

**THE WORKS OF LI  
PO, THE  
CHINESE POET**

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The Works of Li Po, the Chinese Poet by Bai Li & Shigeyoshi Obata

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**BAI LI & SHIGEYOSHI OBATA**

**THE WORKS OF LI  
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PORTRAIT OF LI PO  
BY LIANG CHICK, A CHINESE ARTIST OF  
THE THIRTEENTH CENTURY



THE · WORKS · OF  
LI · PO  
THE · CHINESE · POET  
DONE · INTO · ENGLISH · VERSE · BY  
SHIGEYOSHI · OBATA

WITH · AN · INTRODUCTION · AND · BIOGRAPHICAL  
AND · CRITICAL · MATTER · TRANSLATED · FROM  
THE · CHINESE



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**PART I**

**INTRODUCTION**

**POEMS BY LI PO**

## INTRODUCTION

### I

At the early dawn of medieval Europe China had reached the noontide of her civilization. Indeed, the three hundred years of the Tang dynasty beginning with the seventh century witnessed a most brilliant era of culture and refinement, unsurpassed in all the annals of the Middle Kingdom. And the greatest of all the artistic attainments of this period was in literature, and particularly in poetry. There were no dramatists; no romancers; but only poets—and poets there were galore.

"In this age," remarks a native critic, "whoever was a man, was a poet." And this is not satire. The "Anthology of the Tang Dynasty" consists of nine hundred Books and contains more than forty-eight thousand nine hundred poems by no less than two thousand three hundred poets. Moreover, since this collection was compiled as late as the eighteenth century by order of a Manchu emperor, it represents only a meager crop from a field that had suffered the ruthless ravages of time for fully a thousand years. Imagine, then, the vast efflorescence of what must have been veritably a tropic jungle of poesy!

Now a person may consider it no distinction to be counted one among these poets when the list is so large; but to be picked out as the greatest of them all—as the leader of this colossal army of immortals, is certainly a singular distinction and honor. And this honor falls



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to Li Po. He, by almost unanimous consent, is regarded as the greatest poet under the Tangs, and of China of all times. "He is the lofty peak of Tai," proclaims an admirer, "towering above ten thousand mountains and hills; he is the sun in whose presence a million stars of heaven lose their scintillating splendor."

Before attempting to follow the poet's career in detail, let us take a glance at China as it was under the Tang dynasty, especially under the famous emperor Hsuan Tsung, who was one time patron to Li Po, and whose long and illustrious reign, ending with his tragic fall, marks the golden age of Chinese poetry.

### II

The Tangs came to power in the early decades of the seventh century when Mahomet was just starting out on his first campaigns. Tai Tsung, the second emperor of the dynasty, in the twenty-three years of his reign (627-650) consolidated the hostile sections of the country and laid a firm foundation for his empire, which he greatly expanded by conquering Tibet and subduing the Tartar tribes of the Mongolian desert. Wu Hu—an empress (684-704)—has been much maligned for usurping the male prerogative of sovereignty; but she was undoubtedly one of China's ablest rulers and did more than uphold the prestige of her land during the last quarter of the century. Then followed shortly Hsuan Tsung, who ascended the dragon throne in 713 and ruled for forty-two years.

It was an age of great political power for China. Her suzerainty extended from Siberia to the Himalaya mountain range, and from Korea to the Caspian Sea.

## Introduction

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Tributes were paid by India and Tonkin. The Caliphs of Medina sent precious stones, horses, and spice. From the Japanese capital, Nara, came envoys and students at frequent intervals, while once, in 643, from far Greece Emperor Theodosius despatched a mission to the court of Cathay.

It was an age of prosperity. The fertile valleys of the Yellow River and the Yangtze-kiang were turned into fields of rice, barley and waving corn, amid gleaming streams and lakes. Peace reigned in China proper—the vast domain that had once been torn up and made desolate by internecine wars during the four centuries of the *Three Kingdoms* and the *Six Dynasties*. Even in the remotest rural district, the *wine-pennant*, a tavern sign, was seen flying on the roadside, denoting the presence of tranquillity and good cheer, while large cities like Lo-yang (i. e. Honan-fu, Honan) and Chin-ling (i. e. Nanking, Kiansu) flourished immensely with increasing trade and travel.

Chang-an, the present city of Hsian-fu in Shensi, was the capital and the wonder of the age. The city was never so rich, splendid, and spendthrift. "See ye," proudly sings a poet, "the splendor of the imperial abode, and know the majesty of the Son of Heaven!" Beside the main castle with its nine-fold gates, there were thirty-six imperial palaces that reared over the city their resplendent towers and pillars of gold, while innumerable mansions and villas of noblemen vied with one another in magnificence. By day the broad avenues were thronged with motley crowds of townfolk, gallants on horseback, and mandarin cars drawn by yokes of black oxen. And there were countless houses of pleasure, which opened their doors by night, and

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which abounded in song, dance, wine and pretty women with faces like the moon.

It was also an age of religious proselytism. Buddhism had been in China for centuries before the Tang dynasty, and the country was dotted with monasteries and pagodas. It was in the reign of Tai Tsung that Yuen Tsang, a Buddhist priest, made his famous pilgrimage to India and brought back several hundred volumes of Sanscrit sutras. While Confucianism remained ostensibly the guiding principle of state and social morality, Taoism had gathered a rich incrustation of mythology and superstition and was fast winning a following of both the court and the common people. Laotzu, the founder of the religion, was claimed by the reigning dynasty as its remote progenitor and was honored with an imperial title. In 636 the Nestorian missionaries were allowed to settle in Chang-an and erect their church. They were followed by Zoroastrians, and even Saracens who entered the Chinese capital with their sword in sheath.

Thus Chang-an became not only the center of religious proselytism, but also a great cosmopolitan city where Syrians, Arabs, Persians, Tartars, Tibetans, Koreans, Japanese and Tonkinese and other peoples of widely divergent races and faiths lived side by side, presenting a remarkable contrast to the ferocious religious and racial strife then prevailing in Europe. Again, in Chang-an there were colleges of various grades, beside special institutes for calligraphy, arithmetic and music. Astronomy was encouraged by Tai Tsung, who also filled the imperial library with more than two hundred thousand books. Hsuan Tsung saw to it that there was