

## Li Yu. Poems for Spring

### **Translation Christopher Kelen and Petra Seak**

*Li Yu (936-978) was the last emperor of the Southern Tang, and by all accounts a much better poet than emperor. A monarch in the lounge lizard mould, the philosopher-cum-poet-cum-painter rarely got out of his slippers. Deposed, he died a prisoner in someone else's kingdom but not before penning quite a few complaints about cruel fate.*

*The English-language texts you see below (along with the Chinese originals) are products of a collaborative translation project conducted over the last two years, one of a number of such projects focused on the work of particular poets from the Chinese tradition (including Tao Yuanming, Meng Jiao, Li He, Xin Qiji, Nalanxingde). These projects are described in an article in the current issue of Jacket magazine (No. 32), titled "Conversation with Tang Poets: Some Notes on the Practice." The process is described with more examples there but essentially the process is this: poems are first roughly glossed (from Chinese into English) with some explanatory notes. The poems are then playfully responded to, initially in English, eventually perhaps in both languages. The possibility is there for a dialogue which need not have any specific end-point. Thus far, however, in working from any particular "original," the process usually has only three or four stages.*

*The purpose of these projects is broadly – to honour our ancestors in poetry by continuing the conversation with them. In practical terms, my hope as a teacher is to help my students create themselves as poets by engaging with their own tradition, initially as a guide for the foreign visitor (i.e. me), thereafter as effective participant/observers (i.e. informed makers) of poetry in Chinese and English. Of course, I myself hope to produce good poems along the way, and regardless of what status these may, in the end, be entitled to.*

*The question of what constitutes translation and what might constitute "variation" or "response" is fraught. It is likewise interesting to speculate as to whether these*

*should be theorised as a continuum or in some other way. From the poet's point of view though perhaps the line should be drawn (if need be) in these terms – would you rather be accused of (too) loose translation (i.e. parading your own work as that of the ancients) or of plagiarizing authors who are no longer in a position to defend themselves? I personally would feel more comfortable with being accused of (unwonted) infidelity than (unintended) theft.*

*The five poems below are from a volume Song of the Water Clock at Night, currently in press with ASM in Macao and scheduled to appear later this year. This volume is roughly evenly divided between “translations” and “responses,” but whether this is a line that is drawn effectively in our case (or indeed that can effectively be drawn) will be left for the reader to judge.*

### lovesick

her hair  
mauve cloud  
coiled bun  
jade pinned

gossamer  
pale  
frowning brows  
she wears

autumn wind on  
drizzle out doors

plantain trees tall  
too long night  
out there



### after evening make-up

soon after  
the evening make-up  
some rouge smeared  
tip of the tongue unfolds  
her mouth like a cherry  
nearly silently chanting  
gentlest of songs

crimson prints left  
to the cup's rim,  
splashes of wine  
redden her sleeve,  
this heavenly nymph  
lounges against  
embroidered bed

she chews a red thread  
and coyly spits it  
in her lover's direction

**tryst**

gorgeous flowers  
dim moonlight  
thin mist

shoes knitted with gold wire  
in her hands

a stockinged tiptoe  
to their tryst

he, in the south end  
of the Painting Hall

she, into his arms  
come trembling

how troublesome to meet  
in shadows  
how tender the moment –  
hearts lit within



### **love lost and passion enduring**

I cannot see the girl with the flute  
only scenery remains

flowers bow and lift their heads  
scent of her skin comes to me

twilight in the jewelled glass  
willows cast shadows  
night won't dispel

it is a cruel breeze  
brings her to me

our moment  
a memory  
yet

**our forty years**

our forty years  
of rivers and mountains

that dragon's tower  
the phoenix in the attic

what heights we had!

dense foliage  
misted the sight  
in and out of the palace

I was ignorant  
of weaponry, war

since I was captured  
look how thin  
how grey

I remember music  
on the day  
we departed the palace

I wept before maids  
and concubines