

仲
昭



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Li She was the second of five brothers of a family that originally made its fame in western Gansu Province, in northwest China, but later moved and settled near Luoyang, where they remained for generations.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?

《牧童词》（《全唐诗》卷477）

朝牧牛，牧牛下江曲。
夜牧牛，牧牛度村谷。
荷蓑出林春雨细，芦管卧吹莎草绿。
乱插蓬蒿箭满腰，不怕猛虎欺黄犊。

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.