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.

《石上藤》（《全唐诗》卷267）
空山无鸟迹，何物如人意。
委曲结绳文，离披草书字。

《临平湖》（《全唐诗》卷267）
采藕平湖上，藕泥封藕节。
船影入荷香，莫冲莲柄折。
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 Xuazong 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, Tángdài Shíwén Liújià Nüanpǔ, 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 Yúnjīqiān (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.
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.

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.
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.
《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。

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.

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.
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.

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.