

Good research paper  
about facing my wine,  
i did not see the dusk,

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## English

### Li Bai, One of the World's Greatest Poets

In the greater scheme of things, it's very rare that a poet is published in multiple languages. We may hear of it a lot, especially if you study poetry, but it's usually the same group of names, from roughly the same time periods; a select hundred or so poets from the last couple centuries. They come primarily from the Western Hemisphere, and primarily in the Western Hemisphere their poetry remains, no matter how great it is. I know it's great, because I've gotten to experience it now that I'm here. There's even fewer poets who manage to bridge the gap of hemispheres, time, and nationality. Aside from all of that, it's unprecedented that already world renowned poets, such as Ezra Pound, take such note of a poet from 1200-1300 years before their time in such a way that compels them to learn a new language, just so they can exact new renditions of that said poet. That said poet is Li Bai.

Li Bai was not just a Chinese poet, though at the time, he had no way of knowing just how profoundly his words would affect the minds of so many generations in the future. He was prolific in his time, according to extensive Tang dynasty records, and the autobiography that is interestingly played out through much of his thousand or so works. I want to spend some time discussing perhaps the greatest, most internationally known poems of all time, "Changgan Memories," which might not ring a bell yet, but it will, and one of his lesser known poems, "Amusing Myself." I choose these two poems because they together show the complexity of such a great artist, and more generally, a poet/writer's capability to take on two completely different narratives, one their own autobiographical narrative, and one of a

completely different class and gender. Then I will summarize more broadly what it means to be Chinese, and the effect his poetry has had on me, and on the arts in China.

“Changgan Memories,” much more known to the Western World as “The River-Merchant’s Wife: A Letter,” a retelling or translation by Ezra Pound. Before delving into the world of dozens of various translations and interpretations, there are facts about the poem that can be taken as it is translated directly from the original Chinese Script, as it was during the mid-Tang dynasty, one of many Chinese “Golden Ages.” The script, which is distinctly in the vein of what is now Mandarin, and not Cantonese, gives us insight into just how Li Bai wanted us to view the wife (or probable widow). For the purposes of this final report, I wanted to give an accurate portrayal of how such characters are translated, so I found the most literal English translation I could. To do this I used a website dedicated to original translations of poetry (poemhunter. com, 2015).

Many view this as a love poem; in many ways it should seem only obvious that it is. But the poem takes a turn for the worse in several ways, and Li Po (Li Bai), in only a way that a poet can, portrays a woman who is somewhat distant from the reality that her husband didn’t just “go away.” She watches the green plums ripen, the green moss grow over, and then finally, yellow butterflies float away and her face turns red. The literal way of looking at this is that the seasons have changed without his return, several times over; it even mentions autumn as if it were now a different part of the year than the previous few lines. The changes of color and associated objects, of course, probably lead to a much more profound meaning in terms of her mentality.

She comes to realize that he is not coming home. He is gone, and she knows it's forever. How do we know this? It's because of the very last line of the poem, and really, the very last word, Changfengsha. Now upon general inspection, this word doesn't seem to mean much, other than a couple references to a land by the sea, to the northeast of Nanking. In this case, Li Bai probably was looking for a triple-meaning (triple entendre?) here, perhaps so that when pronounced in the non-traditional way he chose, it matches up semantically with the other lines prior; more importantly he wanted the illusion of a land just far enough away from a peasant lady to travel to in her lonesome (Changgan is a town not far away from Nanking); most importantly though, is the literal translation of the traditional word Cho-fu-sha — meaning long wind sand, according to Yunte Huang (Perloff and Dworkin, 56-7).

When pondering about those three words as separate full fledged (no root word) entities, yet bound together in a single word. Longwindsand. It reminds me of a tradition that many cultures and religions throughout the world (at the time of Li Bai's life, the primary religion throughout all of China was Buddhism), the want for an afterlife of some sort, and the burning of something followed by the spread of it, in this case paper ashes, according to the Victoria and Albert Museum (VAM. com, 2015, web).

If you combine the second and third meanings that Li Bai may have intended, we have the death of her husband but why. This is why I believe Li Bai may have used the allegory of a red face. It's an odd placement of an adjective. But I believe he meant it to mean war. The age of sixteen, when her husband left, would have been an appropriate age for a man to enlist in

the army at the time this poem was written. Coincidentally, before this poem was written, Li Bai served under a prince who led an unsuccessful revolt against the An Lushan Rebellion of 755 AD, according to the Harriet Monroe Poetry Institute (poetryfoundation. org, 2015).

So, is this a poem about love? Of course. That is clear. The man and lady knew each other since the time her bangs grew over her eyes, (Pound's translation of this line, as well as subsequent western poetic translators, is kind of pejorative, considering he probably had little idea of how children had their hair done during the Tang dynasty). This is also a poem about war, and about the death of a spouse; the denial, acceptance and the resolution to "meet on the other side." Toss in the fact that this is a passionate observance of a peasant woman, the exact opposite of who Li Bai was, a male poet who served in two royal courts and was married four times. This poem has been so convincingly feminine throughout the years, that many not familiar with him and his work often confuse him as being female.

There were different translations of this poem, of course, and many different angles and lenses that this poem has been scrutinized over the past 1350 years. Multiple textbooks have helped me come to understand the Western view of this poem, and they are all compiled by the University of Illinois' website "Modern American Poetry (copyright 1985).

Now to the autobiographical side of Li Bai's poetry, and something that only people very familiar with his work know, Li Bai was not opposed to wine, at all. He was a huge fan of it, and of getting drunk. Using the site chinese-poems. com, I found a short poem entitled "Amusing Myself," and it's short enough to include in this paper:

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Falling blossoms have filled the folds of my clothes.

Drunk, I rise and approach the moon in the stream,

Birds are far off, people too are few.

As is most of his work, this is meant very literally. It is no where near as complex as his other poetry. I fully believe that he sat under a blossoming tree, getting drunk on wine, and forgetting to catch the dusk falling.

Interestingly enough though, in these four lines, there is a sudden change of mood in the last two. It's up to the reader, I suppose, to decide as to whether this was written later, after he became drunk, trying to recall how one feels when they are lonely and looking down at a stream to see the moon, rather than looking up to see it for himself, or whether he jotted this down after taking in his loneliness. What seems more unclear is whether he is depressed by being alone, and he spent a lot of time traveling up and down the Yangtze River Valley by himself, for the sole purpose of writing poetry, or just wishes he could share in his merriment and drunkenness with others, if even those others are birds.

I left on this note to give light to an artist's life, regardless of where they are from, and what time period are from. In the 64 years that Li Bai lived, he managed to get kicked out of two separate royal courts, arrested for treason, write as though he himself was a woman, while taking and divorcing four wives, with whom he fathered a debatable amount of children, and still he managed to be one of the most prolific poets of the last two millennia. It sounds like a pretty fun, rockstar life to me. And he is Chinese, as am I. People here tend to see us as strictly obedient, militant, and no fun. That, and we're good at Math. Awesome stereotypes, but not true. We are just as

vibrant, colorful, and cultured as anybody else. Li Bai has passed away long ago. But his legacy belongs to our people, his works have stood the test of time, and hopefully will continue to do so.

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