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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."

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《过山农家》（《全唐诗》卷267）

板桥人渡泉声，茅檐日午鸡鸣。
莫嗔焙茶烟暗，却喜晒谷天晴。

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.

《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。

**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.

《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。

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 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, *Tangdai Shiwen Liujia Nianpu*, Taipei, 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 *Yunjiqian* (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.

《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.

《观田家》（《全唐诗》卷 192）

微雨众卉新，一雷惊蛰始。
田家几日闲，耕种从此起。
丁壮俱在野，场圃亦就理。
归来景常晏，饮犊西涧水。
饥劬不自苦，膏泽且为喜。
仓廩无宿储，徭役犹未已。
方惭不耕者，禄食出闾里。

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.

《山耕叟》（《全唐诗》卷 193）

萧萧垂白发，默默诮知情。
独放寒林烧，多寻虎迹行。
暮归何处宿，来此空山耕。

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.

《幽居》（《全唐诗》卷 193）

贵贱虽异等，出门皆有营。
独无外物牵，遂此幽居情。
微雨夜来过，不知春草生。
青山忽已曙，鸟雀绕舍鸣。
时与道人偶，或随樵者行。
自当安蹇劣，谁谓薄世荣。

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 led 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 曹刿, 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.

《山店（一作王建诗）》
（《全唐诗》卷 280）

登登山路行时尽，决决溪泉到处闻。
风动叶声山犬吠，一家松火隔秋云。

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.

《山中一绝》（《全唐诗》卷 279）

饥食松花渴饮泉，偶从山后到山前。
阳坡软草厚如织，因与鹿麕相伴眠。

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.

《春游东潭》（《全唐诗》卷 279）

移舟试望家，漾漾似天涯。
日暮满潭雪，白鸥和柳花。

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?

《和张仆射塞下曲》
（《全唐诗》卷 278）

月黑雁飞高，单于夜遁逃。
欲将轻骑逐，大雪满弓刀。

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.

《晚到盩厔老家》（《全唐诗》卷 280）

老翁曾旧识，相引出柴门。
苦话别时事，因寻溪上村。
数年何处客，近日几家存。
冒雨看禾黍，逢人忆子孙。
乱藤穿井口，流水到篱根。
惆怅不堪住，空山月又昏。

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.

《竹窗闻风寄苗发司空曙》
（《全唐诗》卷 283）

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。

**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.

《夜上受降城闻笛》（《全唐诗》卷 283）

回乐峰前沙似雪，受降城下月如霜。不知何处吹芦管，一夜征人尽望乡。

**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.

《汴河曲》（《全唐诗》卷 283）

汴水东流无限春，隋家宫阙已成尘。
行人莫上长堤望，风起杨花愁杀人。

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.

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《水宿闻雁》（《全唐诗》卷 283）

早雁忽为双，惊秋风水窗。
夜长人自起，星月满空江。

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.