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 Xinzheng 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 白湟, for example, served as magistrate of Gong County in what is now Henan Province. Seeing the beautiful landscape of a neighboring county, Xinzheng, 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 Weifei 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 新乐府 (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 makes 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.
Releasing the Fish (Composed in Jiangzhou Prefecture)

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.
《游石门涧》（《全唐诗》卷430）
石门无旧径，披榛访遗迹。
时逢山水秋，清辉如古昔。
常闻慧远辈，题诗此岩壁。
云覆莓苔封，苍然无处觅。
萧疏野生竹，崩剥多年石。
自从东晋后，无复人游历。
独有秋涧声，潺湲空旦夕。

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.

《山雉》（《全唐诗》卷431）
五步一啄草，十步一饮水。
适性遂其生，时哉山梁雉。
梁上无☁翳，粱下无鹰鹘。
雌雄与群雉，皆得终天年。
嗟嗟笼下鸡，及彼池中雁。
既有稻粱恩，必有牺牲患。

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.
Releasing a Migrating Goose

Over Jiujian, 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.
Planting the Litchi Tree

Giant pearls of coral,
so red and lovely!

The magistrate in exile,
so old with white beard!

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?

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.”

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**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 王安石 (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).

《拟古咏河边枯树》
（《全唐诗》卷469）
野火烧枝水洗根，数围孤树半心存。
应是无机承雨露，却将春色寄苔痕。

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 Jianshang 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.

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.