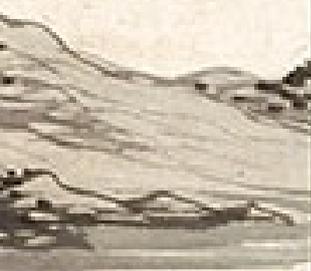


THE
SHAMBHALA ANTHOLOGY
OF *Chinese Poetry*

TRANSLATED AND EDITED BY J. P. SEATON



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ABOUT THE BOOK

In traditional Chinese culture, poetic artistry held a place that was unrivaled by any other single talent and that was a source of prestige and even of political power. In this rich collection, J. P. Seaton introduces the reader to the main styles of Chinese poetry and the major poets, from the classic Shih Ching to the twentieth century. Seaton has a poet’s ear, and his translations here are fresh and vivid.

J. P. SEATON is Professor of Chinese at the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill. He is the translator of numerous books, including *The Poetry of Zen* and *Cold Mountain Poems*, and his poetry translations have been widely anthologized in such books as *The Anchor Book of Chinese Poetry*, *The Norton Anthology of World Poetry*, and *The Vintage Book of Contemporary World Poetry*.

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J. P. SEATON

with additional translations by
James Cryer



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Dedication

THIS BOOK IS A "LIFE'S WORK." AS SUCH, IT IS DEDICATED to too many to name, who were just enough to keep me at it for forty years. Of my teachers, F. A. Bischoff, above all. Influences, and a joy to know, Carolyn Kizer and Ursula K. Le Guin, each of whom changed my life and my work. Fast friends: Bill Bollinger, Brad Langley, Jim Cryer, Jim Sanford: who could ask for more. Students, from 1968 until 2004, five or six thousand, twenty or thirty of whom should know for sure that I remember them. I *do*, and thank you here.

Finally though, this book is dedicated to Rosalie Katherine Paradiso Seaton and her three children, without whom this life would not have been lived nor this work ever begun. Everything begins in the family, or so the Chinese philosophize.

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Notes

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Introduction

THIS INTRODUCTION WAS WRITTEN TO OFFER YOU SOME information about Chinese poetry and about the arrangement of the anthology, to help you to get started. It begins with a little discussion of the extremely elevated place of poetry in traditional Chinese culture. I then discuss as briefly as possible the nature of the writing system that makes Chinese poetry unique in world literature, and the interesting variety of poetic forms in which Chinese poets put their language to use. If I come close there to suggesting that Chinese poetry can't really be translated at all, you must try to remember that while poets (and translators) generally agree that "the translator is a traitor," as the Italians say, and "poetry is what is lost in translation," as Robert Frost said, the knightly translator in his chamber-pot helmet continues to create literature that can be read for learning and for pleasure, and that without the treacheries of my fellow translators you couldn't read Chaucer, much less Homer, Sappho, or Catullus. Next I dash through an introduction to the poets who have seemed to me for one or another reason most clearly worth singling out. Some of the poets left out of this introduction may appeal to you more than the "headliners" in the act, and you may feel free to regard my standouts as merely your landmarks as you wander through the book. Finally, inspired by a reencounter with a poem by Li Po, I end with a sentimental cry for peace on earth and goodwill toward men, women, and children, and an invitation to begin reading poems.

In traditional Chinese culture, poetry held a place that was unrivaled by any other single talent, ability, or practical accomplishment as a source of prestige, affluence, and even political power. Literacy was a source of potency in all premodern societies, and literary prowess was and is admired and acknowledged as a gateway along the path of social mobility in many Western cultures (French, Italian, German, even English). However, nowhere else has it even approached the position it held in traditional China. The reason for its preeminence there lay directly in the many pronouncements of the Master Sage, Confucius, that linked together, under the Chinese term *wen*, a number of things that go beyond even the most advanced conception of literacy in the West.

Wen was to be acquired by a twofold process. Fundamentally, the word refers on the one hand to *decoration*, that which is applied to the outside of an object of sacred worship or of civil ritual, or to a cup, or a house, or a man or a woman. On the other hand, *wen* also refers to the patterns that occur and recur in nature: ripple patterns in the sand of a streambed, or the grain in the wood of a freshly cut board, always apparent in the raw wood but always more evident and more beautiful when rubbed and oiled and rubbed again, to glow with a warm sheen. So too, a man or a woman may decorate clothing, or even skin, to attract attention. So too, say the Confucians, one must rub and polish one's natural grain: the Confucian believes that human nature is good at birth and that it may, with care, glow with a warm sheen. To accomplish

wen is, finally, in the simplest terms, to accomplish the ability to communicate fully and powerfully.

Wen includes the most advanced forms of passive literacy: reading with discernment, critically and analytically, and with a joyful appreciation of the aesthetics of the written word as well. Beyond these, *wen* is also active literacy at its most powerful. It is the ability to create through language, to communicate with passion and power. It includes not just the ability to argue brilliantly but also the ability to marshal beauty on the side of truth in the ultimate form of humane argument.

The five books that Confucius used in his teaching, what we call the Chinese Classics, included a poetry anthology, the *Shih Ching*. It is the largest of the five. These books, though they do not claim divine authority, were as influential in traditional Chinese culture as the Bible is in Christian societies or the Koran in Islamic. Using each of these books, Confucius taught that literacy granted the ability to cross the barriers of both time and space through the *study* of history and literature. Further, he taught that self-cultivation in the arts of *wen* gave the honest student (or scholar, as we in the West have called the traditional Chinese gentleman who followed the Master's injunctions) the tools to master the arts of communication.

And though a clean and clear prose style was an ideal of Confucius, *poetry* was the mode of communication par excellence. According to Confucius, the cultivated man, speaking through poetry, the most powerful literary medium, achieved *Te*, *charisma*, the almost magical power to lead the community in peace and even, when necessary, in war.

The vehicle that made all this powerful communication, all this world-ordering charisma, possible was itself unique, a one-of-a-kind written language, based in turn on a system of writing completely unlike any other in the world.

All Western languages are written using one or another form of alphabet: *letters* used to represent the *sounds* of spoken words. There are advantages to alphabetic writing. Once you learn a relatively small and clearly defined set of letters of your given alphabet, you can "sound out" any word in your own language, and if you know it by ear, you can also "read" it. But there are problems. The pronunciation of words changes over time, and so the farther away you are from a source text, say Shakespeare (who can be hard to read) or Chaucer (impossible without special training), the harder it gets to understand what you're reading, even in your own language. Also, language change is accelerated across national borders. So speakers of Italian, French, and Spanish, for instance, could understand each other's spoken language two thousand years ago, but they can't today. Thus we might say that alphabets cause us to grow apart from even the closest members of our human families, helping space and time to separate us.

Though it is not what most people find most immediately fascinating about the Chinese writing system, its most important feature is the fact that its characters carry meaning independent of sound. They carry pronunciation and meaning both, but the meaning of the characters stays the same, even as the inexorable laws of sound change make the pronunciations of all words in Chinese change at the same rate as do the words of Greek, Russian, Italian, or English.

Every single Chinese character represents a single spoken syllable. That syllable may be a single spoken word, or it may represent one part of a polysyllabic word.

Chinese has never been, as so many well-intentioned authors have told us all, a monosyllabic language. There are in fact fewer one-syllable words in spoken Chinese than in spoken English. But since the Chinese writing system consists of single-syllable characters, each of which does have a meaning, any writer who wants to communicate the meaning of a two- or three-syllable spoken word with a single character can do so.

Economy, or elegance, as even a scientist routinely puts it, has almost always been regarded as a mark of superior literary style in every culture in the world. So it's not surprising that from the beginning, most Chinese authors have chosen to use one character to express the meaning, in writing, of polysyllabic spoken words: in addition to being a rule of good writing in most languages, *in the beginning*, when *the word* was out of necessity scratched or carved on relatively hard materials, it made extra good sense.

Maybe that's how it began: laziness as the mother of invention. But whatever the reason, long before most of the poems presented here were written, *most* written Chinese was as close to being monosyllabic as writers could make it. Within poems and prose pieces the drive toward verbal economy also set a premium on extreme grammatical simplicity. Spoken Chinese can be as joyously redundant and wordy as any medium of gossip in the world, but classical Chinese is positively telegraphic.

But now to the fascinating stuff!

The traditional Chinese characters fall into three basic categories: pictographs (which *sometimes* look delightfully, excitingly like what they mean), ideographs of two types (a few of which are among the most interesting elements in the language), and finally a somewhat complicated type (extremely important in artistic terms), the phonetic/signific compound.

The pictographs came first, certainly. They represent simple *things*: always the real, the phenomenal, never the imaginary or the abstract. When introduced to them and to the simpler of the ideographs by the first Jesuit China scholars, the great German polymath Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz (1646–1716), a contemporary of Isaac Newton and inventor of calculus in the notation still used today, wondered if they might not be the perfect *language of phenomena*, the way to talk about everyday, bump-your-toe-on-it, “real” things, even as mathematics is the language of abstraction. Some of the characters easily reveal their meanings even to an untrained eye, and when we look at older, less stylized versions of these little pictures, as traditional Chinese poets always did in the process of learning, and in everyday life in traditional Chinese culture where they were used ceremonially, we can easily discern many, many *things*, from the sun and the moon to mother and baby, from mountain and river to fish and horse and bird. Fewer than 15 percent of the characters are pictographs, but when one appears in a line of poetry, it announces its presence directly to the right brain, where visual images are processed, as well as to the left brain, where *language* is processed. For a moment at least, the reader may perhaps experience the thing represented directly. Words in alphabetic script enter the left brain as spoken words, without raising a flicker in the visual cortex.

The ideographs come in two types. The simple ideograph offers a picture of an idea, an abstraction. Beyond a surprisingly few extremely simple concepts, this is very hard to do, and there are very few. Simple horizontal lines piled on top of each other give us

the first three numbers; after that, as the allowed standard space gets crowded, this gives out as a *method*. In another, a horizontal line meets a vertical at the top, with a little mark beside it apparently meant to say, “It’s the direction of the vertical stroke that counts, stupid!” because the character indeed means “down, under, inferior,” while a horizontal line met by a vertical line at the bottom, with the same wisecrack little dot beside it means “up, on top of, superior.” After a few other stumbles, the earliest generations of character inventors gave up on the “simple” ideographs. So we can say that the characters are not particularly good at rendering abstractions. We can agree with Leibniz that perhaps math is the better alternative here. On the other hand, the Chinese have no trouble with abstractions or abstract words in their thought or in their spoken language, nor do they have trouble rendering spoken words created to express abstractions into quite understandable characters.

After the simple ideographs came compound ideographs, and these were much more successful. They are characters constructed by juxtaposing (side by side or in some close physical relationship) two or more *preexisting* pictorial elements. Two trees placed side by side make a grove, and three (for design’s sake, two below and one above) make a forest. A sun beside a moon means “bright.” A woman beside a child means, interestingly, “good” or, more interestingly, “addicted” or “passionately dependent.” A human being beside the number two indicates a more abstracted sort of goodness: “benevolence” or “compassion,” a philosopher’s term to stand beside the visceral good that are woman and child, to any eye but a fear-crazed soldier or a cold-hearted dictator. This more abstract word means “Good” or “Goodness” for Confucius and Confucians. It is that which we owe each other because we are human, all some mother’s child. A poet like the powerful Sung poet, historian, political magnate, and literary patron Ou-yang Hsiu could shock his readers, Hemingway style, by using the former character, rather than any of a hundred more nuanced pieces of literary vocabulary for natural “goodness” or beauty, to describe a place and a state of mind it produced, while Confucian philosophers, under the influence of Taoist and Zen thought, would expand their meaning of the second “good” further, to say that any human facing any other *thing* must know love. A great green good, a tender love of all the world, the whole material universe, one thing at a time!

Between them, the two types of characters, pictographs and ideographs, constitute less than about 15 percent of the characters in the largest Chinese dictionary. The vast majority of the remaining characters are of the third type, what I will call (different folks have used different terminology) the phonetic/signific compounds. A phonetic/signific compound consists of one element that gives a clue—sometimes a very slight one, because language sounds change in time—to the pronunciation of the character, and another element that gives an often very general and sometimes downright indiscernible indication of the class of meaning into which the character falls. For many characters, however, the signific is powerful: almost every one of the hundred or so characters found in any Chinese-English dictionary that have the signific element *mountain* have something to do with mountains. A majority of the nearly nine hundred in the forty-volume complete Chinese-language dictionary do also. Almost every single character in that Chinese-English dictionary that contains the element *fish* is the name of a particular variety of aquatic life. Here the signific shouts, “It’s a fish” at the beginning reader, while the phonetic says, “Try the words you know

that sound something like me.” But many “signific” elements are required to act in too many characters, thus leading to an ambiguity that makes them useful only as mnemonic devices, memory aids once the learner has memorized the character in which they are contained.

But if phonetics don’t always carry true phonetic information, and signific elements are not always very significant, the characters of this class can still offer extremely useful tools to the talented poet. Detached from their codified dictionary meanings, the elements within a character may function independently, answering to the needs of the creative artist’s imagination. For example, the suffix meaning “before” or “in front of” in Chinese includes among other elements a pictographic representations of a moon. The elements are there in the character originally to help to give a guide to pronunciation. But a poet who wants to talk about the pain of separation, while gazing upon the moon, like Li Po in “Thoughts of a Quiet Night,” the famous poem found here on p. 90, can introduce an extra moon into a line by simply using what comes out in English translation as the appropriate preposition. Li Po’s famous line “Before the bed, bright moonlight” actually contains among its five characters a moon (the pictograph for moon) and two more moons, one in the compound ideograph *bright* and another shining dimly but insistently out of the character for the preposition *before*. The moon, which can be seen at the same time in different places by separated friends, lovers, or family, is a powerful ready-made symbol. The writing system lets Li Po literally fill his little poem with moonlight.

Contemporary Chinese readers pay little or no attention to such possible manipulations of the language when they are reading a history, a scientific paper, or the daily news (though modern print advertisers *do* use these three-thousand-year-old “artifacts” in some pretty nearly subliminal advertising techniques). Moreover, not many traditional Chinese poems contain any character “tricks” of any kind. *Meaning*, the content of the poet’s heart and mind and the message that heart and mind wishes to send another human, is almost always the purpose of the poem, at least of any poem I would translate. But the tools of the writing system are nonetheless clearly there. The best poets use them most, and put them to use best; sometimes, I’m sure, they play this way simply to show that they can, and sometimes, as in Li Po’s “Thoughts of a Quiet Night,” they do it seemingly effortlessly, as if the poetry gods had provided them with antic strokes in honor of a noble effort.

When, at last, I begin the run through of poets included in this book, I’ll begin with an anonymous peasant, or peasants, who cared little for “form.”

But before I present them, one more little technical bit: poets write in forms, such as sonnets or heroic couplets or free verse, and it’s customary in any kind of poetry anthology to talk a little about the forms presented. This anthology contains poems in nine different forms. Two of them developed during the late Chou, in the fourth century B.C.E., outside the Chinese cultural realm in the state of Ch’u, and though the examples from these styles are important poems, the *form* did not continue as a vehicle for literary creation after the very early Han, two hundred years later.

Five of the most important forms are very closely related and can be seen as having evolved from the simple verses found in the *Poetry Classic*, or *Shih Ching*. All five of the forms share end rhyming on even numbered lines, with a rhyme on the first line

optional. For all of the forms except the four-character verse found in the *Shih Ching*, both five- and seven-character lines are permitted, with a pause, or caesura, immediately before the final three characters in the line. Four of the five can be written to any length (any number of lines), if we don't quibble about a subdivision that observes an eight-line limit, and another that allows only four lines. Each of these forms is a kind of *shih*. The word *shih* can refer either to one of these forms or to poetry in the generic sense.

Of the seven forms that survived the Han or were invented after it, the eight-line *lu-shih*, or "regulated *shih*," was technically the most demanding, being the only form in general use that forced the poet to take into account the fact that tone, the change of pitch over the course of a syllable, was a feature of the Chinese language. Interestingly, the strict rules of the *lu-shih* made it easy to write good verse—that is, to learn and to follow rules—and hard to write real poetry—to follow all the rules and still express clearly and fully what weighs on your heart and mind. Most poets of T'ang and after, even the wild Li Po himself, wrote *lu-shih*, peer pressure making them feel compelled to prove they *could*, perhaps. Tu Fu's reputation as China's greatest *human* poet, second only to Li Po, who was regarded as the spirit of poetry incarnate, rests partly upon his absolute mastery of the *lu-shih*.

The last two of the original forms mentioned above, the *tz'u*, practiced most seriously by Sung poets, and the *san-ch'u*, the short lyric variety of *ch'u* most popular among the unemployed bohemian-style poets and popular dramatists of the Yuan, were not widely pursued vehicles for serious poetry after the periods of their origination. Each of these forms involves "filling in" the metrical demands of, that is, putting words into, a preexisting song, as if you, or Weird Al Yankovich, were to write new words to "Yankee Doodle" or "The Star-Spangled Banner" or "Feelings." Many very fine poems, including the complete works of Li Ch'ing-chao, were written in the *tz'u* form, but the addition of tonal rules, à la the rules of the T'ang *lu-shih*, effectively stifled whatever freedom the folk origin of these forms brought with them. By the time of the Ming and Ch'ing, *tz'u* and the several kinds of *ch'u* writing became more or less a poetaster's hobby.

Now, though, we are ready to talk poetry and poets, and you may trust no poetaster is to be found anywhere ahead.

Anonymous is without a doubt the most prolific poet in the world. And I'm convinced that more often than not in world literature, Anonymous is a woman's name. Certainly, anyway, that's most often the case in this book. Rough-voiced as it is, "The Peasant's Song" might or might not be an exception to my rule. At any rate, this poem is identified by Mencius and Chuang Tzu, respectively two of the most important of the founding fathers of Confucianism and Taoism, as the first poem ever uttered in Chinese. Its radical, even anarchical ("What has some emperor to do with us?"), vision of local autonomy may be surprising to some readers. But perhaps we are just still influenced by old stereotypes regarding traditional Chinese ideas about personal freedom and "human rights." The poem's theme is certainly an honorable expression of the ideals of democracy as well as a perennial feminist one. It's also one that you'll find again and again in the poetry of Li Po and his friends in both temporal directions.

Following "The Peasant's Song" is a group of poems from the *Shih Ching*, a book

regarded as a bible by orthodox Confucians for the past 2,500 years. Let me emphasize here that every poet in this book, Confucian or otherwise (save perhaps *the peasant* if we accept the dating of Mencius and Chuang Tzu), knew by heart all the poems from the *Shih Ching*. Like the Christian Bible in the English poetic tradition, the sacred status of all of the Confucian Classics makes these poems, even the most rough and ready among them, ripe for use as powerful allusions in later poetry.

The first nonanonymous poem in the Chinese tradition, the famous “On Encountering Sorrow” (*Li Sao*) by Ch’u Yuan, and the Taoistic response to Ch’u Yuan seen in “The Fisherman’s Song,” finish the offerings from the pre-Han period. Their content is extraordinarily influential in later traditional poetry.

After a selection from the Han’s extant poetry, the most important poets of the Chinese dark ages are presented, and the works of Juan Chi and T’ao Ch’ien, among a group of notables, certainly point to the universal verity of the Western saying that hard times make for great art. Juan Chi is ambiguous and philosophically deep, and he is a source for T’ao Ch’ien, perhaps China’s first “modern” poet, and many after him.

The sheer number of poets whose outstanding poems fill part 3 makes it clear that the T’ang dynasty, from which all the poets and poems that fill those pages are drawn, is, as the Chinese themselves assert, the Golden Age of Chinese poetry. First among many giants of the period comes Wang Wei, who would in any other generation have been a man without peer. He was a child prodigy as a musician, the innovative founder of a Zen-influenced school of landscape painting, and an important patron of Zen itself. He was also a high minister of state and a poet who mastered the T’ang quatrain, a verse form perfectly fitted to his synthesizing intellect and his Zen-trained powers of perception.

Immediately following Wang Wei in our pages, and in fact born less than a year after him, comes the truly incomparable Li Po. Though a difference between the length of one foot in his time and today makes this legendary eight-footer measure in at something closer to a modern six feet eight, he was a literary giant by any measure. Born and raised in China’s western borderlands, he studied the art of swordsmanship while he also mastered the civil arts of poetry and philosophy in a Taoist monastery during his youth. Perhaps the world’s first cultural “superstar,” he composed verses on the spot to please an emperor or to settle a bar bill.

Just a page or so away from Li Po is to be found his younger contemporary and friend and China’s other claimant to the title of “greatest poet,” Tu Fu, a devoted family man who was also a dangerously courageous civil servant in an empire under siege. A generation later, in the footsteps of these master poets comes another wave of greats, including “the poet’s poet” Po Chu-i, perhaps the second best known and certainly for a long time the single most translated of all the Chinese poets. Swelling the ranks of his generation are a trio of extraordinary poets, including Tu Mu, a somewhat guiltily committed hedonist, who was a relative of Tu Fu (and a master of the quatrain to rival even Wang Wei and Li Po); the mad, macabre genius Li Ho; and the Casanova of Chinese poetry, Li Shang-yin.

Because of the special themes of their poems, I have separated six poets of the T’ang from their contemporaries and placed them in a section of their own at the end of part 3, out of order in the book’s chronological arrangement. All six are known as Zen poets. They include both monks and laymen. Three are pseudonymous or perhaps

even entirely legendary, two were historically important men in the history of Zen Buddhism as an institution, and one was an apostate monk who went on to a successful career as a local official in a time when the famous bodhisattva oath (to dedicate oneself to serve humanity with unlimited compassion, refusing to enter nirvana until all other sentient beings were saved) may indeed have called humane and compassionate mortals to service in the red dust of the profane world. Their talents and skills mark them as members of the same tradition as Juan Chi and T'ao Ch'ien; and though Zen holds them apart from the lay poets of T'ang, *wen* binds them to the tradition of the Chinese person of letters.

When we return to history from our side trip into the sacred space-time of Zen, we discover T'ang drawn to an end and the number of great poets about to grow markedly fewer. The Sung did produce great poets. It offers Su Shih (also known as Su Tung-p'o) as an arguable rival for the title of greatest of the great. And Li Ch'ing-chao, wife of a Sung official from whom she was tragically separated, is the unquestioned best of all of traditional China's women poets.

But, to speak frankly, from the thirteenth century to the present there are really only a few truly outstanding poets. Of course there is no simple reason for the decline: with the growth of printing came the rise of colloquial prose forms, theater, the short story, the novel, and these, as in our own time, were forms that became popular and commercially successful. Printing meant that a literatus could make a living from his (or, if sufficiently masked from public recognition, perhaps even her) literary talents alone, without service as an official or even without official patronage. In both the Yuan and the Ch'ing dynasties, poets who would in better times have traditionally put their talents at the service of the government might even have considered it patriotic to have taken their literary talents into theater or popular commercial prose fiction as a protest against alien rulers (the Mongols of Yuan, the Manchus of the Ch'ing). And, just perhaps, the poets of later dynasties suffered from the very weight of their tradition. Certainly most of the poets who did write in classical forms during the Ming and the Ch'ing dedicated themselves intentionally to the *imitation* of either the T'ang or the Sung masters rather than to the conscious pursuit of originality. When imitation was the name of the game in poetry, we can expect only a few defiantly original voices, and that is what we get.

Luckily for our anthology, we can choose from the poems of only those few. There are the funny drinking songs of the out-ofwork poet-officials manqué of the Yuan, and the wonderful rant of the first great Chinese dramatist, Kuan Han-ch'ing, whose "Not Bowing to Old Age" is an urbanite's bit of antinomianism to match anything "The Peasant Song" has to offer. There is the wonderful set of twenty quatrains by the Ming Zen master Han-shan Te-ch'ing, rendered here, as are the poems of Li Ch'ing-chao and the extraordinary Hsu Wei of the Ming, by the brilliant translator James M. Cryer. And there is no doubt in my mind that only a few of even the T'ang greats are equals of Yuan Mei, the sometime official of the Manchu Ch'ing, a man who may have seen Europeans in the flesh and who, like Benjamin Franklin, sometimes read with "eyeglasses." Ching An, the hardworking and good-humored Zen abbot, and Su Man-shu, the fake monk, both subjects of the Ch'ing, are both also outstanding poets. It is interesting to note that a consistent feature of the originality of all these Ch'ing dynasty poets is their ability to fit colloquial language into the classical forms, and

though both Yuan Mei and abbot Ching An deny that they imitate either T'ang or Sung masters, both write in the purely classical *shih* forms, ignoring both the *tz'u* popularized by the Sung poets and the *san-ch'u* lyrics begun in the Yuan. Both poets sought a contemporary audience, but both also clearly honored classical poetry by writing it.

So, I might say, go to it. But I have one more thing to say before I let you go (says the old professor, who's closing in on forty years of working at translating some of these poems): though language, technique, and form are always extremely important in helping the artist deliver his or her message, that message—content and not form—is the point of poetry. Li Po proves his worthiness not by a trick with the moon elements in “Thoughts of a Quiet Night,” a quatrain that is nearly untranslatable. He proves it with the accomplishment of a will to communicate something important, something simple for children and old folks: “Home is where the heart is, don't go far afield.” It is something very different for the deep reader, the man and woman of the world, the striver toward whatever goal. “Home is where the heart is, don't go far lightly afield: even art and imagination *may not* be able to lead you home again.” In a final reading it may simply say to the older reader, “Go home,” whatever that may mean. Perhaps it's a pale shadow of this poem that awaits you in translation on p. 90. In the original it is the world's best-known poem, even today. In traditional times illiterates could chant it by heart. In the 1980s I heard a recording by a Cantonese children's choir that sounded strangely familiar (my Cantonese was just barely usable), and when I looked up the words (the characters allowing me to read the lyrics in Mandarin, the only kind of modern spoken Chinese of which I had any command), I found the nursery lullaby constructed around the Li Po poem and a few la-la-la's in the choruses. Li Po became and has continued to become, across well over a thousand years and many “language barriers” of time and space, the grandpa, the loving godfather singing a lullaby, for millions of Chinese children. *Wen* has made a family of all these people, a family of people who may stay at home and live rich lives or travel abroad in the great world, with old Grandpa or new friend Li Po at their sides.

Welcome to the best of my life's work and a sample of my friend Jim Cryer's inspired translations. Perhaps you will be taking the first step that begins the journey to the worldwide village of the future where Li Po and his friends are dwelling. I hope so.

PART ONE

From Before: The Beginning

Poetry from the Beginning of the Zhou Dynasty (1122 B.C.E.) to the End of the Han
(220 C.E.)

Introduction to Poetry from the Beginning of the Zhou Dynasty to the End of the Han

BEFORE PEOPLE BEGAN TO HERD DOMESTICATED ANIMALS and till the earth, they painted, they put flowers on the graves of their loved and honored dead, and without any doubt, they sang, alone and together, speaking to their gods, wooing a mate, lamenting what is always lost in living, and celebrating the miracle of life itself. So the peasants of “The Peasant’s Song” dug their wells, cultivated their fields, and sent a message in song to whomever claimed hegemony over their land and their lives. Perhaps the first song in this anthology was indeed written even before the “first,” which is to say *mythical*, dynasty, the Hsia, in a time when the emperors were True Sages, ruling solely by the emanations of their personal virtues and passing on rule not to their own kin but to the most virtuous subject they could discover. Whether or not this poem is authentically “prehistoric,” it seems to me, with its theme of individual freedom so central to all Chinese poetry and all Chinese life, a perfect place to start.

The *Shih Ching*, usually translated as either the *Book of Songs* or the *Poetry Classic*, is the first great collection of Chinese poetry. Tradition says that it was edited into its present form by the Sage of Sages, Confucius himself. In fact the book was assembled before, during, and after the life of Confucius. Its more than three hundred poems include fragments of works as old as the Shang dynasty (traditional dates, 1766–1154 B.C.E.) as well as “contemporary” poems from the Chou feudal states written or spoken by both aristocratic court figures and just plain folks. A great deal has been said about the origin of many if not the majority of the poems as oral “folk” art, but it is clear from the artistry of the written language in which they have been handed down that, like the scribes who improved upon the originally oral poetry attributed to Homer in the West to create the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, the people who converted Chou folk songs and court verses into poetry in written Chinese characters clearly thought of themselves as (*and were*) artists. So the characters used to render simple and direct lyrical utterances of the illiterate peasant folk often honor them with carefully chosen written vocabulary: the heart and soul of folk art remains clearly present, but literary subtleties, the polish and the decoration that are *wen*, are introduced. The scribes who created the *Shih Ching* were poets, not tape recorders. They chose the best of what existed, and they honored its soul with their own art.

In its present form, the *Shih Ching* consists of three major sections. The *Kuo Feng*, or “Odes of the States,” comprising the first 160 of the 305 poems, are generally but not always folk songs. The *Ya* (“Elegant Verses”), subdivided with no obvious criteria into greater and lesser, include poems 161 through 265, and the *Sung*, or “Temple Odes,” high ritual songs and bits of dynastic myth, include poems 266 through 305. Of the present selection, except for a single longer poem on drinking and its positive and negative consequences that is found among the “Lesser Elegants,” all come from the *Kuo Feng*.

The form of almost all the verses in the *Shih Ching* is extremely simple. There are four characters in each line, almost always divided by a caesura. Rhymes occur on all