J. GILL HOLLAND

Teaching Narrative in the Five-Character Quatrain of Li Po

1

The pattern of complication and resolution within the traditional five-character quatrain (*chüeh-chü, jueju*) of "Ancient Style poetry" (*ku-shih, gushi*) of Li Po (Li Bo, Li Bai; 701-762) goes a long way toward explaining Burton Watson's high praise of Li Po's poetry: "It is generally agreed that [Li Po] and Tu Fu raised poetry in the *shih* form to its highest level of power and expressiveness."[1] To his friend Tu Fu, Li Po left the "compact and highly schematized form of Regulated Verse" (*lü-shih, lushi*), which was deemed the ideal poetic form in the High T'ang of the eighth century.[2]

Before we begin, we must distinguish between Ancient Style poetry, which Li Po wrote, and the more celebrated Regulated Verse. The purpose of this essay is to explain the art of Li Po's quatrain in a way that will do justice to the subtlety of the former yet avoid the enormous complexities of the latter.[3] The strict rules dictating patterns of tones, parallelism and caesuras of Regulated Verse are not the subject of our attention here.

A thousand years after Li Po wrote, eight of his twenty-nine poems selected for the *T'ang-shih san-pai-shou* (*Three Hundred Poems of the T'ang Dynasty*, 1763/1764),

the most famous anthology of T'ang poetry, are in the five-character quatrain form.[4] Today even in translation the twenty-character story of the quatrain can be felt deeply. Below, in two of his famous quatrains, we will study how the spontaneity of the verse—his trademark—works. We then look at Li Po's use of allusion, the traditional dialogue between Chinese poets of different eras. Next we consider the larger issue of poetics that may lie behind the poems. Finally, as a postscript we will consider using Li Po's quatrain as a model for student creative writing.

2

From line one to the last three characters of the final line, "Autumn Cove" bears all the marks of Li Po's delight: up-and-down verticality, parallelism, the middle action of the centrifugal antics of the monkey tribe, and the resolution of all of that energy in the closing image. The sequence of actions is direct.

The words, which are a literal translation of the characters of the original, are to be read first down the column, beginning with the rightmost column in the conventional order of Classical Chinese poetry: "Autumn Cove many. . . ." The English order follows:

drink	coax	bound	Autumn
play	pull	leap	Cove
water	from	like	many
centred	branches	fly	white
moon	children	snowflakes	monkeys

Autumn	Cove	many	white	monkeys
bound	leap	like	fly	snowflakes
coax	pull	from	branches	children
drink	play	water	centred	moon

"At Autumn Cove many white monkeys bounding leap like flying snowflakes[,] coaxing[,] pull children from branches[,] drinking[,] play [in, by] the moon centred (reflected) in the water[.]"

Conventionally in Classical Chinese poetry, number is not given; the plural forms of monkeys, snowflakes, and children are understood. The moon would first appear to be singular, though the movement of the water could flash more moons than one. No tense or number is given for verbs. This action could be set in the past, the present, or the future. All of these conventions are reasons for the famous universality of Classical Chinese poetry. Prepositions follow the object of the preposition: "water-centred" means "centred (reflected) in the water."

Parallelism is always a source of pleasure. It yokes "white monkeys" and "flying snowflakes;" the yoking of white young monkeys and the dancing reflection of the moon is highly suggestive. The energy of the up-and-down movement of the monkeys in the

two inner lines is signature Li Po. The resolution of up and down lies in the shimmering moon up in the sky reflected in the water down below; the up-and-down is one in the closing image. The moon above seems to preside over the whole scene below.

3

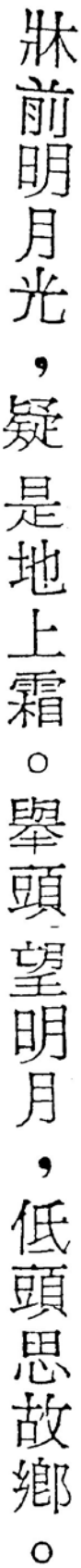
"Night Thoughts" may be the best-known poem about homesickness in the world. First, in Chinese, reading down the columns, beginning with the rightmost column:

lower	raise	suspect	bed
head	head	this	before
think	gaze	ground	bright
old	bright	upon	moon
home	moon	dew	gleam

Now in English word order:

bed	before	bright	moon	gleam
suspect	this	ground	upon	dew
raise	head	gaze	bright	moon
lower	head	think	old	home

"Before the bed the gleam of the bright moon[.] [I] suspect this [is] dew upon the ground[.] [I] raise [my] head gaze [at the] bright moon[.] [I] lower [my] head[,] think [of my] old home[.]"


牀前明月光，疑是地上霜。舉頭望明月，低頭思故鄉。

I have read many English translations of this quatrain. Not one captures in English the magical power of the mistaken jump to the conclusion that the moonlight is dew on the ground at the old home or the subsequent raising of the head to the moon and the lowering of the head in memories of home. Once a student of Chinese background who had been born in Vietnam and brought as a girl to the United States came to my office for a conference. She could read Classical Chinese. I showed her this poem in the *T'ang-shih san-pai-shou*. She read it and began to weep—even at such a remove!

Fig.1: Li Po, "Night Thoughts"

As in "Autumn Cove," the preposition "before" follows the object of the preposition "bed." The pronoun is omitted, as is the verb tense. The verb "suspect" suggests his heart was ready to leap back to his old home. The four following verbs proceed with the characteristic verticality of up and down. The mental return home seems to go on forever. Home is ever there, never changing.

For Li Po, it should be noted, mind travel, or the dream journey, was not an idle fancy but an important part of Taoist philosophy.[5, 6] Moreover, the "old home" might have referred to Heaven. Li Po was called and considered himself to be a "Banished Immortal:"

> It was commonly believed that immortals who had misbehaved in Heaven were as a punishment banished to live on earth for a fixed period, where they figured as wayward and extraordinary human beings. They were what was called "Ministers Abroad of the Thirty-six Emperors of Heaven."[7]

In "Night Thoughts" there is a possible allusion to one of the most popular poems of T'ao Ch'ien (Tao Qian, 365-427), "Wine Poem No. 1:"[8]

> The traffic where I built is terrible
> But I don't hear a thing, not a cart or a horse.
>
> You ask me how that can be?
> When the heart is far away, nobody is at home.
>
> I pick never-die mums by the hedge to the east
> And keep an eye on South Mountain.
>
> At dusk its mountain air makes me promises.
> Birds flock in homeward flight.
>
> There was something true in all of this,
> But when I started to explain, I'd already lost the words.

South Mountain corresponds to Li Po's "old home." "Longevity like the Southern Mountain" is the irresistible associative line from the *Classic of Songs,* one of T'ao

Ch'ien's favorite texts; it can also stand for a removal from the ordinary world, even the grave, the final resting place.[9] Like Li Po's, T'ao Ch'ien's five-character lines move from chaos—the confusion of the traffic and the puzzlement of the interrogator—to cosmos, the crystal vision of reassurance in the mountain scenery. The final couplet stating the ineffability of the meaning is understood but unexpressed in Li Po's tight quatrain.

4

We must make a try at constructing the poetics which lie behind these poems. Poetics in China is of course a vast and many-faced subject.[10] But a few claims many be tendered. First of all, it is clear that Li Po, though often said to be a Taoist, did not despise Confucius's ideas about language. Confucius fought the corruption of language. Some of his analects seem to fit Li Po's pared-down, minimalist quatrains and the authenticity of his feelings: "Words—just far enough is enough" (15.41). "Overdo your deeds but shame your words down. If your words are not close to your heart you can't do a thing" (14.27, 20). "Without heart-language the people could not stand" (12.7).[11]

As for the shape of the plot, it is a critical commonplace that comedy begins in chaos and ends with cosmos, harmony, whereas tragedy begins with cosmos and ends in chaos. In these two quatrains, after the scene is set in line one, chaos and confusion fill in the second and third lines, and the last three characters of line four calm and crystallize the little story. The final mood of the two poems is of course different. In "Night Thoughts" the yearning for home is melancholy, but the certainty of home is as the North Star, ever constant. In "Autumn Cove" natural harmony prevails. Though some might argue that this is a detached, objective description of monkeys at play, there seems to be

an immanent sense of joyful harmony in the scene. In Chinese nature poetry this is called the "fusion of feeling and scene" (*qingjing jiaorong*), which was first used to describe the nature poetry of T'ao Ch'ien, whose "Wine Poem No. 1" was discussed above.[12]

From ancient times paired opposites have been explained in terms of *yin* and *yang*. In these two poems we see several such opposites: up and down, as seen in the verticality of the poems; movement versus the stillness seen in the image of the "water-centred moon" and in the vision of "old home." In both poems the opposite of the bright moon is the implied darkness of water and tree in "Autumn Cove" and the night in "Night Thoughts."

Yin and *yang* are terms often misunderstood. They are "not universal principles that define some essential feature of phenomena, but are explanatory categories that register a creative tension in specific differences." The *yin-yang* is a "vocabulary of complementary opposites."[13] This tension charges the action of the poems.

In their union of movement and stasis in the last three characters of line 4 these poems might remind one of the "strolling gardens" of Suzhou. The stroller passes through partitioned sections or courtyards one by one, just as the reader of the poems proceeds from character to character. There is no panoramic view to be taken in instantly. The gardens and the quatrains unfold. The quatrain is of course a miniature (like many features of the garden), but the element of time is essential; the action must take place over time, through time, before reaching the fixed resolution of "water-centred moon" and "old home" at the end.

The paradoxical union of movement and repose in a strolling garden is like that union in these two quatrains. In discussing the gardens of Suzhou Jan Stuart explains the

concepts of "motion in repose" and "repose in motion," which suggest an analogy to the paired opposites in the poems. "Motion in repose" is experienced as the stroller pauses and, inspired by the "dynamic sequence of sites to be visited—courtyards, buildings, watery spots, rock formations, and plants," makes journeys of the mind through the miniature landscapes. "Repose in motion" is experienced as the stroller sees such rock formations as "steadfast monuments likened to China's great peaks." The boulders are not seen as mountains to climb but solid, eternal presences under the sky. Such a union of repose and motion is found in particular in

> the peculiar manner of standing solitary boulders from Lake Tai on their narrow end to represent a mountain peak. Though the monolith seemed about to overturn at any moment, a large piece of the rock was buried underground to act as an anchor. The sensation of potential motion . . . was a valued allusion to yin and yang.[14]

This potential motion seems analogous to the union of movement and stasis in Li Po's two quatrains. The "vocabulary of complementary opposites" seems to be at work in the poems and the gardens.

To glance further back in history we find that the tradition of the paradox of "motion in repose" and "repose in motion" has roots in early Taoism. Chuang-tzu (4th C. BC) called it "going at a gallop while you sit."[15]

It might be added here that contemporary American poet Charles Wright (b. 1935) alludes to *yin-yang* in the Chinese garden in his poem "Reading Lao Tzu Again in the New Year:"

> Two birds
> Whistle at something unseen, one black note and one interval.
> We're placed between now and not-now,

held by affection,

Large rock balanced upon a small rock.

"[T]he idea of compression […] is maybe as close as we can get to the ideogramic method," he wrote in 1988 in reference to Chinese hieroglyphs.[16]

5

Samuel Taylor Coleridge gives us an enduring insight into these eighth-century Chinese poems in three remarkable passages. In *The Statesman's Manual* (1816) he comments on the bond between nature and mind found in great literature:

> It is worth noticing that in the Scriptures, and indeed in the elder poesy of all nations, the metaphors for our noblest and tenderest relations, for all the Affections and Duties that arise out of the Reason, the Ground of our proper Humanity, are almost wholly taken from Plants, Trees, Flowers, and their functions and accidents.[17]

In order to describe the mind of William Wordsworth, Coleridge turns to a similar description of soil and rock and flora in *Travels Through North and South Carolina, Georgia, East and West Florida* by William Bartram (1791):

> The soil is a deep, rich, dark mould, on a deep stratum of tenacious clay; and that on a foundation of rocks, which often break through both strata, lifting their back above the surface. The trees which chiefly grow here are the gigantic, black oak; magnolia magniflora; fraxinus excelsior; platane; and a few stately tulip trees.

Coleridge added: "I applied this by a fantastic analogue & similitude to Wordsworth's Mind."[18]

Coleridge was searching for a universal symbolic language based on natural forms. He found it in the concept of the hieroglyph. Leibniz and Vico had earlier

entertained the idea that Chinese, which had a hieroglyphical "alphabet" of ideas, not letters, like Egyptian, might have been such a universal language.[19] The idea was widespread. The *Encyclopædia Britannica* of 1771 stated, "instead of an alphabet [the Chinese] use a kind of hieroglyphics."[20]

Coleridge says here what he was looking for, "the short-hand, Hieroglyphic of Truth:"

> At this moment my eyes were dwelling on the lovely Lace-work of those fair fair Elm-trees, so richly so softly black between me and the deep red Clouds & Light of the Horizon, with their interstices of twilight *Air* made visible—and I received the solution of my difficulty, flashlike, in the word, BEAUTY! in the intuition of the *Beautiful*!—This too is *spiritual*—and [by] the Goodness of God this is the short-hand, Hieroglyphic of Truth—the mediator between Truth and Feeling, the Head & the Heart.[21]

The similarity between Li Po's vision and Coleridge's is surely farfetched, fetched from afar, but it is too wonderful not to pass on!

Finally, in trying to grasp the magic of these quatrains we must consider the very assumptions about language that make the experience of reading Classical Chinese poetry quite different from reading in English. In *Anticipating China: Thinking through the Narratives of Chinese and Western Culture*, David L. Hall and Roger T. Ames have analysed the sharp differences between the cultures of China and the West. They have clarified the barriers a Western reader faces when reading Chinese characters. Simply put—at the risk of oversimplifying their lengthy argument—they summarise:

> In the classical Chinese model, image is the presentation rather than re-presentation of a configured world at the concrete and historical levels. The constructed image assumes considerably more explanatory force than would a logical account. . . . The meaning resident in an established image is the reflexive act of creating, and recreating, the image itself. Contrary to naïve expectations, what one finally sees in a work of art is the creative act that produced it. The

> creative process, not the object, is the repository of meaning. What is imaged is the process.[22]

That is, the poem is not in the words. This explanation recalls the image of the branching-hanging antelope used by Ch'an (Zen) Master Tao-ying (d.902) of the T'ang Dynasty and later expanded by Yen Yü (c.1180-c.1235) to explain the spontaneity of the High T'ang masters like Li Po:

> That which has been called "don't travel on the road of Principle and don't fall into the fish trap of words" is the superior way. Poetry is the expression of one's original nature and the poets of the High T'ang were solely concerned with inspired feeling. They were like antelopes who hung by their horns, leaving no tracks by which they might be found. Their poetry is utterly marvelous because it is transparent as crystal, and thus, like echoes in the air, the play of color in phenomenal appearance, like the moon reflected in water or an image seen in a mirror, their words come to an end, but their meaning is limitless.[23]

The words are the tracks on the ground. The poem is up in the tree.

This indirection seems to reflect the Taoist view that "knowledge is not, by nature, discursive;" the true knowledge the Taoist seeks "is not expressible in or bound by the arbitrary and restrictive divisions of language."[24]

6

In teaching of Li Po's quatrains the instructor should not miss the opportunities to engage the students more fully by means of assignments in creative writing. Following the model of this economical form of twenty characters can open a door to poetry and to China and thrill the students with their own inventiveness. The author has put this lesson to use in classes all the way from the seventh grade (the youngest class he has tried it in) to college classes and beyond in adult education. Moreover, the narrative advance from the first five-character line to the magical close in the fourth can be taught and learned in a single

class period. Quite quickly students discover the pleasure of creating their own poems within the straits of twenty "characters," that is, syllables. Here are two couplets that demonstrate how rising high school seniors struggle with the tight form:[25]

A Lazy Summer Afternoon
by Kate Gillespie

The sun, lounging lazily in the air,
Yawns as it plays with shadows in my hair.

On My Mind
by Jack Sterling

Slinking 'cross the green'ry, toes bathed in dew,
My thoughts not yet athinking, yet they think of you.

In line two Jack substitutes an alexandrine to great effect. We deleted syllables and words to determine if the same effect could be caught in ten syllables and decided the alexandrine should stand. The paradox of thinking and not thinking recalls paradox in the Chinese quatrains studied above. Kate's playful up and down verticality also recalls Li Po. Of course English syllables are not Chinese characters. Nevertheless, class presentation of lovely poems like these is always full of amazement and delight, and the notion of a dialogue with past poets is true to Chinese literary tradition. Li Po looks back at T'ao Ch'ien. They, as it were, perform a salaam over the centuries.

T. S. Eliot concludes his definitive essay "Tradition and the Individual Talent" thus: "And [the poet] is not likely to know what is to be done unless he lives in what is

not merely the present, but the present moment of the past, unless he is conscious, not of what is dead, but of what is already living."[26] These are rich moments when such a consciousness is born in a class discussion.

I wish to thank Professor Ping Shao of the Department of Chinese at Davidson College for guiding me to the web sites for Li Po and T'ao Ch'ien and for his contribution to the study of Classical Chinese poetry in the senior English capstone course in 2002.

I also thank the staff of the E. H. Little Library of Davidson College for their help in carrying out research for this study.

This essay is submitted in memory of the late Dr. John M. Bevan, Dean of the Faculty and Vice-President for Academic Affairs at Davidson College, 1970-1975, in gratitude for his encouragement and support of my study of Chinese at Stanford University and my family's first sabbatical leave in China.

Notes

[1] Burton Watson, *The Columbia Book of Chinese Poetry: From Early times to the Thirteenth Century* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1984), 205.

[2] C. H. Wang, "Chinese Poetry" in Alex Preminger and T. V. F. Brogan, eds., *The New Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993), 194.

[3] Richard Bodman and Shirleen S. Wong, "Shih [Poetry]" in William H. Nienhauser, Jr., ed., *The Indiana Companion to Traditional Chinese Literature*(Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1986), 687-688.

[4] Shuen-fu Lin, "T'ang-shih san-pai-shou" in Nienhauser, 755-56.

[5] Arthur Waley, *The Poetry and Career of Li Po: 701-762 A. D.* (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1950), 56.

[6] Hongnam Kim, "The Dream Journey in Chinese Landscape Art: Zong Bing to Cheng Zhengkui" (*Asian Art* 3.4, 1990), 11-29.

[7] Waley, 20.

[8] Gill Holland, *Keep An Eye On South Mountain: Translations of Chinese Poetry* (Davidson, NC: Briarpatch, 1986), 11.

[9] James Robert Hightower, *The Poetry of T'ao Ch'ien* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1979), 131-32.

[10] Richard John Lynn, "Chinese Poetics" in Preminger and Brogan, 187-90.

[11] Holland, *Keep*, 5.

[12] Wang, 193.

[13] Roger T. Ames, "YIN-YANG" in Edward Craig, ed., *Routledge Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (London: Routledge, 1998), 9: 832.

[14] Jan Stuart, "A Scholar's Garden in Ming China: Dream and Reality" (*Asian Art* 3.4, 1990), 42.

[15] A. C. Graham, *Chuang-tzŭ: The Seven Inner Chapters and other writings from the book Chuang-tzŭ,* trans. A. C. Graham (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1981), 69.

[16] J. Gill Holland, "Charles Wright and Classical Chinese Poetry" in Bernhard Kettemann and Georg Marko, eds., *Crossing Borders: Interdisciplinary Intercultural Interaction*, Buchreihe zu den Arbeiten aus Anglistik und Amerikanistik, Bd. 15 (Tübingen: Gunter Narr, 1999), 317.

[17] J. Gill Holland, "China and the hieroglyphical Chinese language in the imagination of Coleridge" in Colin Smethurst, ed., *Romantic Geographies: Proceedings of the Glasgow Conference, September 1994* (Glasgow: University of Glasgow French and German Publications, 1996), 293-294.

[18] Ibid., 293.

[19] Ibid., 292.

[20] Ibid., 294.

[21] Ibid.

[22] David L. Hall and Roger T. Ames, *Anticipating China: Thinking through the Narratives of Chinese and Western Culture* (Albany, NY: SUNY, 1995), 217-218.

[23] Yen Yü, "*An Analysis of Poetry*," trans. Richard John Lynn, in Victor H. Mair, ed., *The Columbia Anthology of Traditional Chinese Literature* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), 139-144.

[24] Lisa Raphals, *Knowing Words: Wisdom and Cunning in the Classical Traditions of China and Greece* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1992), 70-71.

[25] J. Gill Holland, "Teasing out an English translation from a Classical Chinese Poem: with a translation from T'ao Ch'ien," in *EnterText* 2.2, 2003.

[26] T. S. Eliot, *Selected Essays* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1950), 11.