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Li Bai

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DELPHI POETS SERIES

D E L P H I P O E T S S E R I E S

Li Bai

(701-762)



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The Delphi Classics Catalogue

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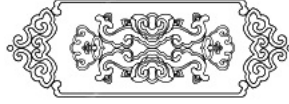
Li Bai



By Delphi Classics, 2023

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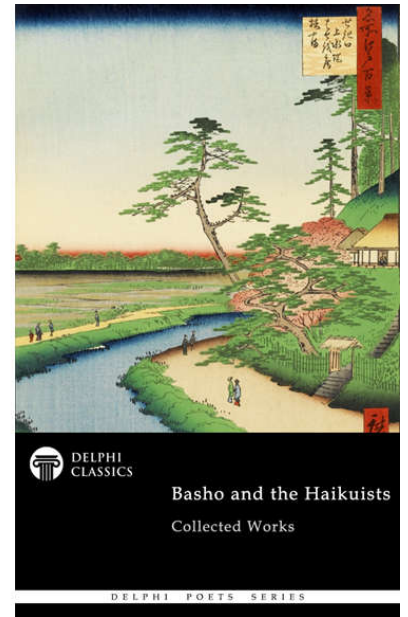
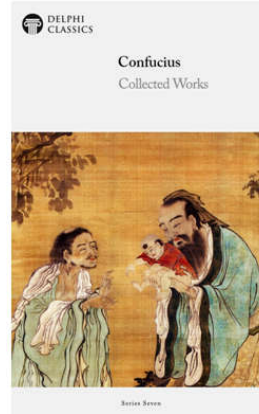
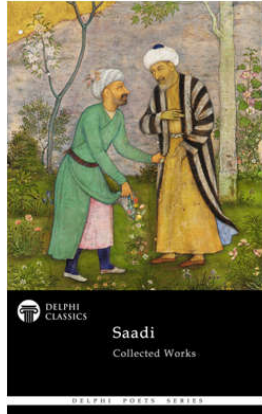
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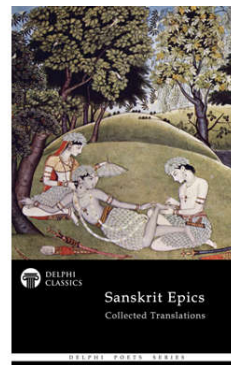


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The Life and Poetry of Li Bai



The site of Suyab, an ancient Silk Road city located 30 miles east from Bishkek, present-day Kyrgyzstan — the traditional birthplace of Li Bai, where his family had prospered in business at the frontier.



*Chengdu, a sub-provincial city that serves as the capital of the province of Sichuan, south-west China.
Li spent his early years living in Sichuan, near Chengdu.*

Brief Introduction: Li Bai



THE EIGHTH CENTURY Tang dynasty Chinese poet Li Bai was acclaimed from his own lifetime to the present day, producing a corpus of around 1,000 short poems. These verses became models for celebrating the pleasures of friendship, the depth of nature, solitude and the joys of drinking. His life has taken on a legendary aspect, including tales of drunkenness and chivalry. Much of Li's life is reflected in his poems, which concern the places he visited; the friends he saw off on journeys to distant locations, perhaps never to meet again; his own dream-like imaginings, embroidered with shamanic overtones; current events of which he had news; descriptions of nature, perceived as if in a timeless moment; and many more. However, of particular importance are the changes he records taking place in China. His early poems were written in what is now regarded as a "golden age" of internal peace and prosperity for the nation, living under a benevolent emperor that actively promoted and participated in the arts. This ended with the beginning of the rebellion of general An Lushan, which eventually left most of Northern China devastated by war and famine.

The Old Book of Tang and *The New Book of Tang* are the primary sources of bibliographical information on Li Bai. He is generally considered to have been born in 701 in Suyab of ancient Chinese Central Asia (present-day Kyrgyzstan), where his family had prospered in business at the frontier. Afterwards, the family under the leadership of his father, Li Ke, moved to Jiangyou, near modern Chengdu, in Sichuan, when the poet was about five years old. There is some uncertainty about the circumstances of the family's relocations, due to a lack of legal authorisation, which would have generally been required to move out of the border regions, especially if a family had been assigned or exiled there.

Two accounts from contemporary sources, one of which was a family member, state that Li's family was originally from what is now south-western Jingning County, Gansu. His ancestry is traditionally traced back to Li Gao, the noble founder of the state of Western Liang. This adds support to Li's own claim of connection to the Li dynastic royal family of the Tang dynasty: the Tang emperors also claimed descent from the Li rulers of West Liang. Evidence suggests that during the Sui dynasty, Li's own ancestors were forced into exile from their original home to a location further west. During their exile, the Li family lived in the city of Suiye and perhaps also in Tiaozi, a state near modern Ghazni, Afghanistan. These areas were on the ancient Silk Road, and the Li family were likely merchants, conducting a prosperous business.

One account of his life tells how his mother had a dream of a great white star falling from heaven, at the time she was pregnant with him. This seems to have contributed to the idea of his being a banished immortal (one of his nicknames). That the Great White Star was synonymous with Venus helps to explain his courtesy name: "Tai Bai" or "Venus". In 705, when Li Bai was four years old, his father secretly moved his family to Sichuan, near Chengdu, where he spent his childhood. The young Li spent most of his adolescent years in Qinglian, a town in Chang-ming County, Sichuan. He read extensively, including Confucian classics such as *The Classic of Poetry* and the *Classic of History*, as well as various astrological and metaphysical materials that Confucians tended to avoid, though he disdained to take the literacy

exam. Reading the “Hundred Authors” was part of the family literary tradition, and he was able to compose poetry before he was ten. Li also engaged in other activities, such as taming wild birds, fencing, riding, hunting and aiding the poor or oppressed by means of both money and arms. Eventually, he seems to have become skilled in swordsmanship; as an autobiographical quote testifies his practice with the weapon. Before he was twenty, Li had fought and killed several men, apparently for reasons of chivalry, in accordance with the knight-errant tradition. In 720, he was interviewed by Governor Su Ting, who considered him a genius. Though he expressed a wish to become an official, he never took the civil service examination.

In his mid-twenties, about 725, Li Bai left Sichuan, sailing down the Yangzi River through Dongting Lake to Nanjing, commencing his days of wandering. Next he travelled back up-river to Yunmeng, in what is now Hubei, where his marriage to the granddaughter of a retired prime minister, Xu Yushi, seems to have formed a brief interlude. During the first year of his trip, he met several celebrities and gave away much of his wealth to needy friends. In 730 the poet stayed at Zhongnan Mountain, near the capital Chang’an, where he failed to secure a position. In 735, Li was in Shanxi, where he intervened in a court martial against Guo Ziyi, who was later, after becoming one of the top Tang generals, to repay the favour during the An Shi disturbances. By 740, he had moved to Shandong, where he became one of the group known as the “Six Idlers of the Bamboo Brook”, an informal group dedicated to literature and wine. He wandered about the area of Zhejiang and Jiangsu, eventually making friends with a famous Daoist priest, Wu Yun. In 742, Wu Yun was summoned by the emperor to attend the imperial court, where he announced to the court his praise for Li Bai’s poetry.

This in turn led Emperor Xuanzong to summon Li to the court in Chang’an. His personality fascinated the aristocrats and common people alike, including another Taoist poet, He Zhizhang, who gave him the nickname the “Immortal Exiled from Heaven”. After an initial audience, where Li was questioned about his political views, the emperor was so impressed that he held a grand banquet in his honour. It is said that the emperor even went so far to show his favor by personally seasoning Li’s soup. The emperor employed him as a translator, as Li Bai knew at least one non-Chinese language. Ming Huang eventually gave him a post at the Hanlin Academy, in which role he provided scholarly expertise and poetry composition for the Emperor. When the emperor ordered Li to the palace, the poet was often drunk, but still able to perform extempore. One of his most famous verses is ‘Rising Drunk on a Spring Day, Telling My Intent’, concerning the pleasures of escaping the world’s troubles by drinking wine:

*We are lodged in this world as in a great dream;
Then why cause our lives so much stress?
This is my reason to spend the day drunk
And collapse, sprawled against the front pillar.*

*When I wake, I peer out in the yard
Where a bird is singing among the flowers.
Now tell me, what season is this?—
The spring breeze speaks with orioles warbling.*

*I am so touched that I almost sigh,
I turn to the wine, pour myself more,
Then sing wildly, waiting for the moon,
When the tune is done, I no longer care.*

Li Bai wrote several poems about the emperor's beautiful and beloved Yang Guifei, the favorite royal consort. A story, most likely invented, circulates about Li during this period. Once, while drunk, he had made his boots muddy and Gao Lishi, the most politically powerful eunuch in the palace, was asked to assist in the removal of them, in front of the Emperor. Gao took offense at being asked to perform this menial service and later managed to persuade Yang Guifei to complain of Li's poems about her. At the persuasion of Yang Guifei and Gao Lishi, Xuanzong reluctantly, but politely, and with large gifts of gold and silver, sent Li away from the royal court. After leaving, Li formally became a Taoist, making a home in Shandong, but wandering far and wide for the next ten or so years, composing poems.

On his travels, he met the celebrated poet Du Fu in the autumn of 744, when they shared a single room and various activities together, including traveling, hunting, wine and poetry, establishing a close and lasting friendship. They met again the following year. These were the only occasions on which they met, in person, although they continued to maintain a relationship through their poetry. This is shown in the dozen or so poems by Du Fu to or about Li Bai that survive, as well as the extant verse by Li directed toward his friend.

During the An Shi disturbances of 755, Li Bai became a staff adviser to Prince Yong, one of Emperor Xuanzong's sons, who was far from the top of the primogeniture list, yet named to share the imperial power as a general after Xuanzong had abdicated, in 756. However, even before the empire's external enemies were defeated, the two brothers fell to fighting each other with their armies. Upon the defeat of the Prince's forces by his brother, Li Bai escaped, but was later captured, imprisoned in Jiujiang, and sentenced to death. The famous and powerful army general Guo Ziyi and others intervened, as Guo Ziyi was the very person that Li Bai had saved from court martial twenty years before. His wife, the lady Zong, and several other prominent figures wrote petitions for clemency. Upon General Guo Ziyi's offer to exchange his official rank for Li Bai's life, the death sentence was commuted to exile: he was consigned to Yelang, a remote extreme south-western part of the empire, considered to be outside the main sphere of Chinese civilisation and culture.

Li headed toward Yelang with little sign of hurry, stopping for prolonged social visits, sometimes for months, always writing poetry along the way, leaving detailed descriptions of his journey for posterity. Notice of an imperial pardon recalling the poet reached him before he even got near to Yelang. He had only gotten as far as Wushan, when news of his pardon had caught up with him in 759. So he returned down the river to Jiangxi, passing on the way through Baidicheng, in Kuizhou Prefecture, still engaging in the pleasures of food, wine, good company and writing verses. His famous poem "Departing from Baidi in the Morning" records this stage of his travels, as well as poetically mocking his enemies and detractors, as conveyed in the monkey imagery.

*White mist flees the Yangzte's speed
Rows of layered hills flash by
Monkeys screech joy to the sky
As my boat flies me homeward, free!*

Although Li did not cease his wandering lifestyle, he generally confined his travels to Nanjing and the two Anhui cities of Xuancheng and Li Yang (modern day Zhao County). The verses written at this period include nature poems and verses of socio-political protest. Eventually, in 762, Li's relative Li Yangbing became magistrate of

Dangtu and he went to stay with him. In the meantime, Suzong and Xuanzong both died within a short period of time and China now had a new emperor. The nation was now involved in efforts to suppress military disorders stemming from the Anshi rebellions and Li volunteered to serve on the general staff of the commander Li Guangbi. However, at the age of sixty-one, Li became critically ill and he was unable to fulfil his plans. The new Emperor Daizong named the poet the Registrar of the Left Commandant's office in 762. However, by the time that the imperial edict arrived, Li Bai was already dead. The magistrate buried him at the eastern foot of Dragon Mountain. In 817, Fan Chuazheng, the son of Li's friend, alongside Zhuge Zong, then magistrate of Dangtu County, reburied the poet at the western foot of Green Mountain, 12 miles southeast of Ma'anshan city, where a tomb houses his remains today. In 2006, it was declared a "Major National Historical and Cultural Sites in Anhui" by the State Council of China.

There is a long and romantic tradition regarding Li's death, claiming that he drowned after falling from his boat one day while drunk, as he tried to embrace the reflection of the moon in the Yangtze River. However, the actual cause appears to have been natural enough, although he was well known for his hard-living lifestyle. Nevertheless, the legend has secured an enduring place in Chinese culture.

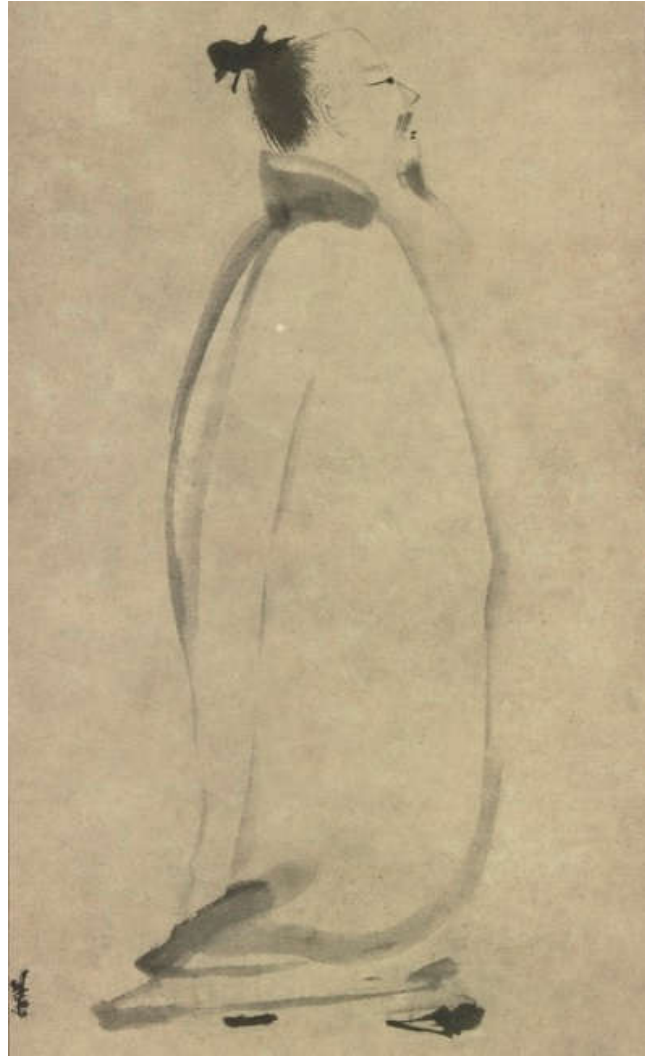
Over the centuries, critics have focused on Li Bai's strong sense of the continuity of poetic tradition, his glorification of alcoholic beverages (even frank celebration of drunkenness), his use of persona, the fantastic extremes of his imagery, his mastery of formal poetic rules and his ability to combine all of these with a seemingly effortless virtuosity to produce inimitable poetry. Other themes in his work, noted especially in the twentieth century, are sympathy for the common folk and antipathy towards needless wars, even if conducted by the emperor himself. Li Bai also had a strong sense of himself as being part of a poetic tradition. The genius of this eighth century poet is exemplified by his complete command of the literary tradition before him and his ingenuity in adapting it to produce a uniquely personal idiom. Unlike the verses of his great contemporary Du Fu, Li's romantic poetry is essentially backward-looking, representing a revival and fulfilment of past promises and glory, rather than a foray into the future.

An important trait of Li's poetry is the fantasy tone and note of childlike wonder and playfulness that permeate much of his work. There is a strong element of Taoism, both in the sentiments that his poems express and in their spontaneous tone. Many of his poems deal with mountains, often descriptions of ascents that midway modulate into journeys of the imagination, passing from actual mountain scenery to visions of nature deities, immortals, and 'jade maidens' of Taoist lore.

A prominent example is Li's famous poem 'A Quiet Night Thought', still learned by schoolchildren in China today. In a mere twenty words, the poem employs the vivid moonlight and frost imagery to aptly convey the experience of homesickness:

*Beside my bed a pool of light—
Is it hoarfrost on the ground?
I lift my eyes and see the moon,
I lower my face and think of home.*

It is the compelling magic of such elegant and yet short verses as these that have won for Li Bai the enduring admiration of his fellow men and women, from his own day to the present, fortifying his status as a romantic legend, who took traditional poetic forms to new heights, while always conscious of the great and timeless tradition behind him.



'Li Bai Strolling' by Liang Kai, c. 1200



Li's first noted patron, Emperor Xuanzong of Tang (685-762) was the seventh emperor of the Tang dynasty, reigning from 712 to 756. His reign of 44 years was the longest during the dynasty. Through two palace coups, he seized the throne and inherited an empire still in its golden age.



The Emperor's favourite consort Yang Guifei, by Uemura Shoen, Shohaku Art Museum, Nara, Nara, Japan



Emperor Minghuang, seated on a terrace, observes Li Bai writing poetry while having his boots taken off, Qing dynasty illustration, c. 1650



Qing Palace portrait of the poet Du Fu. Along with his elder contemporary and friend Li Bai, Du is frequently called the greatest of the Chinese poets.



A drunken Li Bai, as depicted in the Nanling Wushuang Pu by Jin Guliang, Ming dynasty

Translations by Herbert A. Giles (1898)



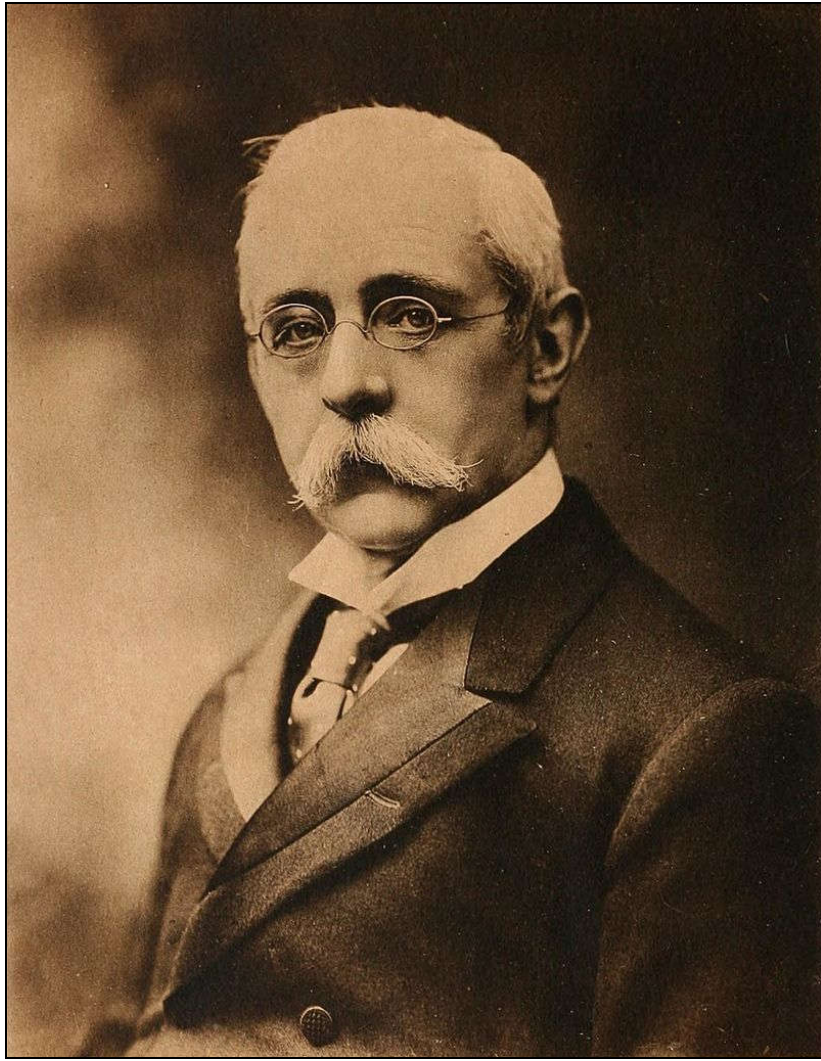
Herbert Allen Giles (1845-1935) was a British diplomat and sinologist, who served as the professor of Chinese at Cambridge for thirty-five years. Giles was educated at Charterhouse School before becoming a British diplomat in China. He modified a Mandarin Chinese romanization system established by Thomas Wade, resulting in the widely known Wade–Giles Chinese romanization system. Among his many works were translations of the *Analects of Confucius*, the *Lao Tzu* (Tao Te Ching), the *Chuang Tzu*, and, in 1892, the widely published *A Chinese-English Dictionary*. Giles included translations of Li Bai in his 1898 publication *Chinese Poetry in English Verse*, and again in the seminal work *History of Chinese Literature* (1901). These were the first English translations of Li Po to appear in the West.

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Herbert Giles, c. 1920

From *Chinese Poetry in English Verse* (1898)

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