

In the evening
I herd the cows through the valley's ville.

Lotus leaf – my round hat,
bulrush cape – my overcoat,
I play my reed pipe on the back of a cow
riding through the green meadows.

With my bamboo bow and arrow in my belt,
not even the tiger dares to bully my calves.
Li Shen 李绅

Li Shen’s ancestors built the family reputation in what is now Hebei Province, in northern China, but his great-grandfather moved to Bozhou, in the northwest corner of modern Anhui Province, on the south bank of River Wo. His father served as county magistrate in three counties in Jiangsu Province, southeast of the Yangtze. One of the counties was Wuxi, where Li Shen was born and raised, from 772 until 806, the year he took and passed the imperial examination. Although he was appointed assistant professor in the imperial academy immediately after the exam, he had no interest teaching in the capital and returned east to his home in Wuxi. For the group of seven poems he wrote (one of them, “Kingfisher Cove,” is translated here) he wrote a preface in which he states that he had lived in Meili Village in Wuxi County for forty years. However, staying at home didn’t guarantee a peaceful life. A general in charge of safe-guarding the coastal region liked Li Shen’s literary talent and invited him to serve as his secretary. Li accepted the invitation but in the year after, 807, the general decided to rebel against the empire and ordered Li Shen to draft a declaration of his intent. Li Shen pretended to be so nervous that his hand shook and wasted sheets of paper without being able to write one word. The general in rage threatened to behead him. In response, Li said that he was raised in a scholar’s family and was too frightened by military trumpets and the gongs to think clearly – he’d rather die than suffer from fear and shock like this. Somehow the general didn’t carry out his threat, but arranged for another secretary to draft the document. After that narrow escape, Li Shen was appreciated by the emperor for his loyalty to the central government and refusal to follow the rebels. His career as a bureaucrat now began an upward swing and he eventually became the prime minister in 842. Readers may find it reassuring to learn that this prime minister seemed to have firsthand knowledge of the hardship that common peasants have experienced. He died in 846.

Seven Poems about My Old Home
Where Only Walls Stand Now

No. 6 – Kingfisher Cove

Two kingfishers, a couple, wheel over the lotus cove.
One fishes, the other dances and sings, scattering lotus stems, knocking leaves slant – water flows down the leaves like shining pearls rolling into the ocean.

The fishery warden, armed with bow, with arrows set to tightened string, rows stealthily over the water, frightens the birds.
They fly away fast, never looking back their green backs barely visible high among the clouds, soaring wing to wing.
They are far beyond the warden’s arrows and slingshots. He looks up, sighs in vain until sunset.
Two Songs in Ancient Style

No. 1

One seed planted timely in spring renders a harvest of ten thousand grain in fall.

Over the four seas not a single acre is left fallow.

Why is it then, one asks, that peasants should die of starvation?

No. 2

Hoeing the weeds from dawn till noon, I water the land with large drops of sweat.

Does anyone know that each grain of rice in his bowl is a drop of my hard working sweat?
Little is known about Bao Rong except that he was friendly with fellow poets Han Yu, Meng Jiao, Xu Hun, Liu Deren, and, especially, Li Yi (all but Liu Deren are included in this collection). Bao Rong passed the imperial examination in 810; after that he served in a number of low-rank posts, traveling in service far and wide across China, including the Gobi Desert on the western frontier. His best friend, Li Yi, for a time shared his fate, at first making little progress in officialdom and serving at low ranks. Later in life, however, Li Yi became a minister in an important department. Their friendship, however, remained the same. In one poem to Li Yi, Bao Rong mocked himself, jokingly warning Li Yi that the clouds that clung to Bao the “mountain man” might contaminate the embroidered uniform of the high official Li. The two friends got a good laugh out of the poem and drank more wine to celebrate this rare happy hour in their life. Late in his life, Bao Rong served in Sichuan and there he died. The poets Xu Hun and Liu Deren wrote verse to commemorate Bao Rong as talented poet and obscure bureaucrat.

《巢鸟行》（《全唐诗》485）

鸟生子子林萧条，雄鸟求食雌守巢。夜愁风雨巢倾覆，常见一鸟巢下宿。
日长雏饥雄未回，雌鸟下巢去哀哀。野田春尽少遗谷，寻食不得饥飞来。
黄雀亦引数青雀，雀飞未远鸟惊落。既分青雀啄尔雏，尔雏虽长心何如。
将飞不飞犹未忍，古瑟写哀哀不尽。
杀生养生复养生，呜呜啧啧何时平。

Nesting Crows

Among a few bleak trees
crows build their nest
to raise a family – a handful of chicks.

The male flies out to search for food.
The female stays to watch her chicks.
Afraid her nest might fall in a stormy night
she stays beneath the tree of her nest.

The days are long, chicks forever hungry,
father not in sight.
The mother has to leave the nest with sad,
sad croaks
to comb the field for food.

At spring’s end the fields are bare of grain.
The mother flies back home. By chance
she sees a mother oriole a few feet
away from oriole chicks.
The mother crow in surprise snatches...

Oh, crow, crow!
You feed your chicks with oriole chicks
But how do you feel in the bottom of your heart?
I see the crow fly in a circle
as if in regret she hesitates.

My ancient harp plays sad music.
Sadness does not end on harp strings.

We kill life to raise life.
That life does the same.

We cry and weep, weep and cry!
How can we end the sadness of life?
Staying Overnight in Daoist Liang’s Hut In the Black Ox Valley

Following the clouds, my steps take me into Black Ox Valley, where Master Black Ox offers me a bed for the moon-lit night.

Far into the long night
I walk around his dwelling.
All I see is a single bamboo beside the incense altar.
Often mistaken as a native of Hongzhou (now Nanchang of Jiangxi Province), Shi Jianwu was actually born and raised in Huzhou, Zhejiang Province. He spent most of his earlier years in Zhejiang, visiting famous mountains such as Siming and Tiantai, and lakes such as Taihu and Mirror Lake (see note to He Zhizhang). He passed the examination in 821 but he didn’t wait for the appointment in a governmental position; instead, like Li Shen, he left the capital immediately and returned home in the southeast. Unlike Li Shen, he didn’t join the service of any powerful general, but went to Jiangxi, the adjacent province west of Zhejiang, where became a Daoist monk on the West Mountain of Hongzhou. That’s why his birth place was mistaken for Hongzhou. He was obviously well received there and soon he felt confident enough to regard himself as the thirteenth Daoist saint who achieved the true Dao and became immortal. Because he gave up the officialdom so resolutely, little is known about him in the official history, not even the years in which he was born and died. Perhaps this is a sign of his “true immortality”: his poetry lives in the Chinese imagination, and it is refreshing to learn from his poems that in his time there were still tigers in Nanchang, which is now a city of five million.

《消山中叟》（《全唐诗》卷 4 9 4）
老人今年八十几，口中零落残牙齿。
天阴伛偻带嗽行，犹向岩前种松子。

《山中玩白鹿》（《全唐诗》卷 4 9 4）
绕洞寻花日易销，人间无路得相招。
呦呦白鹿毛如雪，踏我桃花过石桥。

Teasing an Old Man on the Mountain
Old man, old man, late in your eighties,
few teeth remain in your depressed mouth.
On a cloudy day, bent by rheumatism, you cough and go to the front of the cliff
to plant a few pine seeds.

Encountering a White Deer on the Mountain
The roads in the human world no longer appeal to me.
I hike through gorges and caves in idle search
of blooming trees to pass my days with ease.
Then I hear a deer’s bell voice,
see his hair white as snow.
He steps over my fallen peach petals
to cross the rock bridge.
Late in the evening, Returning to My Mountain Dwelling

Late in the evening,
I, a lone traveler,
walk up the mountain
heading for my cave dwelling
by the creek,
miles away from human neighbors.

Then I’m taken aback
by fresh tiger tracks
in the muddy path after the rain.

What good fortune! I have the partridge*
to guide my way.

*In Chinese mythology, the partridge’s cry sounds like a sentence in human language: “Don’t go, brother, don’t go.” Therefore, the poet might be advised by the bird not to go down the trail of tiger tracks.
Though known as a Zhang from Nanyang, Henan Province, Zhang Hu was actually born south of the Yangtze in the famous city of Suzhou. He of course looked at Suzhou as his home and had strong feelings for the mountains and lakes in the southeast part of China. *Tang Caizi Zhuan* mistakenly states that because of his proud personality he never took the examinations that might have enabled him to find a position in the officialdom (Xin Wenfang, *Tang Caizi Zhuan*. Shanghai, the Press of Classic Literature, 1957, p. 107). The truth is that Zhang did want to take the exams, though was perhaps overconfident about his literary talent and his chance of scoring at the top in the local examinations which were the first step for the national exams at Chang’an. It happened that the official in charge of the local exam taken by Zhang Hu was the famous poet Bai Juyi, who did consider him as one of the two candidates. In the end, however, Bai Juyi favored the other candidate. Zhang Hu now lost appetite for any further efforts in that matter.

He did, however, still wish to enter the bureaucracy, an ambition he now pursued in a different manner, sending his poems through powerful friends to the emperor, who became interested enough to ask his courtiers about Zhang Hu’s talent. This time it was Bai Juyi’s best friend, Yuan Zhen, who unwittingly helped frustrate Zhang’s effort to enter the court (Fu Xuancong, *Tang Caizi Zhuan Jiaojian*. Beijing, Zhonghua Press, 1999, p. 170). In Yuan Zhen’s view, though Zhang’s poetic style was exquisite, it was not “manly” enough, and would not help the emperor’s effort to stir up the spirit of his subjects whose confidence was already dampened by the upheavals and wars that plagued the empire. This was the last straw. From this point on, Zhang Hu satisfied himself with the reputation of *chushi* (a gentleman who chooses to stay at home rather than serve in the court). He never, however, ceased to connect with powerful people, such as Pei Du, Li Deyu, and Li Shen, all poets who eventually rose to be prime minister. The second poem translated here shows that Yuan Zhen’s criticism of Zhang Hu’s poetic style was wrong. Although Zhang Hu had a sharp eye for the details in a peasant’s life and spoke in the voice of a girl, that did not make him “unmanly.” His brave exposure of governmental encroachment on private land reminds readers of Li Shen’s critique of the state of the country: no land is laid in fallow but peasants still die of starvation. In the first poem, if we read the tree as a symbol of people and the grass as the court and its expanding road system, we know that Zhang Hu was one of the poets who considered environmental justice as a part of the overall harmony under the heaven.

It was unknown when he was born. He died in 853.
Grasses in a Dead Tree Trunk

The grasses grow green in a hollow tree.
They've sent down their roots
at a high and dangerous place.

From them one can learn the secret
of what's going to prosper
and what's going to wither –
as the tree slowly dies
the grasses grow greener.

A Song

My young man went to gather cucumbers
My young man came to collect red dates
he also tilled the field and planted hemp
where he worked has become
roadway to my neighbor in the west.
Xu Hun 许浑

Xu Hun’s year of birth was estimated by Wen Yiduo to be 791 (quoted in Fu Xuancong, ed., Tang Caizi Zhuan Jiao Jian. Beijing, Zhonghua Press, 1999, Vol. 3, p. 234). His great-grandfather six generations back had been a prime minister who lived in Chang’an. But Xu Hun himself probably lived near Luoyang during childhood and then moved to the region around Dongting Lake in what is now Hubei and Hunan Provinces. He loved the lake area so much that when he sojourned for three years further upstream on the Yangtze in the famous Three Gorges area in what is now Greater Chongqing City, he missed the lake area as if it were his home. Probably it was in the Three Gorges (the Wizard Gorge is one of the Three) that he adopted a pet monkey. When he finally got back to the lake area, he empathized with his new companion: perhaps the monkey missed its home in the Wizard Gorge as much as he had missed the lake district when he was in the Gorges, and as a young man in his late twenties with no clear future in sight, had felt like “a fish in a tank or a bird in a cage” (quoted in Fu Xuancong, ed., p. 234). With the monkey actually on a chain, he had no choice but let it go to trace its way up the Yangtze back to its own home.

When he finally passed the imperial examination in 833, after several tries, he was already a middle-aged man. He was appointed the year after to the position of assistant director in the Bureau of Forestry and Crafts (Yubu 廟部), which had charge over hunting and the gathering of food in mountains and forests. He went on to serve in various positions all over China, including magistrate of a county in the mid-Yangtze region, an imperial inspector traveling through Shanxi, Henan, Guangxi, and Guangdong Provinces, and finally from the age of 68 governorships in Zhejiang and Jiangxi Provinces. Many of his poems celebrate leisure days in the countryside, but a close look at his life shows that the only leisurely days he had after he passed the examination came when he excused himself from his first appointments, and during a couple of years he spent on sick leave in Danyang County, Jiangsu. As an inspector, he traveled extensively and loved best the mountains in Zhejiang Province on the southeast coast.

We don’t know when he died.
Releasing a Monkey

The rain last night — sad and sad —
kept me awake. Early this morning
I unlocked the gold chain around your neck,
offered you my heart-felt goodwill.

These mountains are not too far
for you to remember your way,
that leads back home near the Wu Gorge.*
At least the cold water of this river
should lead you to your familiar Creek.

For shelter you may want to try
the remote trees of red leaves.
For companionship you should holler
into the depth of white clouds.

Re-trace your steps with caution.
Try not to lose yourself
in the mist among phantom vines
in the manner I lost mine.

* Wu巫 means "wizard" in Chinese.
Li Shangyin 李商隐

Li Shangyin was a good friend of Bai Juyi 白居易, although their poetic styles were quite different. Bai Juyi and his friend Yuan Zhen 元稹 tried to promote a simple style that could be understood by common, working people, allegedly including an elderly female servant of Bai. Li Shangyin, however, developed an exquisite style rich in literary allusion that only the well-educated elite could have understood and appreciated. Yet interestingly, Bai Juyi in his old age admired Li Shangyin’s style so much that, as legend has it, he even said something to the effect that after death he hoped to be reincarnated as a son to Li Shangyin, who was forty-one years his junior. Li Shangyin, in return, did name his first born “Senior Bai” (Fu Xuancong, ed., Tang Caizi Zhuan Jiaojian. Beijing, Zhonghua Press, 1999, Vol.3, p. 279).

Although Li Shangyin is known for his more ambiguous love poems, because of his extensive travel experience, his few nature poems are genuine, plain, and pleasant. In the two “nature” poems selected here, Li was deliberately simple and, almost, free from literary allusions, except the reference to the gull, which is so well known that it is hardly ambiguous. The gull, as also mentioned in Wang Wei’s 王维 poem “Composed in My Cottage Near Wangchuan Village after Days of Rain,” comes from the “Yellow Emperor” chapter 黄帝篇 of the Daoist text Liezi 列子: a boy is on familiar terms with the gulls on the beach and plays with them like close companions. When his father learns about it, he asks the son to catch a sea-gull and bring it home, for the father wants to taste the meat. Being a dutiful son, the boy goes back to the beach the next day with his father’s plan in mind. However, the gulls are so sensitive and intelligent that they know that this boy has a different mind now; so they are on guard against the boy and refuse to come close to him. In Wang Wei’s poem, the poet complains that he is already wild – and thereby honest – yet why should the gull stay suspicious about him; in Li’s poem, the poet is happy for the gulls flying around him seem to testify that he is truly one with the wild.

Li Shangyin was born in the year 813 to a cadet branch of the imperial family of Tang that had over time fallen into genteel poverty. Originally inhabitants of Qinyang, Henan Province, Li Shangyin’s grandfather and his immediate family had moved about a hundred kilometers southeast to what is now Zhengzhou, in eastern Henan. Li Shangyin was exceptionally talented. In his teenage years he was already known as a prolific writer. Unlike many Tang poets, Li Shangyin didn’t take the imperial exam but was recommended into the officialdom by a powerful bureaucrat. He served in different areas of China, traveling as far as Xunzhou, now known as Longchuan County in northern Guangdong Province, and Guizhou, now Guilin, in what is now northern Guangxi Zhuang Autonomous Region.
Self-Happiness

In the way the snail loves its tiny shell house, 
I love my little hut and share it with swallows.

By my front gate, green bamboos shed their fading leaves when the herbaceous peony emits fragrance from petals.

The tigers already know my traps. They walk around my gaping fence. I’m grateful to the biting fish for offering me an additional dish.

My neighbor brews a special rice wine seasoned with pine seeds. We stroll together, our steps shaky, after drinking – too much.

For the Old Man in the Field

A sickly old man, shouldering a hoe, seemed to feel sorry for me – when I asked for directions, he simply took my hand, walked me around the ville.

The flame and smoke from the burning fields in the morning tinted the far hills purple.

Gulls and magpies forgot we were plotting men. They wheeled around us in familiar ease.

Doubly rewarded with directions and a friend I bowed with gratitude and a pleasant surprise – such a good man! In such a wild place!
Ma Dai 马戴

Like his good friend Jia Dao, Ma Dai was from a rather obscure background. It is only in recent research that scholars have figured out that he was probably from Yanzhou, now in Shandong Province, less than two hundred kilometers from the coast (Fu Xuancong, ed., Tang Caizi Zhuan Jiaojian. Beijing, Zhonghua Press, 1999, Vol. 3, pp. 335–36). It is still unknown when he was born, but historical records do show that he passed the imperial examination in 840. After that, he served as confidential secretary on the staffs of several military headquarters. The rank was low but responsibility was high. His outspoken personality offended one superior and he was thus demoted to the position of county sheriff. Jia Dao was well known as being poor, and perhaps because of his close friendship with him, Ma Dai was understood to be poor as well. Ma had, however, traveled far and wide – east to the coast of Jiangsu, west to the mountains of Sichuan, north to the frontier and south to the southern bank of Dongting Lake – with a mobility not available to the truly impoverished. However he was close to poor working people and understood their happiness and hardship, as shown in the two poems translated here. He probably died in 867.

Passing a “Wild” Man’s Dwelling

A wild man in leisure time plants a wild tree.
It grows old before the planter seems to age.

He lives and travels in mountains among white clouds, fishing, chopping firewood by the boundless sea.

Hollering his four sons to harvest mountain herbs, he leads the calves to drink from the creek.

The author of a book on longevity, he has no worries about his own age.
Ma Dai 马戴

《路傍树》（《全唐诗》卷五六）

古树何人种，清阴减昔时。
莓苔根半露，风露节偏危。
虫蠹心将穴，蝉催叶向衰。
樵童不须翦，聊起邵公思。

The Tree by the Road

Who planted this ancient tree,
in what ancient time?

Its pleasant shade has dwindled,
its roots half-covered by fungi.
In the slightest storm it may topple,
its leaves eaten by cicadas,
its trunk hollowed by worms.

Oh, please, woodchoppers, leave it alone –
it reminds me of the ancient sage
who sold watermelons under an old tree,
declining the king’s invitations to serve in the court.
Li Qunyu 李群玉

Li Qunyu was from a humble clan on the banks of the Fengshui River in the northwest of Hunan Province. He had a studio on a sandbar midstream in the river, and he named the sandbar “Sleeping Immortal Island” and his atelier “Water Bamboo Studio.” Though not famous, neither was his family truly poor for he could afford not to bother trying the exams and instead enjoyed an artistic life on the sandbar, writing poetry and listening to his talented servant play the reed pipe. In one of his poems he celebrated his leisurely lifestyle of “falling drunk everyday in the immortal boat over the blue waves” of the Fengshui River. This river originates in the famous tourist hotspot Zhangjiajie – with its spectacular quartzite sandstone pillars – and flows hundreds of miles eastward into Dongting Lake. However, its water is no longer blue, but sort of brown, for the paper mills in Jinshi City on its bank have polluted it severely.

Li Qunyu was probably born in 811 (Fu Xuancong, ed., Tang Caizi Zhuan. Beijing, Zhonghua Press, 1999, Vol. 3. p. 390). For forty years he lived his gentleman’s life on the sandbar until Prime Minister Linghu Tao – the one who used Wen Tingyun’s lyrics as his own (see note to Wen Tingyun) – recommended him to the emperor. The emperor admired Li Qunyu’s talent and offered him a job as an editor in the imperial academy. His naivety and outspoken honesty made the job difficult, however, and he missed his old life back on the sandbar. His poem about the cranes losing their freedom for a handful of grain is both a faithful description of the two cranes in the garden of Lord Cui and a metaphor of his life working for the empire. He died in 861, not many years after he was introduced into the court.

《乌夜号》（《全唐诗》卷568）

The Night Song of a Crow

Behind the tossing waves
on the dreamy sandbar
in the blurred greenness of a young maple
grove
croaks a lonely crow
from night till dawn
in the saddest of tones

With the moon behind clouds the
darkness is complete
Drenched by a drizzle the whole world is
chilly
The bird’s song depresses my heart
as a mother’s moan
when she has to let go of her child

In this long and quiet night
listening to the mountains echo the crow
the traveler plucks his first white hair

This is not the legendary cuckoo
supposedly the reincarnation of Emperor
Shu’s soul
it must be the bird about which Confucius’
disciple
told the master

with her four chicks gone,
the mother bird cries all year round
To My Lost Crane

Behind the clouds,
beyond the ocean islands,
you disappear without a backward glance.

Among the mountains of immortality
on the other side of the ocean
you soar high above the rising autumn
winds
in the boundless azure sky.

You drop off a single feather –
a snow flake of memory.

I try to recapture
Your graceful moves
on the strings of my harp.

I realize how futile it is
to search for you in the air.

You were born to be free
in clouds, among cypress trees.
You’re not a pet bird
locked in a bamboo cage.

Written for the Two Cranes in Mr. Feng’s Garden

Graceful creatures! You make my heart pure.

I sail down the cold river to seek company of clouds.
I play my harp and pipe for you in a scarlet pavilion.

Far above the temptation of a handful of grain,
your heart circles over rivers and oceans.

I should take you to the palace
of gods
to watch you fly
to hear you trumpet there.
Jia Dao 贾岛

Jia Dao’s family seems never to have made any fame for themselves before this poor poet was born in 779 in the town of Fanyang, now Dingxing County, about eighty kilometers southwest of Beijing. For a time Jia Dao was a Buddhist monk, though there are conflicting sources about when he became one, and whether he did so before or after his many failed attempts at the imperial examination. My own educated guess is that it was both, for I think he went to the monastery not out of religious devotion, but under the pressure of poverty, as did his younger brother. He didn’t seem to like the rules that guided the a monk’s life, however, one of which was that no monks should be outside their temple after mid-day. Two lines from a complaint he wrote in 810 have survived:

The cows and sheep return their home at sunset,
I can’t even compare with the beasts.

Failing the imperial exams on multiple occasions over the course of a decade seems to have made Jia Dao slightly insane. He would not greet anybody at the examination hall, but talked to himself so loudly that the supervisors had to reject him, and list him as one of the ten bad students of the year. A story goes that one day, later in Jia’s life, he was chanting his own lines to himself in the bell tower of a temple, when the emperor came in disguise and picked up his poetry collection. Jia Dao first glared at the emperor and then waved his arms about, shouting: “how can a young man like you understand [my poetry]?” Embarrassed, the emperor walked downstairs and returned to the palace. When afterward Jia Dao was informed that the “young man” might be the emperor and knowing that the emperor often walked around the capital city in disguise, Jia Dao was so scared that he went to the palace and knelt at the gate for a long time. When the emperor heard of it, he “punished” Jia Dao by offering him a low rank position of county secretary in Changjian County, Sichuan. Three years later, he was slightly promoted to be the official in charge of the imperial silos in Puzhou, eastern Sichuan. He died in the winter of the year of his promotion, 840. When he died, there was not even a single coin in his home; he left behind only an ancient harp and a sickly donkey. What kind of soul in such poverty can still love the cicadas, egrets, and cranes with such caring sympathy?
A Sickly Cicada

Have you lost your wings, sickly cicada?
Is that why you crawl onto my hand?

Your wings, though broken,
still look like a shiny film.

Your chant, hoarse as it is,
still has that extreme, pure tone.

The dew drops you drink, the petals you chew,
have been distilled
into a fragrance inside you.

The dust in your pupil, blinding you,
is there by mistake.

If you hadn’t lost your vision,
you should have known
that pretty orioles and fierce hawks
are born to harm you.
Written for the Egret Couple on the Pond of Lord Cui

The young pair of egrets
push one another
out of a deep cage.

Silvery feathers, threads of silk, hang
from their heads, exactly the same number.

Stepping on the frost-covered rocks,
do you feel the cold?

Looking over the skyline,
do you see your old empty nest?

If your thought of home
is blocked by the splashing shallows,
if your dream of flying wing to wing
disappears behind the sunset over the remote bay,
you may want to try this pond
dug by His Lordship himself.

Its water is connected with the Lake of the Jade Emperor*
through invisible channels.

*The Jade Emperor is the Supreme God in Daoism.
Your pure trumpets,
cool as the falling leaves in moonshine,
sound exactly the same to me
as when I heard it in the frosty night
over the thousand-mile Lake of Dongting.

If they let loose
the string that ties the feathers in your wings,
you can still fly high
above that lonely cloud.
Wen Tingyun

Wen Tingyun is a complex character. He was born into the upper class in 801 and died in 866. In the years before his death, he was a teaching assistant in the imperial academy in charge of examinations. Thinking several of the essays in the exams to be excellent, however, he breached the rules and posted them in public, thereby offending his superior who now had him demoted to the position of county sheriff in Fangcheng County, in the south of what is now Henan Province. He died there before the year came to its end.

His grandfather was Prime Minister Wen Yanbo, who had served the emperor Taizong (r. 626-649), the most famous of the Tang monarchs. For his service, the Prime Minister was offered a fief in Bingzhou, now Taiyuan. His grandson, Wen Tingyun, however, was born and raised in the suburbs of Chang’an, in Hu County, and had hardly ever been to his supposed homeland in Taiyuan on the other side of the Yellow River. A social opposite to Jia Dao, the poor monk and poet, Wen Tingyun associated with the children of the rich and powerful, and did all the things that rich and spoiled boys do. But Wen Tingyun was smart, a “natural” musician who blew on anything with holes and strummed anything with strings, making beautiful music with all of them. He also was quick in creating verses that went well with the music, and then went on to become popular among singsong girls. One of his friends and fellow bad boys was Linghu Hao, whose father happened to be Prime Minister Linghu Tao. Lord Linghu liked Wen Tingyun’s poetic talent and treated him well, allowing him to live in the Prime Minister’s Mansion. But he used the boy: when Lord Linghu learned that the emperor favored a certain style of lyrics, he would ask Wen Tingyun to write verses for the music and then presented these as his own work. He had from the start informed Wen Tingyun of his plan, telling him to keep it a secret. Unwilling to comply, Wen almost immediately shared the news with his friends. Offended, the prime minister kicked the youth out of the house. Still, people didn’t seem to mind Wen Tingyun’s bad reputation and the crown prince now invited him to stay with him in the East Palace (the traditional residence of the heir apparent in China). He stayed with the prince for two years – 837 and 838 – leaving shortly before the prince’s sudden death, which was probably murder.

Wen Tingyun now finally felt that he should live on his own and in 839 he took the local examination, the necessary first step to taking the imperial examination and entering officialdom. Though not outstanding, his score sufficed to qualify him for the national exam, but he fell ill and was forced to stay for two years in his hometown, Hu County, near the capital. He later took several tries at the imperial examination, but never passed it. In 855, already in his mid-fifties, he was accused of unruly behavior during the examination and was penalized by being relegated to the position of county sheriff in Sui County, in what is now northern Hubei. From there he wandered west to Xiangyang, where he spent four years with powerful friends. He subsequently traveled east to Jiangsu, before finally returning to the capital. At the age of 65, he was recommended to the position of teaching assistant in the imperial academy. He died the next year. Reading the two poems translated here, it is hard to connect the peaceful voice and beautiful imagery with the life of a bad-boy poet.
Passing the Grand Divide

Water in the creek, you seem to have
Feelings – in truth you have not.

For three days you follow me on this mountain.
Tonight your gurgling sound’s so sad,
as if you know that over that ridge
you’ll have to go your way
and I mine.

Early Fall, in My Mountain Cottage

I live close to the mountain and feel
the cold days come early.

The frost on my thatched roof
presages another fine day.

Leaves falling off,
sunshine pours in through the window.

Out there, the autumn tarn is filled to the
brim,
still and quiet.
One of Pi Rixiu’s ancestors had been governor of Xiangyang prefecture in northern Hubei Province. Therefore, he was always regarded by his contemporaries as hailing from Xiangyang, though he was in fact actually born in Jingling, in southern Hubei, in 840. And there he spent most of his life. He went back to the Xiangyang area only occasionally to live as a recluse in Mount Lumen, working his garden and growing vegetables. That’s probably why his poems reveal a degree of familiarity with farm work. In 863, when he was twenty-three, he left a stint on Mount Lumen to make a grand tour. First he headed south, going all the way to the region south of Dongting Lake, in what is now Hunan Province. Then he turned east, into Jiangxi Province, then back north to the bank of the Yangtze, where he hiked Mount Lushan. From there he went further east into what is now Anhui Province, hiking Mount Tianzhu (Heaven’s Pillar) and Mount Huo. The tour ended in the eastern Shou County where his family owned a country house.

He failed the imperial examination in 866, but passed it the next year. In 868 he left the capital for a second grand tour. This one began with Mount Hua, eighty kilometers east of the capital Chang’an, when on to the Nüji Mountains in Henan Province, and then to the Shaoshi Mountains, where the famous Shaolin Temple is located. Eventually he went southeast to Jiangsu, where he took up official work as secretary in the staff of the governor of Suzhou Prefecture. There he met his best friend, Lu Guimeng, with whom he exchanged scores of poems. The poems translated here are mostly chosen from these exchanges.

Pi Rixiu lived in the gasping years of a dying empire, when peasant rebellions occurred one after another. Caught up in one of these, which swept the lower reaches of the Yangtze before finally turning north to occupy the capital city of Chang’an, Pi Rixiu was made “Grand Scholar” of the new “Grand Qi” dynasty of the rebel leader Huang Chao 黃巢. When forced to make some auspicious statement out of Huang’s name, he said something offensive and was killed. He was forty years old.
A Sigh for an Acorn-Collecting Woman

The acorns ripen late in autumn hills. They fall and scatter in prickly bushes and weeds. A hunchback woman of yellow hair ascends the hill before the rising sun to search for acorns on the frosty ground. It takes her hours to collect a handful, a full day to fill her bamboo basket. Three times she dries them under the midday sun. Three times she steams them for winter food.

The rice fields downhill are sweet and ripe with purple ears attracting passers-by. Peasants harvest them with the greatest care, husk with mortar and pestle, and transport the grains of rice, millions of shiny studs of jade, to the tax collector’s warehouse — gaping deep. All the rice they’ll give, not a grain to keep at home. They wonder why a bushel they bring becomes “half a bushel” in the official measuring box.

In season the tax officers use the grain as loans. After season they return the rice to the warehouse. Sly lower officials aren’t afraid of punishment. Their greedy superiors never refuse handsome bribes.

Yet the peasants, like the woman on the hill, stuff acorns in their growling stomach from winter to spring and spring to summer.

In ancient books I’ve read about hypocrites who built kingdoms upon their phony kindness. But now even the phony kindness has disappeared. The only thing that I can do is to sigh and shed tears for the woman on the hill until the front of my coat is soaking wet.
On Fishing with Harpoons

At the confluence of the spring creeks
the water seems to stand still.

Rows of fishermen hold torches there
to turn the night into a shining day
to reveal swimming fish in the pure stream.

On Shooting Fish with Bow and Arrow

The fisher, silent and motionless keeps
his eyes on the arrow across the bow.

He feels the heat reflected from the lake
that shimmers under the scorching sun.

He sees the underwater world in peace,
a world inhabited by fishes, free
and happy as the birds that soar.

Then he lets the arrow loose –
a feather shatters the green water
with shocking speed, scattering scales
like snowflakes, tainting the water red.

On seeing this I can’t help but wonder –
what would Tai the famous chef say
if he knew how they shot the fish here.
**The Woodchopper’s Creek**

When the creek began to flow
trees emerged along its course.

Acorns fell to feed the birds,
vines providing a home to deer.

Forests offered more than fuel for fire.
Let’s sing the praises of temple beams.

Now you know it’s heaven’s will
that my clan live here forever in peace.

**To the Woodchoppers**

In the deepest of empty mountains, two or three
humble families have lived since ancient times.

They share a world of clouds and dreams
with generations of monkeys and birds.

They wash their clothes in fresh and placid spring,
prepare their meals with wild flowers and herbs.

Many grew old here and many more have passed,
yet those alive never worry about death
or ever sigh for the passing of days.
A Woodchopper’s Song

This song is said to be from ancient times.
It never was accompanied by a flute.
It sings the happy life of the chopper
and the mild climate along the river in trees.

Sing it once you may slow down the floating clouds.
Sing it twice the beasts turn their heads toward you – sad faces.
Today you sing it to me the poetry collector.
How can I ignore such songs from the wild?
Beneath your white silk cap your hair is white and shiny as the silk.

You lean against the maple roots and watch your line without care.

Your middle daughter-in-law is selecting leaves from the best mulberry trees around the house.

Your youngest son has returned with a bulrush cape he purchased from the market by the sandy beach.

After the rain the water-shield* floats by the boats, so slippery and smooth, a delicious match for the fat perch that weighs down your rod.

I, a sojourner by the West Fortress Hill, observe and admire you all day long, from the other side of the rippling bay.

* A plant that grows in water, the leaves of which are edible, with a slippery and starchy texture.
Lu Guimeng 陆龟蒙

Lu Guimeng’s great-great-grandfather seven generations back was a powerful courtier, but by the time of Lu Guimeng himself the family had sunk into obscurity in Suzhou, down in southeastern China. It is unknown when he was born, but judging from the way he and his friend Pi Rixiu addressed each other, I have reason to believe that he was slightly younger than Pi Rixiu, who was born in 840. Under the pressure of supporting his mother and family, in the year 865 Lu started clerical work for Lu Yong, a distant relative then serving as governor in Muzhou, now Chun’an County in Zhejiang Province, over three hundred kilometers southwest of Lu Guimeng’s home. It was a long distance back then and quite a commitment for a young man. Yet, he was not that poor for his family owned a farm of about fifty acres (three hundred mu), with a dozen farmhands and ten water buffalos. The farm and a thirty-room compound were located in Songjiang, now a district in Shanghai. He also had a tea garden in Yixing, and a library of ten thousand volumes. That’s probably why during his travels he could afford not to receive some government officials who admired his poetic talent but whose personalities didn’t appeal to him.

Lu Guimeng passed the local examination in 868 but was unable to take the national examination because of the rebellion led by Pang Xun, a frontier soldier who had been recruited to guard the southwestern frontier. Pang’s rebellion swept through southern China, making traveling dangerous. Upon the recommendation of his best friend, Pi Rixiu, Lu took up work as staff member for the governor of Suzhou from 869 to 871. In 875, Lu Guimeng joined the staff of Zhang Tuan in Luzhou, now Hefei City in Anhui Province. When Zhang was in the next year transferred to Suzhou, Lu gladly followed his employer to work in his hometown. Re-united with his family and his best friend Pi Rixiu, Lu Guimeng was happy for awhile. But then, with the encouragement of Pi Rixiu, Lu was tempted to try the examination again. However, fate seems to have decided that he would not take it anyway. Another peasant rebellion, this one led by Wang Xianzhi, now advanced rapidly from Hunan Province to Jiangxi, then through Anhui, Hubei, Henan, and all the way to the gates of Chang’an. Lu Guimeng thus returned to his old life of part poet, part clerk and part farmer.

In Lu Guimeng’s poems we can see familiarity with the life of the peasant. He actually worked in the field. Although he hired a dozen farmhands to work with him, his land was situated at a low-lying bend of the Yangtze and was often flooded. When the floods came, he wrote, the field and the river became one. So he had to work, shovel in hand, side by side with his men to save the crops. When his scholar friends laughed at him for laboring alongside servants, he would blame them for not following the examples set up by legendary leaders such as the Yellow Emperor (Huangdi 黄帝) or the Great Yu 大禹. As both experienced farmer and thoughtful intellectual, Lu wrote in depth about the evolution of the Chinese plow in his book The Classic of Plows (Leisi Jing 耕耜经). With anachronistic application of Pierre Macherey’s Marxist theory of literary production to the writing of Classic of Plows, one may argue that the book is a product of the development of means of production under the pressure of changing times. The numerous rebellions and uprisings of this period, and the wars they set off, had devastated the northern and central areas of China. The center of agricultural production thus moved from central China to the densely populated area south of the Yangtze and farming techniques consequently became more focused on methods to increase the productivity of every square foot of the land. As a farmer in a flood zone, Lu needed the changing techniques and technology for his survival; as an intellectual, he needed to communicate them to other farmers so as to work together with a changing economy that made necessary the intensive farming he practiced on his own farm.
In addition to traditional farming, Lu paid close attention to fish-farming. He was the first in Chinese history to advocate active “planting” of fish, while also strongly objecting to the practice of fishing with poison. These were reflected in the fifteen pairs of poems on fishing he and Pi exchanged. I translate three from Lu below – and two from Pi, just above – to offer a sampling of the two closely connected but subtly different minds.

Never physically strong, Lu became seriously ill in 879. He died in 882.

On Fishing with Harpoons

At midnight the creek flows by quietly,
reflecting the spring verdure on the banks.

Men come with feather-light spears and harpoons,
their torches outshining the Silver River in the sky.

Fish jump, scales fly, out of the waterweeds.
Shattered heads and chopped-off tails
sink down to the river’s bottom.

Spectators, as if watching a fun game,
witness the extinction of aquatic families and clans.
On Shooting Fish with Bow and Arrow

Behind the green maples
the sun,
almost setting,
lights up the clear lake –
such shiny water!

Wagging their tails as if merry
the fish circle around the sandbar.

A man bends his bow to the shape of a
full moon,
stares deep into the flowing green.

With trembling vibration the arrow
pierces through a round lotus leaf,
splattering blood and painting
the tiny white petals of the water-chestnut red.

If the hunters on the steppes
hear of this fisherman,
will they move down here
to the misty waterside?

On Fishing with Poison

They used to fish with lines and golden hooks
that hung in water wrapped in sweetened baits.
From morning to noon they sat on shady banks,
but how many fish can they catch like that?

Now they turn the whole river into a poison stream
to kill the fish, big or small, all at once.

They feed the fish to dogs afterward
with enough left-over for the crawling ants.

Why is “taking all now” the way
of all trades in the world of today?
《樵人十咏。樵溪》
（《全唐诗》卷 620）

山高溪且深，苍苍但群木。
抽条欲千尺，众亦疑朴楷。
一朝蒙翦伐，万古辞林麓。
若遇燎玄穹，微烟出云族。

《樵人十咏。樵家》（《全唐诗》卷 620）

草木黄落时，比邻见相喜。
门当清涧尽，屋在寒云里。
山棚日才下，野灶烟初起。
所谓顺天民，唐尧亦如此。

The Woodchopper’s Creek

Mountain high
creek deep
forest green
with towering trees
millions of lower bushes.

Once you chop these giants down
they leave their mountain home forever
You make fire with them at night
They disappear in a small puff of smoke

To the Woodchoppers

You build your houses
in piles of cold clouds.
Your gates open to
the pure mountain stream.
Your hearts warm up
when you see your neighbors come
through crisp yellow leaves.

As soon as the sun sets behind the hills,
cooking smoke come up in columns
through the cracked roofs
of your mountain huts.
Your lifestyle follows nature
as described of the Golden Age.
The Live Crane Decoy

I tied my fishing boat on an island tree, to witness by chance a hunting tragedy.
A crane was shot in an eerie way that saddened me and all who saw how it died.

A crane decoy stood on a sandbar sending peaceful honks into clouds.

A wild crane attracted by the decoy on land had no suspicion of any harm.

He circled above the isle, changed his mind of flying further south.

He honked back to the crane on sand ready to land near a fellow bird.

The decoy combed his feathers clean to welcome a friend or guest. Unwilling to lose a companion, he worked with utmost grace - in leisure searching for a fish or pecking at the floating weeds.

All seemed natural, all was calm, the crane from the clouds landed for a rest.

A sudden arrow from the bushes pierced him through his white, exposed chest.

The decoy flapped his wings and danced a merry dance, as if pleased with his service to the hunting boy.

Oh, cranes! Flying over the clouds and sleeping on lake, you are certainly free and lofty creatures. Yet some of you hate your fellows and hurt your own kind.

In the human world there are fame and wealth for which men smile and smile but plot against their friends. I know the greatest danger comes from our kind that speaks our tongue, just as the crane decoy who tricked his fellow birds.
《偶摄野蔬寄裴美有作》
（《全唐诗》卷 624）

野园烟里自幽寻，嫩甲香囊引渐深。行歇每依鸦舅影，挑频时见鼠姑心。凌风蔼彩初携笼，带露虚疏或贮襟。欲助春盘还爱否，不妨潇洒似家林。

Written while Picking Herbal Leaves
For My Friend Pi Rixiu

Through thin mist, around my wild
garden
I search in deeper shades.
Small tender leaves and sweet petals lead
me on.

I walk and rest under the Crow’s Uncle –
the shady tallow tree.
I separate and pick at the heart of the
Mouse’s Aunt –
the peony flower.

In the colorful breeze I fill the bamboo
basket.
I stretch out the skirt of my jacket to hold
more dewy leaves. Enjoy them my friend,
as if they come
from your own wild woods. I hope they
will
add more flavor to your meals in spring.

《奉和夏初裴美见访题小斋次韵》
（《全唐诗》卷 625）

四邻多是老农家，百树鸡桑半顷麻。尽趁晴明修网架，每和烟雨掉缲车。啼莺偶坐身藏叶，饷妇归来鬓有花。不是对君吟复醉，更将何事送年华。

In Response to the Poem Written by My Friend Pi Rixiu
When He Visited My Humble Hut

You’ve met my neighbors, peasants for generations.
Together we raise a hundred chickens, grow
a hundred mulberry trees, half an acre hemp.

In fine weather we fix the vine racks.
In misty rains we reel silk from boiled cocoons.

The warbling orioles sit behind shady leaves.
Our daughters-in-law walk under them,
delivering lunch to the field, with wild flowers
in their hair. What else can I do with my life?
Write poetry, drink wine with you, my friend.
Poetry Chanting

Sitting on a rock in evening ease,
I reminisce about my mountain home.
Walking along the cooling creek
I reflect upon events of the past.
I sometimes find an expression of thoughts,
chant my lines out loud.
Does my voice make the egrets fly
or the setting sun jump?

Lunch

Getting up at noon,
my face crinkled from the pillow-press,
I start my lunch of yam and water-chestnuts.

The crows have always trusted me – a mindless man.

Today they descend
from the top of the tree
to peck from my stone plate.
Sikong Tu 司空图

Sikong Tu’s ancestors lived in eastern China, in Sizhou (mod. Xuyi, Jiangsu), not too far away from the eastern coast on the southern bank of Hongze Lake, the fourth largest in China. That’s why his family was often called by his contemporaries the Sikongs from Sizhou. Yet his family for at least two generations had lived in the north, on the northern bank of the Yellow River, in what is now Yongji County, Shanxi Province.

This tradition of respecting one’s ancestral origin (zuji 祖籍), together with the often conflicting concepts of junwang 郡望 (the locale where the family had first made itself known) and place of registration (zhanji 占籍, the place the family actually lived), complicate the sense of place, origin, and identity for Chinese people and their poetic imagination. Back in the Tang, quite a few poets and scholars could trace their ancestry and original homeland back up to ten generations, especially if a forebear had served a previous dynasty. This was an effective way for power to maintain itself: you have to serve the state, although you may not like it, if you want to keep your family reputation (junwang), or add to it. It is in your own and your family’s interest to serve the status quo. The tension involved is seen in many poems in this collection. Sikong Tu did this in an almost legendary way.

His father, Sikong Yu 司空與, had excelled as government manager of two important salt lakes in Anyi, now Xia County in southern Shanxi Province, on the northern bank of the Yellow River. In the process he turned his temporary residence into his family’s formal place of residence, its zhanji 占籍. Pleased with the success of new rules drawn up by Sikong Yu curbing bribe-taking by government officials, the court promoted him, which provided the father funds to buy property in the nearby Zhongtiao 中条 Mountains. For the son, Sikong Tu, this became home, the place he could feel most comfortable to live and die in, as he went on to show in his own life, and death.

Sikong Tu was born in July, 837, on the northern bank of the Yellow River in the southwestern tip of what is now Shanxi Province. He passed the imperial examination in 869 as one of the top four of his class. He appreciated support from a powerful friend and worked in his staff. When the imperial appointment came to call him to the position of Imperial Inspector, he could not bear to leave such a caring supporter and failed to report to duty in the court in a hundred days as required by law. Though reprimanded severely, he was still allowed to stay in the service of his friend, whom he followed in demotion as well as in promotion. Sikong Tu worked diligently and gradually climbed up the ladder in officialdom to the position of vice minister of the Ministry of Rituals. When Huang Chao, the rebel who killed poet Pi Rixiu, occupied Chang’an, Sikong Tu managed to escape and hide in the family’s country house in the Zhongtiao Mountains. In 886, after the emperor had returned to the capital, he was called back to court to a less powerful position. Then already in his fifties he was apparently not in best health. When later restored to a post of the rank he had had before the rebellion, he asked for sick leave. The emperor granted him leave yet called him back again in 897, this time to the vital position of vice minister of the Defense Ministry; he again declined on the basis of poor health. He was now allowed to return to Wanguan Valley in the Zhongtiao Mountains, where his father had bought the land and houses decades before.

Sikong Tu’s health was not as bad as he claimed. Once back home, he enjoyed a creative life writing poetry, talking with Buddhists and Daoists, drinking, hiking, and painting portraits of famous courtiers – his moral exemplars – on the walls of the hall his father had built. In 908, hearing of the execution of the last emperor of Tang, he refused to eat. He died within a few days, at the age of seventy-two.
《退居漫题七首 其四》
（《全唐诗》卷 632）

身外都无事，
山中久避喧。
破巢看乳燕，
留果待啼猿。

《秋景》（《全唐诗》卷 632）

景物皆难驻，
伤春复怨秋。
旋书红叶落，
拟画碧云收。

On Retirement

Avoiding the noisy world,
I have retired into the
mountains
for years.

Free from all obligations I
peek
at the nursing swallows and
leave
some fruits and nuts on the
trees
for the howling monkeys.

An Autumnal Scene

Knowing I can’t keep things
and scenes
from sliding away day by day,
I weep at fading flowers in
spring,
mourn fallen autumn leaves.

Before I finish my poem of
burning foliage,
I start a painting of the azure
clouds.

Releasing a Turtle

Celebrated for spirit,
respected for knowledge,
you at this moment ought to take
advice from me—
live out your natural long life.
The depth of water is not deep enough to protect you,
yet meeting more and more men may run
into one with sympathy.

《放龟二首》（《全唐诗》卷 633）

却为多知自不灵，今朝教汝卜长生。
若求深处无深处，只有依人会有情。
Nie Yizhong 聂夷中

Nie Yizhong was from an obscure family in Zhongdu (mod. Qinyang, Henan), on the northern bank of the Yellow River, in the foothills of the Taihang Mountains. Knowing both poverty and the real life of peasants, he introduced a harsh realism to the pastoral tradition of Chinese poetry. It is unknown when he was born or when he died, but the official record shows that he passed the examination in 871, during the upheavals of the uprising led by Pang Xun, the same rebellion that had made it impossible for the poet Lu Guimeng to travel from the lower Yangtze up to Chang’ an (see note on Lu Guimeng). In short, the once powerful empire was built on an unsustainable system. Pressed to the limit, the deeply oppressed and exploited peasantry had through their uprisings proved a simple truth: nothing unsustainable will be sustained. Nie Yizhong’s poetry reflects this historical moment in a way so powerful that the emperor of the dying empire had to pay it special attention (Fu Xuancong, ed., Tang Caizi Zhuan Jiaojian. Beijing, Zhonghua Press, 1999, Vol. 4, pp. 11–12).

During the upheaval, he was not assigned a job until his coat was worn out and his money ran out. When finally assigned the position of county sheriff in Huazhou, at the foot of Mount Huashan, all he brought with him were a few books and a harp.

《赠农（一作孟郊诗）》
（《全唐诗》卷 636）

劝尔勤耕田，盈尔仓中粟。
劝尔无伐桑，减尔身上服。
清霜一委地，万草色不绿。
狂风一飘林，万叶不着木。
青春如不耕，何以自拘束。

Written to a Farmer Friend

Work hard on your fields,
let grain fill your silos.
Don’t chop down mulberry trees.
Be frugal with your clothes.

When frost falls on the earth
no grass can keep its blades green.
When cold wind combs through the woods
all leaves must fall.

If you don’t till the field when young,
how can you discipline yourself
for the rest of your life?
Garden of a Rich Boy

He's had flowers planted
all over the western garden,
along the road to the pleasure house.

Below one flower grew a rice-sprout.
The boy pulled it out – what
a nuisance weed!

A Peasant's Family Song

Father tills the fields on the terrace,
sons the rocky valley floor.
June – the rice has not grown ears.
The government has readied the silo
to take in the tax grain.
Zhang Qiao 张乔

Zhang Qiao was a resident of Chizhou, on the southern bank of the Yangtze, among the Jiuhua Mountains. After twelve centuries, his home town is still called Chizhou, though it has developed into a city of one and a half million residents, looming large in southwestern Anhui Province.

It is unknown when Zhang Qiao was born or when he died, but we know that he took and failed an imperial examination in 870. He returned to his home in the “old mountain” – one of the Jiuhua Mountains 九华山 – where he lived as a recluse for ten years. Jiuhua literally means “nine flowers.” These mountains had originally had a different name, but during the Tianbao reign period of Emperor Xuanzong (742–756), the poet Li Bai visited the area and thought the nine highest peaks of the mountains looked like nine lotus flowers. So, in one of his poems, he said “Exquisite is the scheme of Yin and Yang, / That brings forth nine inspired rock flowers” (Quan Tang Shi. Vol. 788, poem #1. Translation mine). In this way Li Bai, together with two other versifiers – Wei Quanyu and Gao Ji – changed the name of the mountain into Jiuhua, the Nine Flower Mountains. Decades later, the poet Liu Yuxi exclaimed: “one glance at the exquisite peaks, one shock on my amazed soul” (Quan Tang Shi. Vol. 756, poem #4).

Li Bai and Liu Yuxi were travelers, who in their brief encounter with the Jiuhua Mountains found them impressive, but abstract. Zhang Qiao, on the other hand, was a permanent resident. From his “Winter Night in the Mountains” we get a lower-key, sobering, and even slightly depressing picture both of mountain life and of life in the larger world of a dying empire. This difference is especially interesting for ecocritics who hold physical accuracy and specificity as important standards in the evaluation of literary works.

Written on the Trunk of a Pine Sapling

松子落何年, 纤枝长水边。  
斫开深洞雪, 移出远林烟。  
带月栖幽鸟, 兼花藩冷泉。  
微风动清韵, 独听罢琴眠。

In what year, by what chance
did this pine seed fall here?  
Its tiny twig somehow emerged
by the side of the creek
through the snow of the deep ravine –
a puff of green smoke in distant woods.

The quiet birds love it,
sleep on it in the moonshine.

The lonely hermit loves it,
waters it as his flowers.

The pure breeze loves it,
stirs its needles as strings of a harp.

I love its music so much –
I let my harp rest, listen, until I sleep.
Written to a Monkey

They capture you from the forest of the southern State of Chu, where you used to reach for the moon and sleep among the clouds.

They capture you for your pure voice but they lock you up with a gold chain. You're afraid of the mighty lord — you lose the courage to howl again.

The Fisherman

You never comb your hair, your hat a round lotus leaf. You live in your boat, on mighty floods.

On the head of a sand bar people gather as if in a market — to see the ten-foot fish that you caught in the clear stream.

Winter Night in the Mountains

The wind has sent cold leaves to the ground. The woods are empty with few birds sleeping. The creek is frozen — hard for deer to drink. The snow fills the mountain — what an impediment to the traveling monk!

I sit through the night, all worldly thoughts gone, and chant a long time, the power of my language weak. In the world of messy upheavals, where is the place for me to dream of a peaceful wattle gate?
Zheng Gu

Zheng Gu was born in 851 in Yichun, in what is now Jiangxi Province. A child prodigy who started his education in Chang’ an, at the age of five, he soon started writing poems. When he turned seven, he went to Hunan with his father, who had been sent to serve as governor of Yongzhou. On their way, the seven-year-old wrote a poem on the wall of the famous Yueyang Tower, which was praised highly by the poets Ma Dai (included in this selection) and Li Peng. They believed the child had a bright future as scholar and poet. Yet, life turned out to be ironic. Our genius started taking examinations in 872 but didn’t pass until 887. During the long years of the repeated intervening failures, he lived in reclusion near Jingmen, on the west bank of the Han River, now a city of three million people. Humiliated by his own failures, he also had to face tumultuous larger events, such as the burning of the nearby city of Jiangling in 879 by the rebel Wang Xianzhi, or the occupation of Chang’an in the next year by Huang Chao, which made it impossible for him to even try to take the exams that year. “For ten springs my tears have sped up my aging,” wrote Zheng Gu in that year, “ashamed, I can’t face my graying hair in the clear stream” (quoted in Fu Xuancong, ed., <i>Tang Caizi Zhuan Jiaojian</i>. Beijing, Zhonghua Press, 1999, Vol. 4, p. 157. Translation mine). Zheng Gu subsequently fled to Sichuan where he would remain for six years, spending most of his days there with monks in Buddhist temples. When Emperor Xizong was finally able to return to Chang’an, Zheng Gu returned, too, and as a frustrated, middle-aged man finally passed the examination there in 887. First placed in the post of county sheriff of Hu County, in the Chang’an suburbs, he gradually climbed up the ladder of an officialdom deeply shaken by the many uprisings, eventually becoming department head of a minor ministry. He begged the emperor to allow him to retire in the year 902 and died in the place where he was born, Yichun, in 910.

Although Zheng Gu made himself a reputation at the age of seven, the last poem translated here is what he is best known for. It brought him the nick-name Zheng the Partridge Poet. The Chinese poets believed that the chuckles of the partridge sounds like a piece of advice for the travelers: “Don’t go, Brother. Don’t Go.”

《鹭鸶》（《全唐诗》卷 675）

闲立春塘烟淡淡，静眠寒苇雨飕飕。
渔翁归后汀沙晚，飞下滩头更自由。

To A Snowy Egret

Standing alone in the misty pond of spring
you exemplify leisurely grace.

Sleeping quietly among the reeds
you seem oblivious to the cold rain.

The fisherman leaves the sandbar
late in the night.
You land on the beach perfectly free.
《失鹭鸶》（《全唐诗》卷 675）

野格由来倦小池，
惊飞却下碧江涯。
月昏风急何处宿，
秋岸萧萧黄苇枝。

《鹧鸪（谷以此诗得名，时号为郑鹧鸪）》（《全唐诗》卷 675）

暖戏烟芜锦翼齐，品流应得近山鸡。
雨昏青草湖边过，花落黄陵庙里啼。
游子乍闻征袖湿，佳人才唱翠眉低。
相呼相应湘江阔，苦竹丛深春日西。

On Losing My Snowy Egret

A wild character of course
you’re tired of my small pond.

Frightened in flight
you land by the green river bank.

Where are you going to sleep,
in the windy night of a dim moon?
Everywhere I look, I see and hear
yellowing leaves, rustling reeds.

The Partridge

On the warm and misty marsh you play
to display wings of embroidered silk.

They say your character must be similar
to that of a mountain pheasant.

You pass the drizzling Lake of Green Grass,
*chuck-chucking* at the fallen flowers
by the Temple of Emperor Huang.

Upon hearing your homecoming call,
travelers wet their sleeves with homesick tears.
Singing girls knit their brows
stopping in mid-song.

In pairs you call and respond to each other over the broad
River Xiang, and land in groves of bitter bamboo.
The spring sun sets behind western hills.
Wu Rong  吴融

Wu Rong was a native of Shanyin, now Shaoxing, Zhejiang Province, the same place that the poet He Zhizhang had called home. It is unknown when he was born, but he passed the imperial examination in 889 after two decades of trying and failing, already in his forties. During those frustrating two decades, he lived on the west slope of Mount Maoshan in what is now Jiangsu Province, about two hundred kilometers northwest of his hometown. As he turned thirty, his future in officialdom still uncertain, he bought a seven-acre farm on the lower Yangtze, in a region that is now a district of Shanghai.

It was an embarrassment for Wu that his livelihood and retirement depended on landholding, and after he finally passed the imperial examination he joined the army and went to western Sichuan. Two years later, he was involved in some trouble and demoted to Jiangling, in the mid-reach of the Yangtze, much closer to home. Showing loyalty and ability during the upheavals that would soon end the Tang Empire, he was promoted to the position of vice-minister of the Ministry of Defense. He died in 903. The Tang dynasty had its final death four years later.

From his poems and the brief biography provided here we can see that Wu Rong lived mostly south of the Yangtze, except for the months he spent traveling to and taking the exams in the capital city. Rivers, lakes, and swamps are the familiar landscape for him.

By the River

By the river flowers bloom on every twig.
Through flowers birds fly and scatter sweet petals like festoons behind them.
In sweetness, under the blooms
a snowy egret stands on a single foot
until the sun slants towards the rock in the stream.

《溪边》（《全唐诗》卷 685）

溪边花满枝，百鸟带香飞。
下有一白鹭，日斜翘石矶。
《水鸟》（《全唐诗》卷685）

烟为行止水为家，两两三三睡暖沙。
为谢离鸾兼别鹄，如何禁得向天涯。

The Water Fowl

In mist you fly, on waves you bob, and on bars
of warm sand you sleep neck by neck.

You gently decline the company of swans,
the mystical phoenix who flies aloof and high.

They’re lofty and graceful, yet how can they stand
the journey to the edge of the sky?

《鸳鸯》（《全唐诗》卷686）

翠翅红颈覆金衣，
滩上双双去又归。
长短死生无两处，
可怜黄鹄爱分飞。

The Wood Ducks

A green crown here,
a glimpse of red cape there,
brilliant feathers everywhere –
wood-ducks fly back and forth
all over the sand beach in pairs.

Life or death,
may it be short or long,
you couples always stay together,
pitying the yellow crane who flies alone.
Remembering the Monkeys

The sun sets
The clouds disperse
The blue mists diminish
in the disheartening howls
that pierce the sky.

You form a chain
hanging hand-in-hand
from an elegant tree
reflected by the colorful creek.

Echoed again
and again
your howls finally vanish
as the bright moon rises
from behind the North Mountain.

The gorges hold between them
a silent, misty drizzle,
and in the chilly autumn sky
blows a high, frosty wind.

Remembering you
I too want to return to the mountain home.
Please refrain from howling at me here
near my house for you may scare
these fine trees that I recently planted.
To the Young Teals on the Pond

Two teals, very young, bob up and down on the jade-green pond. They seem happy to entertain each other like a grown couple.

They separate and fly away as the fishing boat approaches. They call and warn each other when they sense the chilling presence of the hawk.

They don't have to fly high, as the kingfishers do, to find home beyond the clouds. Nor do they need to admire the brilliant wood-ducks — favorite of the painter's brush.

It's their good fortune to have feathers so plain: they live a simple and peaceful life among reeds and sweet bulrushes.
There has long been a widespread rumor that Du Xunhe was the illegitimate son of the famous poet Du Mu, though the efforts of many scholars over many ages to prove or disprove the claim have proved inconclusive. But an unexpected result of their studies has been that now we know for sure he was born on the tenth day of the first lunar calendar month of 846 in the same place where an earlier poet, Zhang Qiao, was born: on the southern bank of the mid-Yangtze, by the Jiuhua Mountains, in Chizhou, Anhui Province. He long lived in obscurity in the mountains, for two decades trying and failing to pass the imperial examination. Of this time, ten years were spent on Mount Lushan, reading, preparing for the next exam, and writing poetry. He finally passed in 891, a saddened if not embittered middle-aged man. But by this time the once-powerful Tang Empire was dying and had no position for this miserable scholar who “owns not an inch of land among the four seas but bitterly chants his poems all his life” (Du Xunhe, Quan Tang Shi. Vol. 691, poem #104. Translation mine).

Du Xunhe’s “opportunity” came from an unorthodox direction. In the midst of the rebellion of Huang Chao (d. 884) – the one who killed the poet Pi Rixiu – one of the rebel commanders, Zhu Wen, betrayed Huang, surrendering to Tang and assisting in putting down the rebellion. In return, the court made him a “prince,” with control over a large chunk of central China. Du was recommended to Zhu Wen and won his trust with an impromptu poem written at Zhu’s command about rain drops that fell on a sunny day. In his poem, Du said something to this effect: if the days are always regular, how can heaven show the role that Prince Zhu plays in the process of creation? With his ego tickled, Zhu Wen recommended Du Xunhe to a fairly important office in the last days of the Tang Empire. Du Xunhe died a few days after he accepted the offer.

Before his death, Du Xunhe did have the opportunity to write ten other poems for Zhu Wen, advising him to lower the taxes and let people and land have a chance to recover from the wars that had rendered more than half of China wasteland.

《溪居叟》（《全唐诗》卷 691）

溪翁居静处，溪鸟入门飞。
早起钓鱼去，夜深乘月归。
见君无事老，觉我有求非。
不说风霜苦，三冬一草衣。

The Old Man on the Creek

At dawn he goes to fish
midnight he returns in brilliant moonshine.

I must be wrong to pursue fame and power,
especially when I see him so naturally age.

I never wonder how he’s braved
the bitter wind and cold frost
in the long winter, in a shabby straw cape.
In Spring, Sent from My Mountain Dwelling to a Friend

Where's the best place for the wild chant of a wild poet?

It's the sunny spring scenes of my home mountain: fresh after the rain wheat seedlings wave up and down in green ripples.

In glorious sunset the mountains change colors—blue and purple in various shades.

Half-way around the rocky cliff the clouds hang like a ribbon.

Over the flat fields the birds land on the boughs of the few lone trees.

Lately the deer and elk seem to like me, following me around, making me wonder when will people lay down their weapons and begin to live in peace like this.

Autumn Thoughts on the Creek

At the very end of the mulberry grove three or four families live by means of old nets and broken rods.

The autumnal wind suddenly stirs up catkins on the creek banks scattering snow-flakes over the stream.
Old Peasant

Grey-templed, weak-limbed,
you still work hard in the fields
beside your sons and grandsons.

If the Emperor doesn’t lower taxes,
you’ll be hungry through the year
despite the best of harvests.

To the Cormorants

In green mists, by the waterside,
birds of same feather circle in congenial groups.*

They dive into the depth and bring fish to the surface.
In this beautiful scenery I see hungry egrets.

*Unfortunately, this is a literal translation of the Chinese original. Although in English it sounds like a cliché, I can’t find any way to work around it.
Wei Zhuang 韦庄

Wei Zhuang was born in Wannian County, near Chang’an, probably in 836. Though he grew up in a well-to-do family, receiving a good education, he was a badly behaved child. Many of his childhood friends, who ganged up with him against their unfortunate teachers, later became major officials of the dying empire.

The last years of the empire saw rampant warfare, and Wei and his family eventually had to flee the capital for survival. In 884, they first went to Luoyang, then continued south, crossing the Yangtze in the hope of finding some temporary peace in Runzhou, in Jiangsu (now Zhejiang) Province. There Wei Zhuang became a military secretary in the staff of General Zhou Bao. He worked there for three years before a military coup d'état happened right before his eyes and his general was driven out of town. He and his family had to leave too, this time going to Wuzhou in what is now Jinhua, in western Zhejiang. The second poem translated below was probably written there, where he spent another three years or so living in the rocky mountains.

Wei Zhuang passed the imperial examination in 894 and in 897 was assigned to serve as assistant to a court envoy sent by the court in an attempt to oversee a military man, Wang Jian, who had taken control of western Sichuan. Wei Zhuang somehow won the trust of Wang and in 901 became his confidential secretary (zhangshuji 掌书记). As Tang floated downstream in a flood of rebellions and wars, General Wang decided to establish his own little empire in the Sichuan Basin. Involved from the start in planning, documenting, and organizing the ceremonies and rituals by which Wang attempted to legitimize his regime, Wei Zhuang was soon promoted to the powerful role of acting prime minister. He died in the eighth month of the lunar calendar in 910.
Written on the Wall of Mr. Lu's Farm House on Creek Ji

The owner travels west and will not return, leaving the creek to overgrown wild vetches. Spring rains fill it to the brim. On horseback I'm overwhelmed by poetic inspiration. I see egrets in flight – white prints on blue mountain walls.

Tiger Tracks

Beasts with white patterns on their foreheads visit me again and again during the night. They gradually appear in families on the water-margin where I live – in a cave now to avoid the violent world.

Why do I see you here by my cave door?
According to the inscription on the memorial tablet buried in his tomb, Wang Renyu's ancestral home was Taiyuan, in what is now Shanxi Province (Chen Wenxin, ed., Zhongguo Wenzue Biannianshi. Changsha, Hunan People's Press, 2006, Vol. 6, p. 595). The clan then moved to Tianshui, now in Gansu Province, where Wang Renyu was born in 880. Like Wei Yingwu and Wen Tingyun, Wang Renyu was a “bad boy,” who enjoyed betting on horses and dogs and shooting cross-bows, but never liked school. He was, however, exceptionally talented. At the age of twenty-five, he finally began to focus on his education and within three years had become well-known in eastern Gansu for his literary skills. With this start, he eventually rose into officialdom, and also became a prolific writer, especially in poetry and stories.

At the beginning of the tenth century, the Tang Empire had splintered into several smaller kingdoms and regimes, the northwestern area where Wang Renyu lived still held by Tang loyalists. The general who had taken control of the region liked Wang's literary talent and appointed the poet to be his assistant. Though he had reached the age of thirty-two, Wang Renyu still had something of the dare-devil in him. He hiked Mount Maijishan, famous for the many Buddhist shrines carved in niches high up on cliffs near Tianshui. While there, he climbed a dangerous ladder up to the highest shrine, and looking at the land below him, expressed a feeling that he must leave his name “at the edge of heaven” (quoted in Chen Wenxin, ed., Zhongguo Wenzue Biannianshi. Changsha, Hunan People's Press, 2006, Vol. 6, p. 470). As the general’s assistant, he was then sent to Sichuan, where a rival warlord had declared himself emperor of a new dynasty, the Shu. Wang now transferred his loyalty to this new group, and became a favorite of the Shu heir, who became emperor after his father died. Shu, however, did not last long: Wang together with the new “emperor” were both soon captured by the army of his old overlord, the general who had sent him down to Sichuan in the first place.

In captivity Wang Renyu was sent to Luoyang, the former eastern capital of Tang. The two poems translated below were probably written on his way there. In Luoyang, in 934, he wrote a collection of stories about the peak years of the Tang Empire. Yet wars were still raging in central China, and in 948 Luoyang was seized by the emperor of the Later Han Dynasty (947-951), a Turk. Wang Renyu now became a high official in the third post-Tang regime he had served. As the vice-minister of an important ministry, he had responsibility for conducting examinations in order to find talent for Later Han. He was quite successful in this business, for his favorite student, Wang Pu, became the prime minister of the short-lived regime, which would collapse in 951. Wang Renyu lasted five years longer, dying in 956.
Releasing A Monkey

I let you go now, go back to your home forest.
Again and again I bid you farewell – go find and follow your old tracks.
Along the gorges of Yangtze among the Wu Mountains enjoy your life with your family,
quiet in brilliant moonshine.
Never mind the deep mountains – climb and leap and play to satisfy your heart in white clouds.
Sleep and rest, avoiding the dream of those green mountain barriers.
When pine seeds are ripe in late fall, hold tight to the top branches.
Howl and chant like your poet friend, from dawn to evening, from evening to dawn.

Running into the Monkey I Released

By the altar, over the graveyard, on the bank of River Han, a file of monkeys, hand in hand, form a ladder, hanging from the craggy cliff, taking turns to quench their thirst.
One walks shyly towards the traveler, closer and closer, to take a good look.
I think I recognize you too – my old friend and wild guest?
Have you thought of me in your dreams, as I’ve thought of you in moon-lit night?

You’ve returned to your diet of pine seeds your spirit immortal and free.
You no longer need the human food I fed you.
I remain a slave of rice and sorghum they pay me.
Your three howls clear the clouds and touch my heart. Are you telling me that you do recognize me, your former host and friend?
Xue Tao 薛涛

Xue Tao is the only woman poet in this collection. She was born into a good family in Chang’an, in 770. Her father was a government official who went to Chengdu, Sichuan, in service of the empire. At the age of eight, Xue Tao started to write poetry and her name became known among her father’s friends. Her father died in Chengdu, survived by his widow and daughter. No documentation survives regarding her mother, but it’s reasonable to assume that she died shortly after the death of her husband, for Xue Tao was soon sold into prostitution, where she specialized in music and lyrics. At the age of sixteen, she became the favorite of the general in charge of the whole Sichuan area. She lived in the neighborhood where the “Poet Saint” Du Fu (Tu Fu) used to live, by Wanli (Ten-Thousand Mile) Bridge, over Wanhua (Flower Washing) Creek. She planted bulrushes and rhododendrons in her yard and along the creek. She had long-lasting friendship with several male poets of her time, including Yuan Zhen, Wang Jian, and Zheng Gu.

When Wu Yuanheng became the prime minister of the empire in 807, he recommended that the emperor appoint Xue Tao to be one of the editors for the imperial academy. Although she was the only woman and only prostitute in Chinese history who had that title, many prostitutes who conducted their business near military camps were called “female editors” after Xue Tao died in 832.

《池上双鸟》（《全唐诗》卷 803）

双栖绿池上，朝暮共飞还。
更忆将雏日，同心莲叶间。

A Pair of Water Fowl on the Pond

A couple makes a home on the green pond.
They fly away in the morning and return together at night. They’ll remember the happy days raising ducklings beneath lotus leaves.
Two birds, they share one heart.
Wood-Duck Grass*

Fragrant, green, all over the stone steps, 
wood-duck grasses send out tiny buds in pairs, 
like lovely ducklings that play 
all the long spring day.

They never mind autumn winds 
that come to put their games to an early end.

* The Chinese call honeysuckle “wood-duck grass” because, like wood ducks, the petals of honeysuckle, yellow and white, or as the Chinese say, gold and silver, grow in pairs.
Guanxiu 贯休

Guanxiu was a Buddhist monk. His family name was Jiang, and he was born in 832, in Denggao Lane, Lanxi County, in what is now western Zhejiang Province, south of the Yangtze and about two hundred kilometers from the coast of the East China Sea. He was converted to monastic life at the age of seven, in He’an Temple, in Lanxi and with a fellow monk of his age learned to write poetry at fifteen. After undergoing full ordination at the age of twenty, he went into a ten-year retreat in the Monastery of Mount Wuxie. In the early 860s he left the monastery and traveled west to Hongzhou, now the Nanchang area in Jiangxi Province, to continue his Buddhist study and practice in the Zhongling Mountains. He apparently stayed there for decades. In the late 880s, the general controlling that area became aware of him, and developed a liking for his poetry and calligraphy, while for his part Guanxiu became friends with a member of the general’s staff — the poet Wu Rong, who had been demoted to serve in the area. It was from Guanxiu that Wu Rong learned the Zen attitude towards frustrations in life and how to work himself out of depression. The two became such good friends that, according to Wu Rong, during the one and a half years Wu Rong spent in Hongzhou (from the summer of 895 to the winter of 896), they would miss each other if three days went by in which they didn’t meet and talk (see Fu Xuancong, ed., Tang Caizi Zhuan Jiaojian. Beijing, Zhonghua Press, 1999, Vol. 4, p. 431). But Guanxiu’s relationship with the general himself came to a crisis when the general asked him for calligraphy instructions. Guanxiu took offence: how can the general so casually ask for the most serious artistic commitment? His response shocked the general, who exiled him to the unhealthy mountains in what is now Guizhou Province.

After that, Guanxiu went back east to Hangzhou, near his hometown, and settled in the famous Lingyin Temple. His temper and outspoken attitude, however, soon offended another warlord and he had to go west again, to Sichuan where he would bless yet another powerful general with his honesty. Though offended, this military man was able to put up with the criticism and in fact built Longhua Temple for the monk. Guanxiu died there at the age of 82, in the year 912.
Running into Hunters While Passing by a Village

The hunters comb the woods in larger and smaller groups, followed by their women holding arrows and bows.

The killing mood comes from the south, the north, the east and west, competing with the lingering fire on the smoky plain.

Their falcons sweep over the burning fields with bleeding hares in claws. They whip long bamboo sticks to scare the pheasants from yellow weeds until the birds in fear dash up into the sky.

I can’t help wondering what life is supposed to mean, why these people take up such a trade.

I’ve heard the greatest virtue is to live and let live. Everything that happens happens by heaven’s will.

Then why does heaven make these men?

Why doesn’t heaven send a blizzard in June and freeze to death the elk and deer in ten feet of snow?
The Activities of an Old Peasant

The old peasant doesn’t have much to do — he places sliced pears in a bottle to steam.

While the fragrance fills up the village, mulberry leaves, large and red, fall to ground.

He dozes off on stairs as the sun warms his back and lulls him into a mid-day nap.

The trees are old and thick — bamboo and peaches side by side, their shades darker than those of the tall silos.

He tells me that since his grandchildren became skilled farmers, he’s eaten well for five long years.

On hearing his story my heart begins to ache.

It’s a simple truth known to the world that none can be happy if they can’t harvest what they plant.

A Short Poem on Dao

Grasses and trees have their own nature which is no different from that of mine.

Yet if I behave like grasses and trees, I’ll never find myself approaching the Dao.

People of this world say they want to achieve it, but they’re unwilling to act as the Dao dictates.

I pity these people who find no treasure although they live in a grand treasure house.
The surrounding peaks — your closest neighbors.
The nesting birds — your dearest relatives.
Your white head finds a pillow on a cool rock.
Your black gown, despite the patches, is forever clean.

You find plenty of food in piles of acorns, the chestnuts fall by the foot trail.

Apes and monkeys sit around you as you sit in profound meditation.

If you re-open your gate and start a Zen commune, I'd volunteer to be the sweeper of your altar.

On the Lake House

In the leaves of pear and chestnut trees, birds, high pitched, twitter happy and free.

The man who understands their songs lives in an old house on the far end of the lake.

Hungry mice in his pantry nibble at water caltrop. New cicadas hide in cracks of the chestnut trunk.

He wonders when the wars would finally stop in the human world beyond rivers and seas.

The New Monkey

Finally I see you after the flowers fall and mosses cover the tree trunk.

Suddenly you start howling on the high branch, make me wonder where you come from.

The pure wind sends your voice high.
It sounds more chilling in the dim moonlight.

How many fame-pursuers, I wonder, feel depressed by your voice year after year.
Qiji 齊己

Qiji was a Buddhist monk, his name before conversion Hu Desheng. He came originally from the Tongqing Temple in the Dawei Mountains in Hunan. This was a large temple and major landowner, which had more than a thousand tenant peasants who rented land from the temple. One of these tenants was Hu Desheng’s father, and at the age of seven Hu Desheng himself started herding cows and buffalos for the temple. An intelligent boy, he was a quick learner, with remarkable language skills. He started writing poetry while sitting on the back of buffalos as he herded them along. His talent was soon discovered by the Tongqing monks, who persuaded his parents to allow him to join the temple as a shami – a student monk. That was how the lad Hu Desheng became the monk Qiji.

Qiji soon became a well known poet, highly respected by the poets south of Dongting Lake. He traveled north partly to further stimulate his poetic imagination and partly to meet more poet friends. He started with the famous Yueyang Tower, where he thought he could get a view of the Dongting Lake he had read so much about. However, he climbed up the tower during the wintertime, to discover that at that time of the year the lake shrank down to be just a moderate extension of the Xiangjiang River, the river that flowed past his temple in the Dawei Mountains. I myself was worried about the lake when I read last winter that Dongting Lake had shrunk to one-third of its regular size. Qiji’s experience of the same lake somehow sounds reassuring to me, for now I understand that the seasonal change of size has a history extending back long before construction of the notorious dam on the Three Gorges.

Qiji continued his trip to the capital city Chang’an, and met Zheng Gu (included in this selection). They became great friends, and Qiji even respected Zheng Gu as a teacher. From there he hiked the mountains around the capital, the Zhongnan Mountains, Mount Huashan, and the Zhongtiao Mountains on the northern bank of the Yellow River. In later time, he made several more trips of this sort to Zhejiang and Jiangxi, eventually settling in western Hunan, in the Daolin Temple.

He died in 943 in Jingzhou, now Hubei Province.

Planting a Pine Sapling

A wild monk taught me how to plant.  
I help the sapling grow higher than the bushes.  
Every man grows old within a hundred years.  
A thousand years are just enough for pines to reach their prime.

Quiet is the pine, suitable companion of bamboo and rock.  
Deep is its shade, shelter for monkeys and apes.
Looking at the sapling I hear tidal waves made by giant branches hundreds of autumns to come.

《新栽松》（《全唐诗》卷 838）

野僧教种法，荏苒出蓬蒿。  
百岁催人老，千年待尔高。  
静宜兼竹石，幽合近猿猱。  
他日成阴后，秋风吹海涛。
Releasing a Snowy Egret

I love your fine feathers, white and pure.
You eye the slimy eels.
In the end I have to let you follow
your own will and give you back
to the ripples of your native lake.

The Pine Sapling

Its tiny trunk barely above my knees,
its dragon-clawed roots already possess a
spirit.
In harsh frost all plants turn yellow or
white.
In my yard its greenness makes a small
forest.

Late at night the wind soughs through its
twigs,
to accompany the chirping crickets under
the stairs.
I try but fail to imagine a thousand years
from now –
who would be walking around the pine,
comparing its twisted trunk to an ancient
dragon?
**Wild Mallards**

The mallards on my pond left without bidding farewell to their cousin ducks. They’re leaner but live longer than the ducks who stay, cooked for their tasty fat.

The mallards fly over expansive rivers and lakes, swim and dive in ponds and pools to search for tiny fish and shrimp. Among the white flowers of the duckweed in spring, they play and brush their feathers fresh and green.

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**Written on a Painting of Egrets**

*As a Letter to Director Sun*

I used to see them on broad rivers but never observed them so close.

Today in this wonderful painting I see the true spirit of water fowl.

Never use golden color to add value to characters, nor artificial paint to give beauty to their feather.

The catkins glow bright in the evening – such a wonderful place to be close.

Thinking carefully I realize that for a closer look at the birds I prefer the painting to the cage.

By nature wild birds don’t like to be too close to men.

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《野鸭》（《全唐诗》卷842）

野鸭殊家鸭，离群忽远飞。
长生缘甚瘦，近死为伤肥。
江海游空阔，池塘啄细微。
红兰白苹渚，春暖刷毛衣。

《题画鹭鸶兼简孙郎中》

（《全唐诗》卷844）

曾向沧江看不真，却因图画见精神。
何妨金粉资高格，不用丹青点此身。
蒲叶岸长堪映带，荻花丛晚好相亲。
思量画得胜笼得，野性由来不恋人。
The Monkey’s Farewell to the Master

So worthy of my remembrance, ah, the twelve peaks behind the clouds in spring, along the Wu Gorges. Peaches and apricots ready for picking – sweet, red, wild.

Looking at the gold chain Your Highness may feel sad. In moonlight you let me go despite your broken heart.

A Parrot’s Plea to Its Master

My home was the nest on the highest tree on the highest peak farthest west, so far that no one notice my colorful coat.

Now I’m forced to talk the human tongue – I tell you this: please be kind and let me go to the other side of heaven to peck on a few peaches.
Horse in Human Language 马作人语

This poem was supposedly written in the ninth century, while the Complete Tang Poems (Quan Tang Shi 全唐诗) was compiled in 1707. What impresses me most is that over a millennium, no Chinese reader or poet ever challenged the idea that a horse could compose a poem in human language. I just wonder what my western colleagues, especially the ecocritics would say about this small wonder of literary production.

The story was allegedly about Lu Yan 路岩, a Tang scholar/bureaucrat who became a prime minister at the age of thirty-six, but was demoted to Xinzhou 新州 (in what is now Xinping County, Guangdong Province) in the year 873. According to Beimengsuoyan 北梦琐言 by Sun Guangxian 孙光宪 (901-968), on the road to demotion in Xinzhou, when passing Jiangling in what is now southern Hubei Province, Lu Yan’s horse suddenly spoke up in human language and uttered the lines in the form of a short lyric. The poem turned out to be prophesy: soon after Lu Yan arrived at his demoted office, he was further demoted to Hainan Island, and then was offered the “graceful” opportunity to commit suicide. Sun Guangxian, the collector of this horse story, didn’t believe that the horse could predict future disasters, though he never questioned that the horse did utter those words. (See Taiping Guang Ji 太平广记. Beijing, Zhonghua Press, 1994, p. 1043.) Thus, what the horse said is an achievement in Chinese poetry rather than in Chinese mythology.

A Poem Composed by a Horse in Human Language

Catkins – blooming white flowers.
After these flowers,
No home but the road.
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