

***When Li Po Is Not Li Po:  
Western Stereotypes in Asian Studies***  
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As an Asianist recently hired to teach at a small Midwest college, I was both surprised and delighted to learn that all students were required to complete a three-semester Heritage series which included one semester of study in Asian culture. The purpose of this series in general and the Asian component in particular is to “move [students] beyond [their] personal world—[their] comfort zone—and allow [them] to enter the realms of other cultures and individuals”.<sup>1</sup> Not only is this “broadening of students’ perspectives” an admirable objective in a liberal arts institution such as this, but also, it is becoming virtually indispensable in higher education today for preparing students to meet the challenges of an integrated global community. On a more immediate level, I hoped that students who completed the Heritage program would go on to take my Asian History courses. Assuming that their Heritage coursework would provide them with a common core of information and experience, I anticipated building on that foundation as we investigated Asian history, culture, and literature in more depth. Consequently, I was eager to begin teaching the pre-selected set of Asian-related texts in concert with other faculty in the program drawn from across the disciplines—Chemistry, Physics, Spanish, Psychology, Political Science and English.

One of my favorite of these required texts is *The Selected Poems of Li Po*. When teaching this anthology in the Heritage program, I begin by providing my students with a short historical background (abbreviated here) to Li Po, the Tang Dynasty and its captivating capital city, Chang’an.

The Tang (617-907) was certainly one of China’s greatest dynasties in terms of military conquest, Confucian politics and cultural refinement. Western military expansion across the Pamirs had reopened the ancient Silk route of the Roman and Han empires to the Middle East. Camel caravans again linked East with West, carrying not only exotic trade commodities, but new customs, religions, music, and ideas. Nestorian priests, Persian traders and even Russian entertainers enriched the already flourishing culture of the capital city. Chang’an became the medieval world’s largest and most cosmopolitan city, attracting the finest intellectuals, artists and artisans of the realm and beyond. The dream and desire of all aspiring Chinese intellectuals—including Li Po—was to seek and find appointment at the Tang court in this dynamic city.

Li Po today is considered one of China’s greatest poets; certainly during his own time, he was a most unusual character. During a period of Confucian revival, Buddhist ascendance, and social refinement, Li Po lived a life of eccentricity and excess. He was a free spirit—a “Banished Immortal”—of tremendous talent, who refused to be channeled

into traditional roles of scholar or official. He demanded acceptance and position on his own terms—based solely on the uniqueness of his wit, insight and poetic expression. Though he scandalized the social elite with his impropriety in drink and speech, and his association with riff-raff in bawdy wine shops and bazaars, his undeniable talent won him appointment to the imperial court of Xuanzong in Chang’an. However, his fiercely independent, defiant, even insubordinate spirit eventually overwhelmed imperial infatuation with his talent, and Li Po was dismissed from his position as court poet. He was subsequently exiled to the far Southwest—beyond the borders of Chinese civilization—for his support of an anti-Tang faction during the An Lushan Rebellion (755).

After introducing the poet and his times, I then take the students through a careful analysis of the poems, taking care to explain historic and symbolic references. The following poems are examples of two quite distinct experiences in Li Po’s life.

*Night Thought at Tung-lin Monastery on Lu Mountain*

Alone, searching for blue-lotus roofs,  
I set out from city gates. Soon, frost  
clear, Tung-lin temple bells call out,  
Hu Creek’s moon bright in pale water.  
Heaven’s fragrance everywhere pure  
emptiness, heaven’s music endless,  
I sit silent. It’s still, the entire Buddha-  
realm in a hair’s breadth, mind-depths  
all bottomless clarity, in which vast  
kalpas begin and end out of nowhere.<sup>2</sup>

In my Heritage classes, I explain these poems in terms of personal as well as national achievement and loss. In “Night Thought”—an early Li Po poem—I emphasize the positive spiritualism of the poem. Daoist aspects of nature—Hu Creek, moon, Heaven’s fragrance—converge with Buddhist concepts of the transcendental—pure emptiness, heaven’s music, kalpas. In stillness and silence, Li Po perceives the pulse of the universe, the boundlessness of the spirit. He is enlightened. Rooted in the depth of this knowledge is the spirituality that gives such insight and power to his poetry. His path is clear: follow the Yangzi north to his destiny in Chang’an, where his poetry would astound the Tang court, and his fame would spread throughout the empire. He was young, ambitious and confident. Opportunity was as boundless as the Dao; as infinite as the Buddha.

After attaining the height of glory he sought, however, the following poem reveals the depths to which he falls.

*On Phoenix Tower in Chin-ling*

In its travels, the phoenix stopped at Phoenix  
Tower,  
but soon left the tower empty, the river flowing  
away.  
Blossoms and grasses burying the paths of  
an [sic] Wu palace,  
Chin’s capped and robed nobles all ancient

gravemounds,  
 the peaks of Triple Mountain float beyond  
 azure heavens,  
 and midstream in open waters, White-Egret  
 Island hovers.  
 It's all drifting clouds and shrouded sun.  
 Lost there,  
 our Ch'ang-an's nowhere in sight. And so  
 begins grief.<sup>3</sup>

Li Po wrote this poem after being officially exiled. The poetic account of his slow journey begins at Jinling, present-day Nanjing. Li Po uses the absence of the Phoenix, which appears in times of peace and harmony, to indicate the chaotic state of the Tang Dynasty. Moreover, he compares his own futile career to those of other righteous, duty-bound officials of the past—now only “ancient gravemounds”—meaningless and all but forgotten. At present, he is as cut off from his life and destiny as floating mountain peaks and midstream islands. His future is “all drifting clouds and shrouded sun” of uncertainty. The greatness of Chang'an that once was his is now impossibly far away. “And so begins grief”—for himself and for the Tang.

These are both complex poems with many obscure references for Western students. However, as in all great poetry, though the context may be culturally specific, the emotional content is universal. Given clear explanations of specific Chinese symbols and general historical backgrounds, students find Li Po accessible and engaging. Many students are moved and enlightened by these poems. They readily sympathize with Li Po's thwarted ambition, lost opportunity, and social isolation, and his poetry sparks lively discussion transcending cultural, spatial and temporal borders.

As my History Department course in Asian Civilization entered into discussion of the Tang Dynasty, I was eager to draw on my students' previous exposure to Li Po to enliven my dry historical lectures. When asked what they remembered about Li Po from their various Heritage instructors, I was shocked to hear the same general comments from my students: “He was a drunk.” “He drowned trying to grab the reflection of the moon.” “He was boring.” “What little I did read of his poems, I didn't understand.” When pressed for further details about his life or about the Tang dynasty, they could provide none. Not because they had forgotten the details, but because they had never learned them in the first place. One student related her experience with Li Po as less than “intensive.” The instructor (from physical sciences) invited his students for a coffee and recitation session. Students were required to pick one poem, read it aloud, and offer some insight into its meaning or significance. That was it. He provided no historical or cultural background; students simply ignored obscure references. And this was a common experience. As one instructor confidentially confessed to me, “I use the text only as a vehicle for writing assignments.” Given this minimalist approach to Chinese culture, it should not come as a surprise that students gain only a superficial understanding of Li Po's poetry. Nor should it come as a

surprise that one of China's greatest poets is reduced, in the students' memories, to a clumsy drunk who drowns grasping at the moon's reflection.

Western instructors—far outside their fields of interest and knowledge, pressed for time and overwhelmed by work—present this required Asian text from a learned but not informed perspective. But what is being taught here? What is being learned? Are the students being encouraged, as program guidelines state, to “enter the realms of other cultures and individuals”? Or are they, as outsiders, merely “observing” a two-dimensional, Western representation of an “Asian culture” imagined by their instructors? What these instructors do not know or understand, they tend to label as different, mysterious, exotic, inscrutable, or spiritual. Thus, they continue to perpetuate—not dispel—Western stereotypes of Asia.

Indeed, contrary to the intentions of the program, the Western stereotype of Asia is reinforced during the program's occasional “cultural discovery” days, when outside speakers are invited to present demonstrations to enhance student understanding of Asian culture. Demonstrations have included yoga, feng shui, bonsai, and meditation. True, these are all aspects of Asian culture, but should not be considered central components. They do not provide insight into more fundamental cultural characteristics such as duty and destiny, Confucian ethics, family loyalty, community obligations, or cultural chauvinism. They do not make Li Po more accessible. Rather, they reinforce the Western view of Asia as a decidedly more exotic culture, and thus, fundamentally different from the West.

Do required Asian programs taught by non-specialists have a place in college curricula? Perhaps. However, program coordinators must recognize the inherent problems of cross-cultural education and address these problems through comprehensive faculty development. If instructors do not work to acquire a basic understanding of Asian history, society, politics and religion, they—like Pinkerton in *Madame Butterfly*—will continue to “exoticize” the unknown to the detriment of both their students and of Asian studies. Rather than enhancing knowledge of Asia, and encouraging students to pursue other classes in Asian studies, they may frustrate or disillusion students, and turn them away from such courses. However, I am also confident that properly trained non-specialists can competently teach the intricacies and nuances of Li Po's poetry, and open up to themselves and their students, fresh, non-traditional insights into life, death and other ageless human concerns.

#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup>*The Heritage Travel Guide*, (Kenosha, WI: Heritage Studies Program, Carthage College, 1999), p. 3.

<sup>2</sup>Li Po, *The Selected Poems of Li Po*, trans. by David Hinton (New York: New Directions Publishing Corporation, 1996), p. 9.

<sup>3</sup>Li Po, p. 91.

\*Daniel Meissner was on the faculty at Carthage College when he presented this paper.