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The Selected Poems



Synopsis

Li Po (A.D., 701-762) lived in T'ang Dynasty China, but his influence has spanned the centuries: the pure lyricism of his poems has awed readers in China and Japan for over a millennium, and through Ezra Pound's translations, Li Po became central to the modernist revolution in the West. His work is suffused with Taoism and Ch'an (Zen) Buddhism, but these seem not so much spiritual influences as the inborn form of his life. There is a set-phrase in Chinese referring to the phenomenon of Li Po: "Winds of the immortals, bones of the Tao." He moved through this world with an unearthly freedom from attachment, and at the same time belonged profoundly to the earth and its process of change. However ethereal in spirit, his poems remain grounded in the everyday experience we all share. He wrote 1200 years ago, half a world away, but in his poems we see our world transformed. Legendary friends in eighth-century T'ang China, Li Po and Tu Fu are traditionally celebrated as the two greatest poets in the Chinese canon. David Hinton's translation of Li Po's poems is no less an achievement than his critically acclaimed *The Selected Poems of Tu Fu*, also published by New Directions. By reflecting the ambiguity and density of the original, Hinton continues to create compelling English poems that alter our conception of Chinese poetry.

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Customer Reviews

This review is meant for those who may not read a lot of poetry or are still wondering about this book after reading other reviews. Simply put, Li Po was so good, that he was even thought of as god like. He and Tu Fu are thought of as the greatest eastern poets that have ever lived, and being that they both lived around 700 AD that is very high praise. His words are moving and deeply stirring, and though he lived in such an isolated area so very long ago, his words still have great meaning now, no matter where your from or what your culture. Filled with Zen and philosophy, this book is a great way of spending the day. "The birds have vanished from the sky, and now the last clouds slip away. We sit alone, the mountain and I, until only the mountain remains." A great painter, that leaves you thinking. Get this book!

A good book that could have been better. It does not provide a Chinese text. Besides this, more extensive notes would have been useful. For example, in "Ch'ang-Kan Village Song," the wife says, "I'm not saying I'd go far to meet you, no further than Ch'ang-feng Sands." It would have been nice to know that Ch'ang-Kan was about two hundred miles downstream from Ch'ang-feng Sands. More serious is that note to the poem that states Ezra Pound "translated" this poem. Actually, Ezra Pound could not read Chinese when he wrote his version of the poem, but relied upon the writings of Ernest Fenollosa, who also could not read Chinese and relied upon Japanese scholars. Despite all this, the book does provide an enjoyable glimpse of a Tang dynasty Dylan Thomas (at least as far as wine goes).

There is spontaneous energy in the world, and in nature specifically. Li Po, who lived in China's 8th Century T'ang Dynasty, wanders through this world and experiences this energy and spirit. He unites it to himself, and through the force of his creativity shapes some of the finest poems ever written in any language: I hoard the sky a setting sun leaves / And love this cold stream's clarity: / Western light follows water away, / Rippled current a wanderer's heart. "Wandering Ch'ing-Ling Stream in Nan-Yang" Truth in advertising: I do not know the Chinese language, and so my comments are completely based on the translated versions of Li Po's poems. David Hinton, the translator of this volume, winner of the 1997 Morton Landon Translation Award, has published translations of the poems of Meng Chaio, Bei Dao and Tu Fu. Strangely to our sensibility, Li Po not

only pursues this natural energy and beauty wherever he can find it, but also believes that wine is a good way to enhance the experience. While he scales high mountains to sit with Buddhist monks and converse about enlightenment, he also seems to find enlightenment in drunkenness. Many of Li Po's most interesting poems are about the experience of being inebriated or arguments in favor of drinking. One of my favorites is "Facing Wine:"Never refuse wine. I'm telling you, People come smiling in spring winds:. . . Yesterday we were flush with youth, And today, white hair's an onslaught.. . . If you don't drink wine, Where are those ancient people now? In "Facing Wine" Li Po combines two of the most profound themes of poetry: the "ubi sunt" theme (where are they now) and the "carpe diem" theme (seize the day). Both motifs figure highly in Roman and Medieval Latin poetry. Li Po is funny, entertaining and enlightening. A poet of great personal magnetism and dynamic power.

I had read poems of Li Po translated into German and French in the past but I really enjoyed this edition. I quoted the poem about departing Yangzhou to my Chinese scholar friend who remarked that the translation loses some of the essence from Chinese.

I neither read nor speak Chinese nor have read many translations of Li Po. I like Pound's translation of the River Merchant more than Hinton's. I suspect that Hinton's is the more accurate. The poems are beautiful and graceful. I like to reread them which while not a star is high praise from me.

I love these wonderful poems of Li Po, about his experiences and some of his observations. I think David Hinton did a good job of translating them although I really know nothing about the ancient Chinese language. They are quite lyrical, quite accessible.

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