TANG ERA POETRY - Curated Transcript of BBC In Our Time podcast
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In Our Time is hosted by Melvyn Bragg. Melvyn's guests on this podcast are:

Tim Barrett
Professor Emeritus of East Asian History at SOAS, University of London

Tian Yuan Tan
Shaw Professor of Chinese at the University of Oxford and Professorial Fellow at University College

And

Frances Wood
Former Curator of the Chinese Collections at the British Library

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[Melvyn Bragg] Hello. Two of China's greatest poets date from the 8th century in the Tang era, and they're Li Bai and Du Fu. Li Bai is known for personal poems, many of them about drinking wine and finding the enjoyment in life. Du Fu, a few years younger, is more of an everyman writing in the upheaval of the An Lushan Rebellion. They have formed two intertwining strands of Chinese culture for over a millennium - the public life and the individual. And the sign of their enduring appeal is that there's no agreement on which of them is the greater. With me to discuss Li Bai, Du Fu and Tang Era poetry are

Tim Barrett, Professor Emeritus of East Asian History at SOAS, University of London,

Tian Yuan Tan, Shaw Professor of Chinese at the University of Oxford and Professorial Fellow at University College
and

Frances Wood Former Curator of the Chinese Collections at the British Library.

[Melvyn Bragg] Frances Wood, what do we need to know about the Tang Era?

[1:14]
[Frances Wood] The Tang is viewed, I think, by many Chinese still as being one of the great eras of the past. But it's very different, really, from the picture that we have of kind of traditional China. I think much of what we think about China is really formed by the Ming and Qing. The Tang was really quite a kind of different time. It was a time when the capital city, Chang'an, today's Xi'an, was probably the greatest city in the world, had a population of nearly a million. And one of the things that people always stress about the Tang is that it was a very kind of cosmopolitan and outward looking era. Chang'an was kind-of formed, as a sense, at the end of the Silk Road. So Silk Road trade was fantastically important. Luxuries were imported along the Silk Road, exotica was imported along the Silk Road.

[Melvyn Bragg] What date are we handling here?

[Frances Wood] 600 to 900 AD. 618-907 AD. So it's a period when China's united, when the country has been brought together, and it is enjoying, really, the fruits of fantastic international trade along the Silk Roads. Central Asia was very important. Relationships with the different peoples of Central Asia was important. And one of the great things about Chang'an was its kind of cultural diversity. We tend to think of China as China and really rather isolated from the outside world. But during the Tang, there was an incredibly cosmopolitan population. I mean, if you take the city, we know that there were many, many Sogdian traders who'd come all the way from Samarkand, and there were six temples devoted to Zoroastrianism for them. There was a Christian church, there were probably 300 or more Buddhist temples in the city and probably an equivalent number of Taoist temples. So it's a city that reflects an extraordinary diversity of belief amongst the population. And there was a tremendous fashion for all things Central Asian in the early Tang. And the Tang itself, I suppose it flourishes really until the middle of the 8th century, until 755, when there's a rebellion launched by a man who was ... of Sogdian and Turkic descent, An Lushan, who led a rebellion from the north down, capturing the capital city. And that really broke the Tang, as it were. It recovered, but it staggered on. It was never the same. The glory of the Tang is very much the first half of the 8th century.

[Melvyn Bragg] Can we just talk a bit more about the glory before we start about the breakup?

[Frances Wood] Yes. I think China was really glorious at the time. The reach of China's sort of governance, as it were, stretched right out along the Silk Road. China in the - I suppose the first half of the - Tang is very much directed towards Central Asia and you get the fashions for all things Central Asian. I mean, there were dances all came from Central Asia and all the dances were described as whirling and swirling and twirling. And there are descriptions in many of the Tang poets of male dancers in particular,

dancing with great green pantaloons and red deer-skinned boots - dancing and twirling. Fashions for women changed as Central Asian fashions came into China, replacing a very different look. It's a time when ideas obviously also were fairly freely allowed with all these different places of worship.

[Melvyn Bragg] And it seemed to be so grand. It was almost self sufficient in its fantastic luxurians.

[Frances Wood] It was fairly self sufficient. I mean, it wasn't dependent on foodstuffs from outside. It was really luxury goods ... that were mainly transported, brought in. Because it was a time of great riches, people could afford luxury goods from ... jewels that came from as far away as Burma and Sri Lanka, jade still being imported from Khotan. It was a time of considerable luxury if you were lucky enough to be rich enough to enjoy it. And it was a time, too, when East Asia was very much looking to China... Korea, Japan and Vietnam all looked towards China as the kind of real cultural center of the universe. And many aspects, for example, of Japanese society today, and to some extent Korea and Vietnam, all derived from what they learnt from China at the time. It was the leading cultural universe, really, of the period.

[Melvyn Bragg] You mentioned the An Lushan Rebellion. So how did that change China for the purposes of this program?

[Frances Wood] It broke the reigning dynasty. The Emperor was forced to flee the capital. The Emperor's son eventually took over, but the Tang never really recovered the same position of glory, if you like, as it had before. I mean, there was a massive movement of people from the north of China towards the south. So the whole economic center of China shifted away from the traditional northern area and the Tang just gradually lost control amid emperors. They proscribed Buddhism, they proscribed all sorts of things, they tried all sorts of things, but eventually China fell into a state of really collapse and was then invaded by northern tribes and the Tang Dynasty was no more.

[Melvyn Bragg] Thank you very much. Tian Yuan Tan, we have Li Bai, the older, and Du Fu, the younger. What do we know of Li Bai's life first of all?

[6:31]
[Tian Yuan Tan] There are some uncertainties about the Bai's birthplace and his early life. But we do know that by the age of five he grew up in Shu. That's more than Sichuan Province in southwest China. His father was a merchant, which may explain his somewhat unconventional career compared to some of his other town poets who came from families of aristocratic clans such as Wang Wei for example, [or] those that were descendants of scholarly families, like Du Fu, for instance. So he came from a merchant family and took an alternative path. We do know that he did not take the standard path of sitting for examination. Instead, he traveled widely, starting from his mid 20s in various parts of China seeking personal patronage and also social connections in order to gain public recognition. So eventually it was his political talents that gave him a position in the town court. It lasted no more than three years. Apparently, either his temperament was not suited for the court or he lost favor and he was sent away from the court and thereafter he resumed his wanderings in various parts of China.

[Melvyn Bragg] Can you give us a taste of one of his most celebrated poems, "To Bring the Wine"?

[Tian Yuan Tan] Certainly. I think that would be a good example to showcase the personal style of Li Bai - very carefully flamboyant and spontaneous. So if you look at the poem "Jiāng Jìn Jiǔ", "Bring in the Wine", just from the title itself, we know that this is a reworking of an old folk song title from the Han Dynasty, a kind of Carpe Diem poem which starts with this line: "Jūn bù jiàn, huánghé zhī shuǐ tiān shànglái [bēnliú dào hǎi bù fù huí;]" Right? "Have you not seen how the waters of the Yellow River they just came down from heaven? Once they flow into the sea, they no longer return." Just like our youthful days they are just like surging waters that will never return once again. This is again followed by another powerful line "Jūn bù jiàn, gāotáng míngjìng bēi bái fà, zhāo rú qīngsī mù chéng xuě." So this is [a] rather hyberbolic analogy of our whitened hair: "At dawn they might be just like black silk, but at dawn they turn into snow."" And this kind of hyperbolic use of language is rather representative of Li Bai. And we see that in some of his [other] poems as well. For instance, that's his famous line describing his long sorrows [that's as long as 3000 yards of white hair] by far - san shin jiang??]. I think those are lines I think are most favorably remembered by.

[Melvyn Bragg] Thank you. Tim Barrett, What do we know of the life of Du Fu?

[9:29]
[Tim Barrett] About Du Fu, we don't know too much about his childhood. He was born in 712. He's ... slightly younger than Li Bai but he came from a much more established background. His grandfather had been a poet and scholar towards the end of the 7th century, whose name is well known. He wasn't a major personality, but recognized, and his father not so much... but Du Fu clearly was a clever child, and in his early 20s, they put him in for the civil service examinations. Now, in those days, the civil service examinations had a slightly different function from the later Chinese civil service, where they were very widely used to recruit people. In the Tang period, which was basically a rather aristocratic society, the point of the exams was to identify the high flyers, to make sure that even if most of the country was run by vacuous aristocrats, at least some intelligent aristocrats could be put into the key positions - and Du Fu failed. I mean, people ask themselves about this. This is China's greatest poet, and poetry is part of the examination test, and yet he fails. And I think what it is, is that he wasn't flashy enough. In an exam like that, you've got one chance to impress the examiner - that Du Fu really comes across best when you've got one and a half thousand of his poems in front of you and you can see the big picture of what he's about. Eventually, he gets a very minor position in government, and then, of course, the rebellion breaks out and everything goes to pieces. He's captured by the rebels at one point. Eventually he gets a chance to meet up with his family again. He finds them in a village which is safe, but it's a village that consists only of women, children and old men. He establishes himself again in various minor positions, but he just gets fed up with the paperwork. And in the end, he finds a patron. He's got enough money to have a little cottage. We get a lot of poetry about domestic life - you know, how he mends this... Du Fu is the sort of poet who, if he was around today, would tell you about how he spent the morning constructing a table out of a flat pack.

[Melvyn Bragg] Can you give us a taste of one of his poems? One of his favorites is Spring View. Okay. Spring Prospect...

[Tim Barrett] This is interesting because it comes from a period when the rebellion had broken out, but it was a kind of phony war. He begins the poem "states fall while hill and stream abide, towns bloom, and plants and trees all thrive the season's surge, moistens the flowers with tears as sad to leave the birds unsettled hearts no respite from three months of signal fires, as news from home comes at a soaring price, tugging at my graying lessening locks. No way enough to fix my headpiece on." So it starts with the cosmic and gradually comes down to worrying about hair loss in in any stressful situation. And that's kind of typical Du Fu is that he is the poet both of national worries and personal worries at the same time.

[Melvyn Bragg] Thank you very much. Frances, can you give us a sense of why they were writing at all and how their work was being shared in this very turbulent time when they're moving across China backwards and forwards, no fixed abode and so on and so forth?

[Frances Wood] They're very much communicating with each other. I mean, it's between poet to poet and I think you can think of quite a lot of the poems as almost sort of they're valedictory, they're written on occasions, seeing off so-and-so on his trip to here, welcoming so-and-so on his trip back. You have to think of, I mean, even before An Lushan, when people were appointed to posts in the ... government, they were probably often sent far away and there's an awful lot of travel going off to your position in distant Sichuan or Shandong or whatever it was. I mean, the poets are kind of linked by a culture of poetry writing. They write to each other. I mean, Du Fu writes poemsabout Li Bai and there's quite a funny little one written by Li Bi to Dufu. They acknowledge each other's movements in poetry. But of course, all this is very much the age of manuscript. I mean, printing is just beginning in China at this period. There must have been an amazingly variable postal system. One of the complaints you get frequently in both poets is the difficulty of hearing from home and the reference to geese. A goose in Chinese often means a reference to letters from home. So if you see a goose in a poem, you think, oh, he's missing a letter from his brother, or he's thinking of home. They're poems written by poets for other poets.

[Melvyn Bragg] We hear of Li Bai's following an ancient style and Du Fu, a new style. What does that mean?

[Tian Yuan Tan] By time of the Tang dynasty, we are talking about, broadly speaking, two different categories of poetry, right? On the one hand, the term "ancient style poetry" refers to all the earlier forms of unregulated poetry that already existed before the Tang. And that means there were no uniform lines per poem and also no fixed number of characters or words per line as well. So for instance, the example that we discussed earlier, Li Bai's "Bring the Wine", would be a good example of ancient style poem. On the other hand, there's the recent style of so-called new style poetry in the Tang Dynasty that refers to a heavily-regulated form of poetry that became fully established during the Tang Dynasty - one that observes very strict conventions and rules in terms of structural, tonal and also synthetic patterns as well. If you think about recent-style poetry, it can be subdivided into two different forms: the quatrain, "jueju",

that contains four lines, and "lüshi" regulated verse of eight lines. And both can be written in both pentasyllabic and heptosyllabic forms.

[Melvyn Bragg] As I understand it, the poetry you've been talking about and the poetry we're going to talk about is still very much in the curriculum, on the lips of, taught in the schools today?

[16:12]
[Tian Yuan Tan] Yes, certainly. I think many of the pieces by Li Bai and Du Fu, they will be the standard works that are anthologized in scholarly editions but also in textbooks for students from primary school to high school to universities and they are still very popular.

[Melvyn Bragg] Tim Barrett, Li Bai is associated with Daoism. Let's talk about what that means in a moment, but what effect do these poets having in this time of turbulence, in this vast, vast empire? So much else going on.... They've, as it were, lasted and percolated through for 1200 years, amazingly, but what about at the time? Were they having an effect? Were people following them? changing their minds because of what they said? That sort of thing...

[Tim Barrett] That's an interesting question because as well as the kind of social poetry that Francis is explaining just now, it does also have an impact in that it gets picked up by the entertainment industry in some cases. So a good poet will find that people are setting his words to music. And so a certain amount of poetry is being circulated by such media as there were in those days. Li Bai and Du Fu actually seemed to have had much less impact on their contemporaries than they did on later ages. There are some anthologies that come from the middle of the 8th century and they they don't have Li Bai and Du Fu in them. It has been suggested that, again, the reason for this might be connected with the exams - that these anthologies were aimed at examination candidates to memorize. And so they tended to pick up the flashier poetry of the time and teach you how to impress your examiner.

[Melvyn Bragg] Can we go back to Daoism? Li Bai and Daoism?

[Tim Barrett] Yeah, if I can, I'll give you one of the four line poems that [Tenuan? Qīnglián? Another name for Li Bai?] gave us, the shortest type, which has always been thought of as having hints of Daoism in it. And it starts off with "you ask what keeps me in these azur hills?"" Which you'd think the answer is, well, I like wandering, lonely as a cloud and you're walking in the hills is very good for your health, but but in fact, the next line is, "I smile, but don't reply. I'm feeling good." In other words, there's something mysterious going on. The third line gives a strong hint, "peach blossom swirling downstream and away". Now, this is a reference to a legend that you can find at the beginning of the fifth century about a fisherman who sees a lot of peach blossoms on the stream and follows them upstream till he gets to forests of peach blossom and eventually the stream is emerging from a kind of tunnel and he goes up the tunnel and he finds himself in a completely different environment. The nearest English language analogy be somewhere like the Dune Valley that's kind of separate from anywhere else. It turns out to be that there's an alternative society up there. They're refugees. They've been up there since the collapse of the First Emperor's Empire and they're living an idyllic life that nobody knows about because nobody's

managed to get up the stream. So of course, the fisherman enjoys his time there, goes back down, tells everybody about it, but nobody could ever find it again. But the fourth line complicates matters. After saying peach blossoms swirling downstream and away, it ends up "an earth and sky unknown to mortal man". There was another Daoist story where the man follows the stream upwards. And it's much more radical because Daoists imagined mountains as possibly being like Doctor Who's Tardis or something. They're much bigger on the inside than they appear on the outside. So if you go up the stream and if you go ... up the passage and you're in another world, it literally is another world, there's another heaven and earth and it's inhabited by Daoist immortals. This is a very important idea for Li Bai because he was rumored to be a banished immortal. In Daoist belief, if you are in these sort of paradises somewhere, you could be kicked out for misbehavior, and you could be sent down to Earth. And this idea was established, well established, before the Tang. A very useful idea for some outsiders who wanted to hint mysteriously that maybe their true home was somewhere else. And this is exactly what Li Bai is doing. He's saying, I may be much more important than you think I am.

[Melvyn Bragg] Frances Wood how do these very controlled poems relate to the Chinese paintings of that era? Especially the mountain paintings?

[21:19]
[Frances Wood] You're quite right, I think, to pick up on mountains, because it's during the Tang that we begin to see the development of Chinese landscape painting, which was to flourish through succeeding centuries. If you think of the typical Chinese painting, a great sort of brush stroke, kind of monochrome brush painting, usually dominated by a towering mountain - which, as Tim said, conceals all sorts of wonders around it - with maybe a cascading waterfall and little paths leading up. I mean, the poems of Li Bai and Du Fu are exactly, as it were, the sound equivalent of a painting. There's always the towering mountain, the crags, the clouds, and then as far as you've got bamboo and forests, old pine trees. And there's almost invariably in every painting, if you look carefully, there's a winding path which leads up to a little shack where an immortal is sitting, waiting, or a friend of yours, someone who's retired into the countryside, a scholastic recluse who's there with wine waiting for you. And at the very bottom of the painting, in the bottom register, there's a little figure who's making his way up the stony path to the mountain. So I think it's very true to say that the sound equivalent, the verse equivalent of Chinese painting at the time, was poetry.

[Melvyn Bragg] It's interesting, isn't it, that this idea of a retreat continues. We have it in different cultures before this, but in this particular one, it's physical. You leave, you go up in a mountain, you find a hut and so on.

[Frances Wood] Yes, I think it's terribly characteristic. I mean, what everyone says about China. People used to say that you were Confucian in office, which meant that you served the bureaucracy, Daoist in retirement and Buddhist as death approached. So you made use of all these belief systems. Daoist in retirement, as does create the image of retiring, ideally into the countryside, to attune yourself with nature, to become at one with nature, to watch birds and plants and study the lee of the bamboo and so on. It's an ideal which comes through in poetry and in painting.

[Melvyn Bragg] Tian Yuan, Du Fu wrote poems about, I think, about dreaming of Li Bai. So can you tell us about these and what they reveal and what it says about the relationship between the two men?

[23:41]
[Tian Yuan Tan] Right. I think, as Tim and Frances mentioned earlier, they are good friends. So in Li Bai and Du Fu, we not only have the two greatest poems of China, but we also have one of the most celebrated literary friendships in the Tang Dynasty. Both wrote poems to each other. Among those, perhaps the most famous ones, were a pair of poems that Du Fu wrote about "dreaming of Li Bai". And this was written in the year, I think, 759, after the outbreak of the An Lushan Rebellion that Frances introduced earlier. At this point, Li Bai was arrested because of treason in the south and was exiled in the south, whereas Du Fu was in the north and not knowing the whereabouts of his old friend. So this is a poem that we can read on different levels. On one level, this is a very intimate poem about their friendship. The title says "Dreaming of Li Bai". But the poem itself doesn't directly say that Du Fu dreams of Li Bai. Instead, he says that his old friend enters his dream. ... This old friend (that is Li Bai) enters the dream of Du Fu knowing how much Du Fu misses him. So I think that's a very clever way of saying that there's an intimate friendship between them. On another level, we could also read this poem as a kind of psychological poem because it has lots of twists and turns. It's a rather fine capture of the mix between dreamscape and reality. We see constantly Du Fu, was doubtful of the person he saw in the dreams. Was this Li Bai that he knew in person? Or was it Li Bai that has suffered or might have been dead at this point and was traveling afar to meet him in his dreams? And so there was this constant seesawing of emotions, of joy and despair. So I think that was perhaps the other reason why this friendship poem became famous.

[Melvyn Bragg] Tim Barrett, what can we glean of society from the poems of the Tang Era?

[25:48]
[Tim Barrett] Frances has already touched on a very important aspect, which is that people are always writing poems to each other. So if you're more interested in history than literature, even if you don't understand all the illusions in the poem, you know who's writing to who. So you can do things like trace friendship circles. You find out who is seeking whose patronage and where they are, et cetera. It's a very good source of historical information, but it's also a source of social comment. Right the way back, even before Confucius, it was felt that folks song could be a way of gauging the feelings of the masses. You know..it's like a focus group or something. Problems that people are suffering, even if they're very far from influential circles, could be gathered by collecting poetry. And this tradition means that poets are very happy to tell you if the people are suffering. Even Li Bai, who's not got an overdeveloped social conscience, will still write about the problems of conscripts facing enduring hardship and not getting to go home, because people have been writing about that for hundreds of years. Another theme is the abandoned wife; you know the husband has gone off on a business trip. And that's another one that Li Bai handles quite well. He possibly abandoned quite a few women in his time himself, but he can write in the persona of an abandoned wife. But when you get to Du Fu, the social commentary is becoming quite explicit. There is quite trenchant commentary on the sorrows of the conscript and how awful it is to be sent off into the middle of Central Asia or to the fever swamps of

the Southwest on the emperor's business and how many are going to return, and so on and so forth. Well, Frances will come on to a poem that talks about this, I hope, in a minute.

[Melvyn Bragg] Can we turn to Francis then and ask her about the Du Fu poem, "500 Words About my Journey"?

[Frances Wood] It's quite funny to talk about 500 words, because the first time I encountered this poem in any sort of detail was at Peaking University during the Cultural Revolution, when we had some lessons in Chinese poetics from a very sweet teacher there. But we discovered that one of the problems during the Cultural Revolution, 1966-76, a time when China was culturally in utter turmoil, rejecting everything that had gone in the past, getting rid of the "four olds": old habits, old customs, old ideas, et cetera. There were some people who still clung - I mean, even Mao Zedong, I think, still clung - a little bit to Chinese literature of the past. But the trouble they found was that it was very difficult to kind of find bits of literature of the past that illustrated good proletarian ideals. And there's, out of the 500 lines of Du Fu's poems, we were allowed to study precisely two. We were given two lines which are very important, which go ["chu men joro chou luyo dong si gu"?]. This is behind. "Behind them, inside the vermilion gates, wine and meat are left to rot, on the road are the bones of those who have frozen to death". And this shows that Du Fu, at one moment in his life, was conscious of the horrible difference between the rich and the poor. The rich inside feasting and letting the wine go sour, and outside, the poor dying of starvation and cold. I mean, we also learnt things like ... we studied "The Dream of the Red Chamber", a massive 18th century novel which is of great significance in China still. But there was only one chapter, out of about 80, which was considered politically correct, Chapter Four, which tells you about how rich the families were and how they delighted in their wealth. So, I mean, the interesting thing is, Du Fu actually survived the Cultural Revolution as being a good poet, but on the strengths, really, I'm afraid, only of two out of 500 lines.

[Melvyn Bragg] Tian Yuan Tan, what happened to the poems once they were translated?

[30:09]
[Tian Yuan Tan] I think there are several challenges in translating Chinese poems. If we take the example of Li Bai and Du Fu, they present again quite different challenges as well. In Li Bai, how do we capture that sort-of very idiosyncratic, very individual, spontaneous voice of Li Bai who was also known to really prize [?] on producing lines that are natural, without embellishment. And so it might appear deceptively simple, and in the wrong hands of a translator, such lines might become flat as a result. We also know that, for instance, even contemporaries of Li Bai would describe his language, his poetic language, as strange and shocking to his friends and contemporaries. And if we think about such an example, and "The Difficult Road of Shu" would be a good example if we want to look at this kind of shocking language that Li Bai would introduce in his poems, especially the beginning lines. I think the first three words of that poem, in fact, started with exclamations. And these are exclamations that are written in Sichuan dialect as well. So for any listeners who are interested in translation, I recommend looking at the various English translations of this particular poem and to compare how different translators might try to translate this into English. On the other

hand, in Du Fu we have a rather different case, because Du Fu was known to be an erudite poet and his poems, especially in his later days, I think Tim mentioned that earlier, were particularly complex and dense. Already in the Song Dynasty, we see multiple editions of annotated editions of Du Fu, meaning that you need notes and annotations to understand Du Fu's lines. There was also this famous quote from 11th century critic saying that every character, every word, from Du Fu's poem came from a certain source. Right? So there is a source, [a solution?], behind every single line. And so it means that in order to understand Du Fu, you need an apparatus to understand his lines fully. And for a translator, that's very difficult. How do you provide corpus footnotes, which might be distracting for a general reader? Or how do you try to build that into a translation? I think those are some of the difficulties and challenges one could think of.

[Melvyn Bragg] Tim Barrett, when did these poets start to gain such a strong reputation and why?

[32:42]
[Tim Barrett] Yeah, that's interesting. Tian Yuan has, in a sense, already given you the one word answer [which] is the Song period. But actually, I've already said that in their own lifetimes they tend to be overlooked, not get in the anthologies, et cetera. But in the early 9th century, people, I think, looked at them and realized that they ... had a stature that was above that of their contemporaries, that Li Bai is larger than life and Du Fu ... life is larger than Du Fu, but most of it is in his poetry, so that too becomes something exceptional. And so you find poets beginning to talk of the two of them together, you know, people have a copy of the poems of Li and Du and they are not imitating them closely, but they're ... trying to do the same thing. They're trying to establish themselves as different, which means there are some poets in the early 9th century who go beyond what Tian Yuan was saying about Li Bai's being a bit shocking, to be downright weird. And there's one poet who, for example, if you look at word frequency counts mostly, you will find that mountain, as we've implied, is one of the most popular nouns in in a Tang poem - comes right up in the top ten [most frequent words]. But then there's one of the poets of the period. Up there in the top ten, is the word "war", "I", "myself". And that is extraordinary because, generally speaking, Chinese poets, the poet himself, or herself, is rather in the background. But you get this poetry of assertion in the early 9th century which is, in a sense, building on the success of Li Bai and Du Fu. But, in the long run, it's really only in the 11th century when there's a kind of cultural renaissance that Du Fu in particular is seen as having this deep, long-term historical resonance that really embodies some of the best of Chinese culture and in particular recalling the fact that most of Du Fu's poetry was written in a time of political collapse, the implication is that Chinese culture is often a lot better than Chinese politics, if I can put it that way.

[Melvyn Bragg] Tian Yuan Tan, Which firms by Li Bai and Du Fu have most resonance in China now?

[Tian Yuan Tan] In many ways, I think Li Bai and Du Fu provide not only different poetic models, but in a broader sense, different ways of living life. I think Li Bai seems to constantly seek a kind of transcendence in life and personally I find Li Bai more personal, a more private poet in some ways. And so reading for leisure, one might find Li Bai more satisfying and liberating in a sense. Whereas Du Fu, on the other hand,

would invite one to consider one's place in the society, almost. In terms of popularity, I mean, ...many of their poems ... continue to resonate with the modern days. I will also say, just to go back to [what] Frances was saying, it's different times, we might still think of poems as fragments. So there are poems that perhaps continue to be popular today, not in [their] entirety, but in fragments, meaning that there are certain couplets from Li Bai or Du Fu that continue to be so popular that sometimes people weren't aware that it came from a certain poem. I think we do get quite a number of examples like that. One of my favorites of Li Bai's lines and this is also one that is very popular to the present day...[is] taken from [an] occasional poem that he wrote to his friend. It goes like this: ["cho dao duan shui shui gun liu chu bei shao sho sho gun sho"?] So the first line means something like "Drawing sword, cutting into water, water again flow". And so this is a sense about how sorrows can be stopped. So the next line really explains, right? To raise the cup to draw your sorrows. The sorrow is still there. And in fact, I think ...[who?]...tried to do this in a literal manner, which I think really works. His rendition is like this "Drawing sword cut into water, water again flow raised cup quench sorrow, sorrow again, sorry". As for one poem that's really popular, maybe the "Quiet Night Thoughts" by Li Bai. This is a very short poem, a quartrain of four lines of five characters per line, just so. A poem of just 20 characters.

[Frances Wood] Yes. But if one was to say it in translation, "in front of my bed the bright moon shines", so it's got moonlight beside his bed, so it's nighttime, there's the moon. And then he says, "I think it is. It looks to me as if it's hoar frost on the floor". So it looks as if the frost has come into the cold room at night. Then he says the last two lines. "I raise my head and look at the bright moon. I lower my head and I think of my home, my old home". And to me, that poem actually... it's wonderful because it encapsulates kind of practically all you need to know about Tang poetry: The moon, the coldness, and the longing for home. And... the longing for home is kind of perhaps the most frequent sort of underlying theme. A thing that's also important about it to me is that it actually still preserves an awful lot of the rhyme. I think three out of the four lines all rhyme, you've got ["shuang, yang, xiang"?] and so on. Which, if we're talking about translation, I mean, even today when Chinese people repeat the poems, especially if they're doing them in putonghua, the language of the north, the rhymes have all gone. The rhythm remains, and of course, if we're translating into English, we lose the rhythm as well. But that little poem does retain the rhythm, the rhyme and the essential content.

[Tian Yuan Tan] I think in many ways this is popular because of the universal theme. Right? The homesickness seems to be such a popular subject, not only in the Tang Dynasy, but also being so significant and relevant to the modern day as well. It's also interesting that we spoke so much about this of strange and shocking language of Li Bai, but this poem was very simple, very plain... and this is one that our first-year classical Chinese students in the UK could read in their first year classical...

[Tim Barrett] And yet if you simply translate it; ... it's going to look too plain. It doesn't have the impact in English that it would have in Chinese..

[Melvyn Bragg] Finally, then, and briefly, if we could Tim, to finish the program, what impact have the poems had outside China? Do they have a wider legacy?

[Tim Barrett] They certainly have a legacy in East Asia, where classical Chinese, the language in which they were written, was the language of culture outside China, in the Korean peninsula, in Vietnam, when that became independent, and in Japan. In Japan you find already in 819, a Buddhist monk who'd visited China comes back and writes a kind-of teach-yourself-how-to-do Chinese Literature book, which explains exactly how you can write a Chinese poem and what faults to avoid, how you can get parallelism wrong. And he says in his preface something to the effect that, look, you're not going to get enlightened from reading this book, but if you don't get this right, people will laugh at you... So the idea of writing Chinese poetry in Japan is established already in the early 9th century. Li and Du are not the most popular at this point. It's probably simpler poets who are the big hits in Japan for a couple of centuries at least. But eventually Du Fu comes in, say in the 13th century, especially with Zen masters who have studied in China themselves. They've gone to learn about Zen, but they've picked up a lot of secular culture too. And the Chinese poets remain a big influence even on haiku poetry, which is entirely different in terms of the poetics of it - there's no rhyme schemes and so on and so forth - it's key to the Japanese language. And yet the imagery, some of the illusions, quite often you can trace them to Chinese literature, and often to someone like Du Fu. Even in the 19th century, when Japanese poets or literary men are beginning to write novels in the Western fashion, in their leisure hours they are also writing Chinese poetry. So that's how persistent it is.

[Melvyn Bragg] Thank you very much. Thank you very much, Tim Barrett and Frances Wood and Tian Yuan Tan and our studio engineer Emma Half.

And the In Our Time podcast gets some extra time now with a few minutes of bonus material from Melvin and his guests.

[Tian Yuan Tan] There was something that Tim mentioned about Li Bai being referred to as the banished immortal - I think that was really a very loaded word that we could perhaps say more about that because I was thinking on the one hand, of course, it refers to the philosophical sense of references to Daoism immortality, but also I think that's that sense, that the transcendent quality in Li Bai's poetry. Because I was thinking about one of this contemporary admirer of Li Bai in the in the Court, and he refers to Li Bai also as the banished immortal. I think that's the sense that Li Bai is off this world. Right? It's almost unattainable, that quality.

[Tim Barrett] But wasn't that man himself interested in Daoism? I don't recall. But... yes, a lot of Daoism was in the air in the mid 8th century, at the court of course, but, yes, it does make Li Bai something special. But that is part of his self creation, is it not?

[Tian Yuan Tan] Exactly. Bit I was also thinking about this early biographies of Li Bai, saying that I think in his teenage years, he was already reading apart from the classics, but also Daoist text. I wonder how much of that... to a certain degree, that must be construction by later biographers as well.

[Tim Barrett] Yes...

[Frances Wood] I would have quite liked to talk a bit more about the difficulty of translation, but I think it might be a bit unfair, actually, on listeners, because, I mean, in a sense, I feel that Chinese poetry is practically untranslatable. Things were mentioned about the fact that ... you've got to have so much in the way of glossary. You can't just say, I heard a cuckoo. You have to know that what the cuckoo says is "nothing is as good as going home, brother" ["buru gui shu gege"?] And, you-know, geese, and so on .... anything that's mentioned has always got to be glossaried, plus the loss of rhyme and plus, when we translate into English, the loss of rhythm. So I would say it's almost impossible to translate, but as I say, if we mention it, it's going to put people off even further.

[Tim Barrett] I'm sorry we didn't get into the history of translation because the Victorians really couldn't handle Chinese poetry. I mean, Herbert Giles does his best, but even at his best, because if you think about the Victorians, what they went for is "half a league, half a league, half a league onwards" and all that kind of thumping stuff. So even at his best, Herbert Giles sounds a bit like A.A. Milne. But Ezra Pound comes in and with a background very much with approaching Chinese verse through Japanese and being aware of the kind of literary value of the haiku and things like that, He makes much more of a success of getting the spirit of it and the image, which, of course...

[Frances Wood] And the rhythm... he's brilliant on rhythm.

[Tim Barrett] Yeah, and Arthur Waley then tries to steer it into an academically more respectable form of translation, and that paves the way for the 1950s and 60s translators like David Hawkes, A.C. Graham and so on and so forth. But, this is sad to say, but true, that in Britain we don't have any translators like that anymore; they're all in America, and that's regrettable. 300 people a year graduate in Chinese studies. How many of them could translate a Tang poem? Obviously your students, Tian Yuan, but what does that add up to nationally? Maybe about 30 out of the 300? I don't know.

[Melvyn Bragg] Well, on that cheering note, I think we'll move on. [laughter] So thank you all very much indeed.

In our time with Melvin Bragg is produced by Simon Tillotson.