

## **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).

《享先农乐章－诚和》

（《全唐诗》卷32第10首）

粒食伊始，农之所先。

古今攸赖，是曰人天。

耕斯帝籍，播厥公田。

式崇明祀，神其福焉。

**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 嵇康 (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.

### 《野望》（《全唐诗》卷37第14首）

东皋薄暮望，徙倚欲何依。  
树树皆秋色，山山唯落晖。  
牧童驱犊返，猎马带禽归。  
相顾无相识，长歌怀采薇。

### 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.



《秋夜喜逢王处士》

(《全唐诗》 卷37第32首)

北场芸藿罢，东皋刈黍归。  
相逢秋月满，更值夜萤飞。

**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.

《食后》(《全唐诗》 卷37第35首)

田家无所有，晚食遂为常。  
菜剪三秋绿，飧炊百日黄。  
胡麻山杪样，楚豆野麋方。  
始暴松皮脯，新添杜若浆。  
葛花消酒毒，茱萸发羹香。  
鼓腹聊乘兴，宁知逢世昌。

**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* 寒山

An at least semi-legendary figure, Han (“cold” 寒) Shan (“mountain” 山) 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 天台, 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 钱学烈 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).

《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。  
磻磻风吹面，纷纷雪积身。  
朝朝不见日，岁岁不知春。

**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.



《人问寒山道》（《全唐诗》卷806）

人问寒山道，寒山路不通。  
夏天冰未释，日出雾朦胧。  
似我何由届，与君心不同。  
君心若似我，还得到其中。

**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.

《家住绿岩下》（《全唐诗》卷806）

家住绿岩下，庭芜更不芟。  
新藤垂缭绕，古石树嵒岩。  
山果猿猴摘，池鱼白鹭衔。  
仙书一两卷，树下读喃喃。

**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.

《可重是寒山》（《全唐诗》卷806）

可重是寒山，白云常自闲。  
猿啼畅道内，虎啸出人间。  
独步石可履，孤吟藤好攀。  
松风清飒飒，鸟语声喧喧。

**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 沈佺期和 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。  
往来花不发，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.

《和晋陵陆丞早春游望》

(《全唐诗》卷 62 第 11 首)

独有宦游人，偏惊物候新。  
云霞出海曙，梅柳渡江春。  
淑气催黄鸟，晴光转绿蘋。  
忽闻歌古调，归思欲沾巾。

**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.

《旅寓安南》(《全唐诗》卷 62)

交趾殊风候，寒迟暖复催。  
仲冬山果熟，正月野花开。  
积雨生昏雾，轻霜下震雷。  
故乡逾万里，客思倍从来。

**Sojourning in Vietnam**

Chochin China, such a different  
climate!  
Cold days come late, soon chased  
away by warmer winds.  
In mid-winter, mountain fruits ripen  
in bundles.

Wild flowers begin to bloom the first  
month of the year.  
Incessant rains make a somber mist.  
Thunder-claps shake loose the light frost.  
My homeland is ten thousand miles  
away –  
In my thoughts, the distance doubles.