

THROUGH UNIQUE INTERPRETATIONS AND ORIGINAL PAINTINGS, JINGWEN LUO AND MIKE STEPHENSON EXPLORE THE INFLUENCE OF LANDSCAPE ON THE INFLUENTIAL CHINESE POET LI BAI, AND REFLECT ON WHERE THE POEMS TAKE US AS GEOSCIENTISTS

LI BAI: THE WANDERER OF THE CHINESE LANDSCAPE

A reconstructed Shudao traverses remote and rugged mountainous terrains – they were built through natural corridors using an innovative ‘gallery road’ technique which uses wooden planks fastened within holes carved into cliff sides

THE TANG Dynasty poet Li Bai also known as Li Po, is close to being the national poet of China. Chinese schoolchildren learn his poems by heart, and his influence on later Chinese literature and art is as strong as Shakespeare's influence in the West. But Li Bai's influence was also felt in the West mainly through the American poet Ezra Pound, whose collection of translations of Chinese verse, *Cathay*, which included some of Li Bai's poems, changed the course of modernist Western poetry.

“Li Bai's greatest poems dwell on homesickness, the challenges of travel and the difficult landscapes that separate the traveller from home”

Tianmen mountain skywalk, or hanging footpath, near Zhangjiajie in Hunan province, China

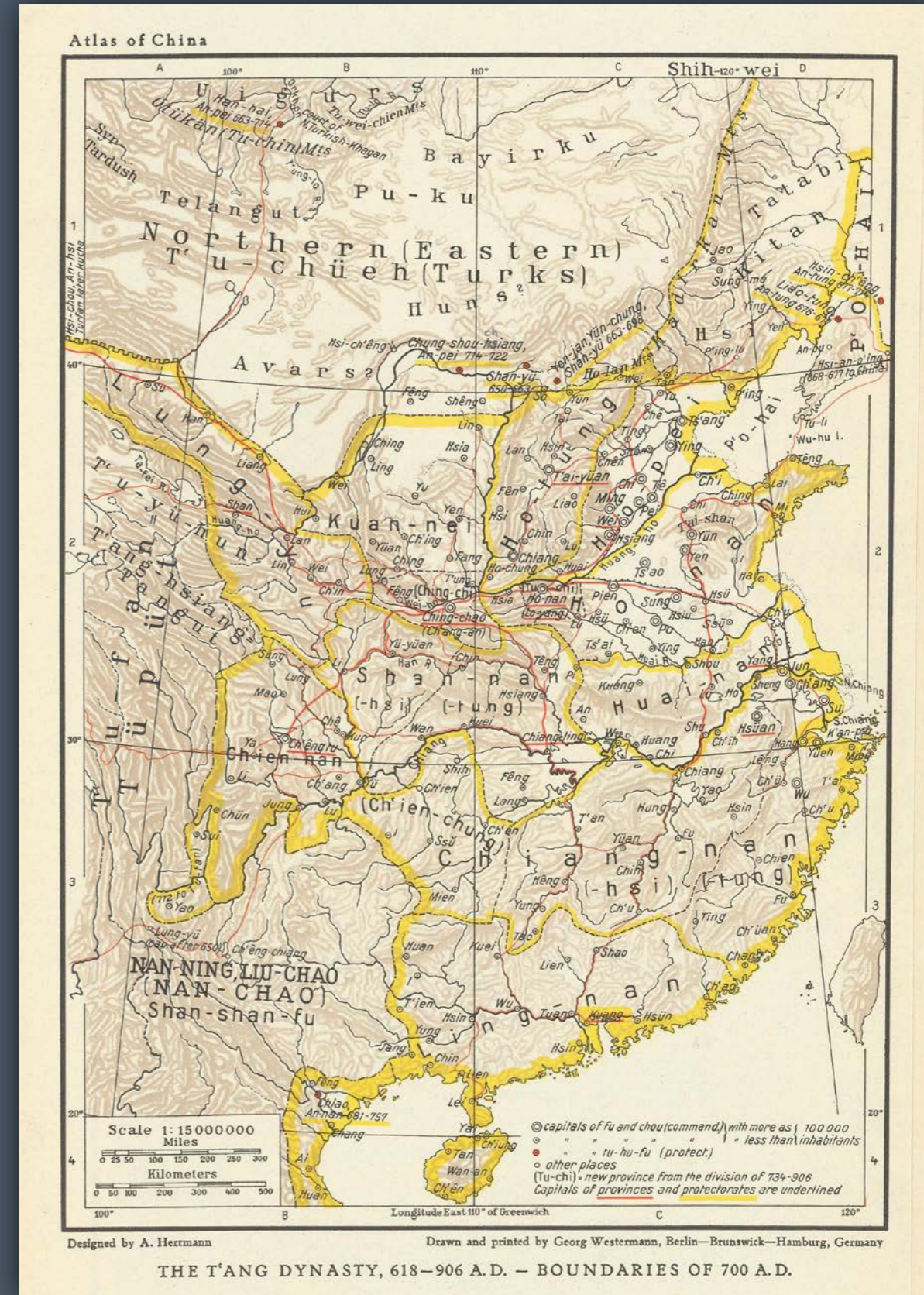


Li Bai's dominant influence was nature, particularly mountains, landscapes and the Moon, though he is perhaps most famous for his many poems about wine and the beauties of intoxication. Like Western poets, he turned his experience into metaphors that permeate his work. In this article we examine some of these landscape influences, illustrate them with Jingwen's new original paintings inspired by Li Bai's poems, and explore the relevance of the poems for geoscientists.

Voyager, storyteller

Quite a lot is known about the life of Li Bai. He is believed to have been born in A.D. 701 in present-day Kyrgyzstan, but as a young boy moved with his family to Jiangyou, near modern Chengdu, in Sichuan. Li Bai, a talented writer and raconteur from an early age, lived a life on the margins of the royal courts and the powerful families of Sichuan, Zhejiang, Jiangsu and Shandong in eastern and central China. His interests in literature and wine led him to join a group known as the 'Six Idlers of the Bamboo Brook', an informal group dedicated to drinking and poetry, but much of his life was spent wandering. Some of his greatest poems dwell on homesickness, the challenges of travel and the difficult landscapes that separate the traveller from home.

One of Li Bai's most famous poems is *Thoughts on a Silent Night*. A note here that Mandarin characters represent concepts and things rather than words and so Chinese poetry can be translated in an almost infinite number of ways—a fact that is well illustrated by the American translator Eliot Weinberger in his book *Nineteen Ways of Looking at Wang Wei*. Even with this ambiguity, the images shine through and *Thoughts on a Silent Night* is taught to children because of its simplicity but also its effective use of imagery, sharply capturing the moment of experience of a lone man waking at night seeing the Moon and then remembering his distant home. In the poem, the Moon is an object that we can all see, giving us common experience but also capable →



1935 map showing the extent of the Tang Dynasty (A.D. 618-690, 705-907), in China

Inspired by *Thoughts on a Silent Night*, and painted on long-fibre rice paper using the methods and materials of China's Dunhuang murals, with pigments from natural mineral powders and silver foil treated with sulphur



somehow of making us feel far from home.

Thoughts on a Silent Night

*A pool of light is sprinkling on my bedside,
It seems like hoarfrost upon the ground.
Eyes raised, moonlight in the sky;
Head bent, homesickness in my heart.*

Translated by Jingwen Luo and Mike Stephenson

In Jingwen's new painting inspired by the poem, we see the poet looking up at the Moon, his bedroom behind him and images of the fragments of dreams in the form of mountains that separate him from home – and the Moon a beacon shared by people everywhere, universal and ever reliable. This artwork was painted on long-fibre rice paper, using the methods and materials of China's Dunhuang murals. The pigments are from natural mineral powders in keeping with a geological theme, and the Moon is depicted with silver foil treated with sulphur, giving it both the luminosity of the Moon and the faint structure of craters on its surface.

Perilous path

Landscape and the perils of travel feature in one of Li Bai's longer poems, *The Road to Shu Is Steep*, also known as *The Shudao Is Hard*. The 'Shu roads' or Shudao is a system of mountain roads linking the Chinese province of Shaanxi and Sichuan (Shu), built and maintained since the 4th century B.C. The roads included engineered sections, consisting of wooden planks on beams slotted into holes cut into the sides of cliffs, and their passage was considered a great undertaking in 8th-century China. Even though the poem is more than twelve hundred years old, it communicates the rugged terrain to us vividly, the perils of landslides and earthquakes, the sounds of rocks that ricochet off cliff walls, and the →

© Jingwen Luo

narrow passes. Here are some of the first parts of the poem describing the terrifying road to Shu:

The Shudao Is Hard

Extracts from the full poem

*The Shudao is so steep,
Harder than climbing to the sky!
An ancient kingdom
endures here,
Its origin unknown to all!*

*Mountains crumbled, heroes
perished
Then came the skyward ladder
And stone paths that
intertwined.*

*As the traveller continues, he looks
back thinking about his return:*

*When will you return from the
journey to the west?
The treacherous path is too
dangerous to climb.
Did you see the birds wail over
the ancient trees,
Males leading females around
the forest.
And hear the cuckoos weep to
the moon,
echoing through the
barren hills.*

Extracts translated by Jingwen Luo and Mike Stephenson

Jingwen's painting shows the complexity of the roads, the steepness of the mountains, the endless forests, the plank roads on the cliffs, but also the brightness and colour of the cities that the perilous roads connect. The work is on silk and shows the Shu road's mountains in traditional Chinese ink painting style. The villages between the mountains are depicted using mineral pigments and metal foils, with elements of both traditional Chinese artistry and contemporary Chinese colour aesthetics.

© Jingwen Luo (Note that the painting's colours vary in print depending on the camera exposure used to photograph the original artwork)



Inspired by *The Shudao Is Hard*, this painting (on silk) of the Shu Road's mountains is in traditional Chinese ink style, using mineral pigments and metal foils

惟天有設險劍門天下壯連山抱蜀西向角向兩崖壁壘倚
刻畫成郭狀大絕臨關百萬夫可倍珠玉中中原賊寇未嘗
三皇五帝前麟大各相放後王尚來遠難肯道之矣至全羅人
高視見蜀王并吞與力不相讓者將非其子孫歟
恐此傳傳然臨風歎

The minds of wanderers

In *The Moon Over Mount Emei*, probably composed around A.D 724., the autumn Moon makes another appearance as Li Bai sails the Yangtze through mountainous Sichuan, in a poem like a postcard to home, but with a note of sadness at the end.

The Moon Over Mount Emei

*A crescent moon hangs over
Mount Emei,
Its shadow falls into the flowing
water.
Embarking from Qingxi's night,
How I miss you: sailing past the
Three Gorges' majestic sight*

Translated by Jingwen Luo and Mike Stephenson

In the poem *Leaving the White Emperor at Dawn* written around A.D 755, we know that Li Bai had been released from exile in the town known as White Emperor City (Baidi Cheng) on the Yangtze River, and we see him yet again travelling, but this time with a feeling of the lightness and ease of travel, passing ten thousand mountains on his way.

Leaving the White Emperor at Dawn

*Leaving the White Emperor
where hues of morning clouds
unfold,
Sailing a thousand li through
canyons in a day,
Monkeys wail over the
riverbanks,
My skiff has left ten thousand
mountains far away.*

Translated by Jingwen Luo and Mike Stephenson. Li (Chinese: 里, li, or 市里, shìlǐ), also known as the Chinese mile, is a traditional Chinese unit of distance. The li has varied considerably over time but was usually about one third of an English mile and now has a standardized length of a half-kilometre (500 metres or 1,640 feet or 0.311 miles).



更討數尺平高武曷道之難於上青天身西望長谷見
橫絕峨眉巖巖武曷南山豈壯矣飛猿天棧石微相詞連上有十龍田曰之高樓下育冲殺建折之固以黃鶴之飛尚不得過
猿猴欲度絳綵攀援青泥何處言沙大折箇也纖細多層井比商竟千排博望長棗問君西遊何時復畏途險阻不可攀但見飛鳥
啼寒雁飛離離在綵林間又問子現啼多月縱空曷道之難於上青天使人聽此洞朱鍾連筆云天風之松對挂旛旛飛瑞環涼星喧
崖轉石常離離專險如此是兩遠道之師為平末武曷關吟穿而崖鬼天當變弱三冥冥所向歐匪親位為猿申豺朝旛旛益雨夕難長歌
晴身吹五教人知絳綵離離專樂子早選蜀道之難於上青天身西望長谷見

The precipitous ladder in Mount Hua, China

© Getty

Even in these short poems and extracts, the sharpness of Li Bai's vision communicates across thirteen centuries in a way that captured Ezra Pound's interest and enlivened Western poets like T. S. Eliot and W. H. Auden.

But for geologists and lovers of landscape, the poems are startling because they resonate with our own experience, the exotic places that we visit as geologists, the way that landscape stamps itself on our experience.

These lines from *The Shudao Is Hard* bring the mountains back to us sharply: that almost inaccessible outcrop, that sudden realisation of where you are when you look up from the rock, half way up a mountain, precarious, scary but exhilarating too. Li Bai is surely the geologists' poet because he expresses the fears and fascination that we feel:

The Shudao Is Hard

Extracts from the full poem

*Between the peak and sky is less than a foot,
Rotten pines cling precariously to the sheer cliffs.
Torrents and waterfalls vie,
Tumble down into the valleys,
Creating a thunderous symphony.
In such perilous heights,
O traveller from afar,
What brings you to these treacherous paths?*

Extracts translated by Jingwen Luo and Mike Stephenson

We geologists are often the 'travellers from afar' and our love of landscape and its history bring us to the 'treacherous paths'. But this vision impresses visual artists too, like Jingwen Luo and many other Chinese and Western painters, who have amplified and interpreted his imagery in the same way

that painters have illustrated Shakespeare's poetry and plays through the centuries. As Li Bai's poetry becomes better known in the West through the internet and through the broadening of international travel and the spread of cultural interest, we expect his influence to live on in the arts—and the minds of wanderers everywhere. **G**

MIKE STEPHENSON

Stephenson Geoscience Consulting Ltd, Nottingham, UK

JINGWEN LUO

Institute of Poetry, Calligraphy and Painting, Sichuan, China

FURTHER READING

A full list of further reading is available at geoscientist.online.

- Po, L., Fu, T., et al. (1973) Li Po and Tu Fu poems. Penguin Classics; 1st edition, 256 pp. ISBN-13: 978-0140442724
- Pound, E. (2016) Cathay. New Directions. Centennial edition, 144 pp. ISBN-13: 978-0811223522
- Weinberger, E. (2016) Nineteen Ways of Looking at Wang Wei. W. W. Norton & Company; Re-print edition, 64 pp. ISBN-13: 978-0811226202