

THE RIVER-MERCHANT'S WIFE:

A Letter LI PO translated by EZRA POUND

Background Li Po and Tu Fu first met in 744 and formed a lasting friendship. The two poets greatly admired each other's work but were very different people. Li Po was known to be free-spirited, while Tu Fu was more serious-minded. The poetry of Li Po and Tu Fu reflects the differences in their personalities. In "Addressed Humorously to Tu Fu," Li Po teases his somber young friend, who seems to be "suffering from poetry again."

While my hair was still cut straight across my forehead
I played about the front gate, pulling flowers.
You came by on bamboo stilts, playing horse,
You walked about my seat, playing with blue plums.
5 And we went on living in the village of Chōkan:¹
Two small people, without dislike or suspicion.

At fourteen I married My Lord you.
I never laughed, being bashful.
Lowering my head, I looked at the wall.
10 Called to, a thousand times, I never looked back.

At fifteen I stopped scowling,
I desired my dust to be mingled with yours
Forever and forever and forever.
Why should I climb the look out?

At sixteen you departed,
You went into far Ku-tō-en,² by the river of swirling eddies.
And you have been gone five months.

1. **Chōkan** (chō' kán') Japanese name for Ch'ang-kan (chāŋ' gān), a village in eastern China.
2. **Ku-tō-en** (kōō' tō' yen') Japanese name for Ch'ü-t'ang-yen (chōō' tan' yen'), the shoals at the mouth of the dangerous Yangtze (yāŋk' sē) Gorges, in the upper reaches of the Yangtze River.

Reading Strategy

Responding What memories or feelings about the past do these lines evoke in you?

Vocabulary Builder

bashful (bash' fel) *adj.* shy

Literary Analysis

Chinese Poetic Forms In what way does the first line of each stanza help to tell the story of this ballad?

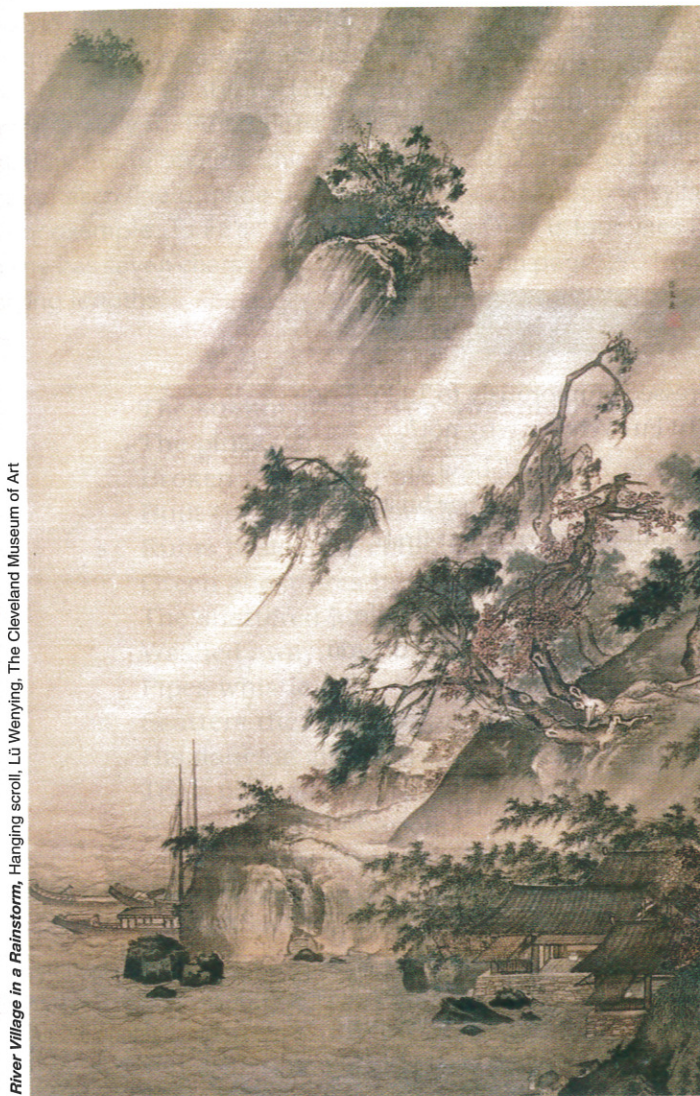
Vocabulary Builder

eddies (ed' ēz) *n.* waters moving in circles against the main current

The monkeys make sorrowful noise overhead.
You dragged your feet when you went out.
20 By the gate now, the moss is grown, the different mosses,
Too deep to clear them away!
The leaves fall early this autumn, in wind.
The paired butterflies are already yellow with August
Over the grass in the West garden;
25 They hurt me. I grow older.
If you are coming down through the narrows of the river Kiang,³
Please let me know beforehand,
And I will come out to meet you
As far as Chō-fū-Sa.⁴

3. **the river Kiang** (kyan) the Yangtze River.

4. **Chō-fū-Sa** (chō' fōō' sā') Japanese name for Chang-feng Sha (chan' fun' shā'), a village on the Yangtze River, about 200 miles upstream from Chōkan.



River Village in a Rainstorm, Hanging scroll, Lu Wenying, The Cleveland Museum of Art

Reading Check

How old was the speaker when her husband went away?

Critical Viewing

Why might an image like this one make the poem's speaker fearful about her husband's safety?

[Connect]

Addressed Humorously to Tu Fu

Li Po translated by Shigeyoshi Obata

Here! is this you on top of Fan-ko Mountain,
Wearing a huge hat in the noonday sun?
How thin, how wretchedly thin, you have grown!
You must have been suffering from poetry again.

Critical Reading

1. **Respond:** Based on his poem "Addressed Humorously to Tu Fu," do you think Li Po is a good friend to Tu Fu? Why or why not?
2. (a) **Recall:** In "The River-Merchant's Wife: A Letter," how does the speaker describe her behavior when she first married her husband?
(b) **Infer:** How did the speaker feel about her marriage at first?
(c) **Analyze:** How does her attitude change over time?
3. (a) **Recall:** How does the speaker of "The River-Merchant's Wife: A Letter" describe the butterflies she sees? (b) **Interpret:** Why do you think the butterflies "hurt" the speaker?
4. (a) **Recall:** In "Addressed Humorously to Tu Fu," how does the speaker describe Tu Fu's appearance? (b) **Infer:** What does the manner in which the speaker addresses Tu Fu suggest about their relationship?
5. (a) **Recall:** In "Addressed Humorously to Tu Fu," what does the speaker conclude about Tu Fu's condition? (b) **Interpret:** What do you think the speaker means by this comment?
6. **Speculate:** How do you think Tu Fu would have responded to "Addressed Humorously to Tu Fu"?

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Jade Flower Palace

Tu Fu translated by Kenneth Rexroth

Background Tu Fu was a master of the "new style" *shih* form. New style *shih* poetry has very strict rules that dictate the number of lines, the number of words per line, and the rhyme scheme. Even within these restrictions, Tu Fu established his own style.

Unfortunately, Tu Fu's stylistic achievements cannot be appreciated in translation. In the original Chinese, new style *shih* poems have a blocklike structure; each line is made up of the same number of one-syllable characters. For example, Tu Fu's "Sent to Li Po as a Gift" is four lines long and each line has seven characters. The translation on page 290 has eleven lines of varying lengths.

- The stream swirls. The wind moans in
The pines. Gray rats scurry over
Broken tiles. What prince, long ago,
Built this palace, standing in
5 Ruins beside the cliffs? There are
Green ghost fires in the black rooms.
The shattered pavements are all
Washed away. Ten thousand organ
Pipes whistle and roar. The storm
10 Scatters the red autumn leaves.
His dancing girls are yellow dust.
Their painted cheeks have crumbled
Away. His gold chariots
And courtiers are gone. Only
15 A stone horse is left of his
Glory. I sit on the grass and
Start a poem, but the pathos of
It overcomes me. The future
Slips imperceptibly away.
20 Who can say what the years will bring?

Vocabulary Builder

scurry (skur' ē) v. to run
hastily; to scamper

Vocabulary Builder

pathos (pā' thās') n. quality
in something that evokes
sorrow or compassion

imperceptibly (im' per sep'
te blē) adv. without being
noticed

Reading Check

What feeling overcomes
the speaker of "Jade
Flower Palace"?

Sent to Li Po as a Gift

Tu Fu
translated by
Florence Ayscough and Amy Lowell

Autumn comes,
We meet each other.
You still whirl about as a thistledown in the wind.
Your Elixir of Immortality¹ is not yet perfected
5 And, remembering Ko Hung,² you are ashamed.
You drink a great deal,
You sing wild songs,
Your days pass in emptiness.
Your nature is a spreading fire,
10 It is swift and strenuous.
But what does all this bravery amount to?

1. **Elixir** (ē lik's'ir) of **Immortality** hypothetical substance, sought by alchemists in the Middle Ages, believed to prolong life indefinitely.
2. **Ko Hung** (kō' hoon) Chinese philosopher and alchemist who tried to create an Elixir of Immortality.

Critical Reading

- Respond:** What feelings does seeing the ruins of a building like the one in "Jade Flower Palace" evoke in you?
- (a) Recall:** In "Jade Flower Palace," what remains of the long-gone prince's "glory"? **(b) Connect:** In what way does this image contrast with the speaker's description of what used to be in the palace? **(c) Draw Conclusions:** What point do you think the speaker is making through this contrast?
- Recall:** What does the speaker of "Sent to Li Po as a Gift" say about Li Po's "nature"? **(b) Interpret:** What do you think the speaker means by this comparison?
- (a) Analyze:** Why do you think Tu Fu considers "Sent to Li Po as a Gift" to be a gift? **(b) Make a Judgment:** Do you think the speaker is criticizing Li Po or simply teasing him? Explain your answer.

Literary Analysis
Chinese Poetic Forms and Tone How would you describe the speaker's tone in lines 6–8?

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Apply the Skills

Chinese Poetry

Literary Analysis

Chinese Poetic Forms

- (a)** Identify a **refrain** in the song "I Beg of You, Chung Tzu."
(b) Identify a refrain with **incremental variation** in "Thick Grow the Rush Leaves."
(c) Explain the effect of refrains in each poem.
- (a)** What feature of "The River-Merchant's Wife: A Letter" indicates that it is a **ballad**? **(b)** In what way does each of the poem's four stanzas reveal a part of the ballad's subject?
- In what way do the structures of these translations of "Form, Shadow, Spirit" and "I Built My House Near Where Others Dwell" reflect the original Chinese structure of these *shih* poems?

Comparing Literary Works

- (a)** How would you describe the speaker's **tone** in "Thick Grow the Rush Leaves"? **(b)** What words and phrases reveal the speaker's tone?
- What do the contrasting tones of "Addressed Humorously to Tu Fu" and "Sent to Li Po as a Gift" suggest about each poet?

Reading Strategy

Responding

- Which of these poems evoked your strongest emotional **response**?
- (a)** Using a chart like the one shown, note your response to each stanza of "The River-Merchant's Wife: A Letter," as well as to the poem as a whole, by jotting down words and phrases that describe the feelings evoked by the poem. **(b)** Did your response to the poem change between the beginning and the end of the poem? Explain.

Stanza One	Stanza Two	Stanza Three	Stanza Four
↓ ↓ ↓ ↓			
Response to Poem			

Extend Understanding

- Philosophy Connection:** Which of these poems most reflects the Taoist idea that one should submit oneself to the way of the universe and not interfere with the natural order? Explain.

QuickReview

A **song** is a poem originally set to music.

A **refrain** is a word or phrase repeated regularly in a song. If one or two words within a refrain are varied in successive stanzas, this technique is called **incremental variation**.

A **ballad** is a song that tells a story.

A **shih poem** is a poem that, in the original Chinese, has an even number of lines of equal length.

Tone is the speaker's attitude toward his or her subject or audience. To **respond** to a poem, reflect on the poet's message and how it relates to your own life.

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