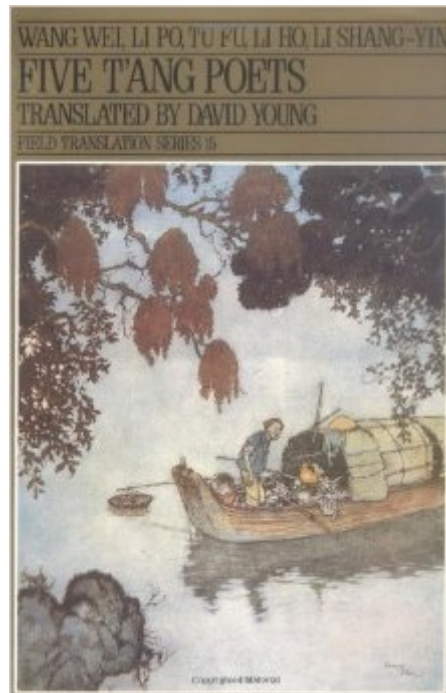


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Five T'ang Poets



Synopsis

The selections from these five poets constitute some of the greatest lyric poetry ever written. Each poet is introduced by the translator, David Young, and represented by a selection that spans the poet's development and career.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

"Verses, however masterly, cannot be translated literally from one language into another without losing much of their beauty and dignity." (Bede, English writer and historian, AD 673-735) For the translator of poetry, and Chinese poetry in particular, the question is: shall I be true to the letter or to the spirit? Usually the answer lies somewhere in the middle. The best translations aim to be true to the spirit without violating the letter more than necessary. David Young, a poet himself, hopes to be true to the spirit of the five poets from the Tang Dynasty (AD 618-906) while at the same time trying to create poetry in a different language and period. The impulse that lies behind his book is to rescue the poets "from the often wooden and dogged versions of the scholars" and to recreate the beauty and dignity of the poetry in a language used by an American poet at the end of the 20th century. The results are marvelously readable, beautiful translations that I enjoyed more than any other translations of Chinese poetry I have read before or since. Preceding the translations, Young has written a short introduction to each of the poets. These include a discussion of the special qualities of the poets' works and a selection of recommended translations by other English authors. The five poets represented in this book are (1) Wang Wei, a devout Buddhist and the

Chinese poet of landscape par excellence who wrote poems of a deeply religious sensibility; (2) Li Po, the Chinese archetype of the "bohemian artist and puckish wanderer," a poet beloved for his Taoist unconventionality; (3) Tu Fu, China's greatest poet according to a widely held view because of his technical brilliance and "vigorous poetry that manages to transcend unhappiness and melancholy by its enormous range and immense humanity"; (4) Li Ho, a poet usually not ranked with the Big Three because he is too innovative and defies classification; and (5) Li Shang-yin, who has a reputation as a decadent versifier but, as Young shows, is a "human and humane artist who feels deeply and sees deeply into mysteries of our common existence." One of my favorite poems in this collection is "Returning to my cottage." It is a good example of Wang Wei's ability to capture stillness and movement in a landscape, to balance observations of things distant and close by, and to create from these images an atmosphere of serenity tinged with sadness. It is a good example for David Young's style of translation, too:

A bell in the distance
the sound floats down the valley
one by one
woodcutters and fishermen
stop work, start home
the mountains move off
into darkness
alone, I turn home
as great clouds beckon
from the horizon
the wind stirs delicate vines
and water chestnut
shoots
catkin fluff sails past
in the marsh to the east
new growth vibrates with color
it's sad to walk in
the house and shut the door.

Bottom line: This is one of the few anthologies of classical Chinese poetry in which the English versions of the poems really sound like poetry. There is nothing of the stiff formality and awkwardness of most other translations that disable the lyric voice of the verses. These translations are full of the beauty and dignity of the Chinese originals.

I first read David Young's amazing translations of these great T'ang poets seventeen years ago, when I was one of his students at Oberlin College in Ohio, and they started me on a lifetime of reading and loving these astonishingly ancient and contemporary sounding poets. There is something vibrantly alive, immediate, and inspiring about these 8th century words and the personalities of their wise, striking authors. In reading many translations, you won't find many as clear and right.

My best friend in this world (outside of my wonderful family) is a guy that I only get to see every few years. He's like the wind. He blows in and out of my life. But he's always in my heart. We are poets. Being a poet is not a choice. It is a life sentence. My friend and I are dissimilar in so many ways that it is remarkable that we don't break out in a fight the instant we come into each other's presence. Yet...and yet...Hearts touched by the flame always find warmth in good company. Imagine my joy then, at finding a new brother (one from over a thousand years ago) when I picked up this

book and met Li Po. I won't bother you much longer with my words. Instead, let me introduce you to Li Po himself: Drinking in Moonlight I sit with my wine jar among flowers blossoming trees no one to drink with well, there's the moon I raise my cup and ask him to join me bringing my shadow making us three but the moon doesn't seem to be drinking and my shadow creeps around behind me still, we're companions tonight me, the moon, and the shadow we're observing the rites of spring I sing and the moon rocks back and forth I dance and my shadow tumbles with me We celebrate for a while then go our own ways, drunk may we meet again someday in the white river of stars overhead!

This is THE book of translated Chinese poems which opened my eyes to the art of poetry. I've since searched for and read many others, but this remains the best. The translations are masterful - lucid, transparent, simple, and, in English, stand as wonderful poems in their own right.

The Five Tang Poets covered in this book are wonderful. Wang Wei excellent landscape poems take you to places which are wonderful while not overly idyllic. Tu Fu is sad and poignant, talking about the scenes of war. Li Po talks of drinking and intoxication in a way that seems that it is a way of life. Young translates in a free verse form using simple words and goes for the feeling of the poem. The poems are not 100 % literal translations but they are gems. I feel like I am having some of my Chinese friends translating a poem for me and they say this is the best I can do you will have to read Chinese to fully understand the poem completely. Young takes us as far as one can go in our language. He took on a difficult task to bring these poems so simple in language and so complex in context and emotion to life, Young has done an excellent job with the tool of the English language

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