

# DRINKING ALONE UNDER THE MOON DOCUMENTATION

## INTRODUCTION

Poetry has never been something that resonates with me. I see the value in half-suggestions and vague illusions; I just fail to enjoy them at any length. However, old Chinese poetry is not quite poetry. Rather, many read more like condensed essays--a series of supporting evidence in order to define a resolute conclusion. Granted some are more like journal entries (e.g. I met a friend today), or just to boast (e.g. who can reference the most poems with the least amount of words), but I was particularly interested in Li Bai's "Drinking Alone under the Moon."

## AN ARGUMENT IN FOUR PARTS

Most know this poem for its first stanza, where the famous "with the Moon and my Shadow I become three" occurs. Li Bai is solving his loneliness and--after drinking--drifts off peacefully into the Milky Way. While it is a nice, uplifting ending, it thoroughly misses the real point of the poem: why have earthly ambitions when you can drink and leave reality?

Through the second and third stanza, Li Bai makes arguments on the "rightness" of wine\* drinking and the naturalness of it all. If all the wise people of the past drank, why shouldn't he consume too? He actually almost seems drunk due to the cadence of the phrases (though he's probably pretending, just a well-developed skill I suppose). By using metaphors of alcohol consumption, he introduces the ideas of life ambitions in relation to luck and nature. Though it could be interpreted as debilitating alcoholism and obsession with drink, I see it more as approaching the Dao-- a way of becoming as things should be. It's almost like a form of enlightenment.

In the end, though, he slowly drifts back down to reality. Throughout the fourth stanza he makes increasingly realistic comparisons (i.e. Confucius and his disciple, hunger and famine, etc....) and ending back as a singularity drinking under the moon. In this way, there's a sort of circular thought process.

*\*Though I use the word wine, it probably isn't the drink you think about made from fermented grapes. In Chinese, there is only one word for any type of alcohol: <jiu>. Of course, all the translators didn't like the word "alcohol" in their poems (how uncouth!), so they all used "wine." Think of something like soju/sake/rice wine, but severely diluted since the technology at the time didn't allow for 40% proof.*

## A COMPILED TRANSLATION

Again, since the first stanza is the most well-known one, finding a good translation of all four of them proved to be a challenge. In the end I compiled a translation of my own, pulling from two books as well as my own understanding of Chinese. Though not all the elements from the poem end up in the artwork, there is a certain flow still preserved. And I would like to think it is reflected in my artwork as well.

### *Li Bai, Drinking Alone Under The Moon*

#### #1

- 1 Among the flowers a cup of wine, I drink alone for no one is near.
- 2 Raising my cup I invite the Moon, and then with my Shadow we are three.
- 3 But the Moon doesn't drink, my Shadow can only follow.
- 4 Yet I will accompany the Moon and Shadow, for I must be merry before the Spring ends.
- 5 I sing the Moon spins, I dance my Shadow splinters.
- 6 Sober we shared the happiness, now drunk we part ways.
- 7 Forever without real emotion but bound together as friends, we'll meet again along the River of Stars

#### #2

- 8 If Heaven had no love for Wine, there would be no "Wine" Star.
- 9 If Earth had no love for Wine, there would be no "Wine" Springs.
- 10 All things—therefore—love Wine, and I can love Wine without reproach from Heaven.
- 11 Clear Wine is for the "Enlightened," Murky Wine is for "the Wise."
- 12 Both Sages and Wise men were drinkers, who needs to study—then—to become Immortal?
- 13 Three cups will lead *me* to the Dao, one barrel and *I* become one with Nature.
- 14 But the things I feel when wine possesses me, those who never drink will never know.

#### #3

- 15 The third month Hysien-yang, is thick with thousands of falling flowers like embroidered silk.
- 16 Who can sulk alone in Spring? facing this scenery, one must drink.
- 17 Rich or poor—long life or short life, Nature not man decides these things—it is preordained....
- 18 Ah—but a cup of Wine levels all, life and death does not matter when drunk.

19 After I am drunk Heaven and Earth leaves me, all senses are gone and I lie down alone.

20 Without my body my spirit is pure, and is the greatest joy indeed.

#### #4

21 There's a million reasons for deep bitterness in life, the cure's a mere 300 cups of Wine.

22 There are too many sorrows and not enough Wine, but drink all the Wine and the Sorrow will be gone!

23 Of the people who drink a lot, drink just enough and your heart will open.

24 Refusing grain and lying down at Shou Yang, or Yen Hui often without money following Confucius and still starving.

25 In this life, if you cannot enjoy drinking—what's the point of fame?

26 When drunk Crab claws can be a great food to accompany the wine, and the hill of wine dregs left behind can even become the P'eng-lai Islands.

27 Oh well—I shall just drink good Wine, at a higher platform closer to the Moon.

#### *Resources Used:*

Li, Bai, and Jerome P. Seaton. *Bright Moon, White Clouds: Selected Poems of Li Po*. 1st ed., Shambhala, 2012.

Waley, Arthur, and Juyi Bai. *More Translations from the Chinese*. Translated by Arthur Waley, Knopf, 1919.

## FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

The light swaying of the frames wasn't planned, but I like the effect and it adds something to the work. In future works, or another iteration of this one, I would like to include a deliberate planning of this sort of movement. Furthermore, I would have liked the paper to be even more translucent while retaining its heavy, completely opaque black ink. It's a bit of a paradoxical dilemma I suppose, but perhaps some sort of paper cutting composite would work. This translucency would improve the viewability of all the frames together and cohesiveness as one piece of literature.