

## LI Bai's Eight Poems About XI Shi

LIANG Ying

Beijing Foreign Studies University, Beijing, China

The study traces Chinese poet LI Bai's eight poems about the mythical figure XI Shi and investigates the reasons why none of these eight poems gets anthologized in *Tang Shi San Bai Shou* (《唐诗三百首》), the most popular poetry of Tang Dynasty anthology. Observations focus on the poems' departure from writing conventions, the poems' genre of *huai gu* (怀古), the general assumption that may block our understandings and evaluations of these literary works such as LI Po is clumsy at describing feelings and he shows signs of hasty composition and his risky experiments with the tonal effects.

*Keywords:* huai gu (怀古), beauty, *Tang Shi San Bai Shou*, tonal effects

### Introduction

It is a great literary tradition that "historical events and personage" (HUANG, 1985, p. 109) never retreat from literary works. XI Shi (西施), though a legendary figure, has occupied writers' imaginations for thousands of years. Born in 5th century BC, she is the queen to FU Chai (夫差), the King of Wu, and one of the most famous court beauties. Actually, she is originally from Kingdom of Yue, and is sent to King of Wu as a present after GOU Jian (勾践), the King of Yue was defeated by King of Wu in 494 BC. It is said that:

After he returned home, GOU Jian reportedly lay on faggots and tasted gall (presumably some animal gale) every night to remind himself of the humiliating defeat while nursing vengeance against FU Chai. Nineteen years later he successfully conquered the Wu. (LIN, 1986, p. 327)

History does not provide evidence that establishes direct links between XI Shi and the defeat of Wu, but she is generally believed to have made King of Wu lost his kingdom and almost his life. Throughout history, XI Shi is a handy example in China when people want to prove that "Woman is evil water". How does such a mythical figure get represented in Tang Shi, particularly by LI Bai (李白) (701-762), who is often regarded as the greatest poet under the Tangs?

Among 755 poems of LI Bai that are collected in *Xiangzhu Quan Tang Shi* (《详注全唐诗》), eight directly talk about or mention XI Shi. Yet none of them is included in *Tang Shi San Bai Shou* (《唐诗三百首》), "Which is the most popular poetry of Tang Dynasty anthology and includes mostly well-known good poems" (ZHU & XIONG, 1995, p. 107). Among the eight poems, only "The Ballads of the Four Seasons: Summer" ("Ziye Wu Ge: Xia Ge" (《子夜吴歌: 夏歌》)) and "Song of the Roosting Crows" ("Wu Qi Qu" (《乌栖曲》)) get miscellaneous studies. Are these poems not of high quality? Is LI Bai making an extraordinary departure from

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LIANG Ying, Ph.D. of Purdue University; associate professor at Graduate School of Translation and Interpretation, Beijing Foreign Studies University.

convention in them that may make this group of poems unaccepted? Do they represent LI Bai's general themes, techniques or styles? How are they different from other poets' products that treat the same topic? These are the questions that are going to be dealt with in this paper.

### A Detailed Look

Besides "Ziye Wu Ge: Xia Ge" and "Wu Qi Qu", the other six poems are: "XI Shi" ("XI Shi" (《西施》)); "Improvising on King of Wu and His Beauty Half-drunk" ("Kouhao Wuwang Meiren Banzui" (《口号吴王美人半醉》)), "Three Baizhu Ci Poems : Number 1" ("Baizhu Ci Sanshou: Zhi Yi" (《白紵辞三首: 之一》)), "Seeing Zhuba Off to East of the River, and Writing on Getting a Wash Yarn Stone" ("Song Zhuba Zhi Jiangdong, Fu De Huanshashi" (《送祝八之江东, 赋得浣纱石》)), "Two Poems Imitating the Past: Number 2" ("Xiaogu Ershou: Zhi Er" (《效古二首: 之二》)), and "On A Jade Bottle" ("Yu Hu Yin" (《玉壶吟》)). Readers may be concerned that LI Bai's poems which mention XI Shi may not really be about her and dialectically, his poems that are really about her may not mention her directly. That is true, but it would be too broad a topic if poems which talk about "Yuenv" (越女), "Meiren" (美人), "Huansha Nv" (浣纱女), etc., that could be about XI Shi are also included in this study, and besides, sometimes a "Meiren" is just a "Meiren".

Among these eight poems, "XI Shi" and "Ziye Wu Ge: Xia Ge" give direct portraits of XI Shi's beauty (see Example 1).

#### Example (1) 西施

西施越溪女，出自苕萝山。  
秀色掩(超过)今古，荷花羞玉颜(美丽的容貌)。  
浣纱(洗纱)弄碧水，自与清波闲。  
皓齿(洁白的牙齿)信难开，沉吟碧云间。  
勾践征(选用)绝艳(绝色美女)，扬蛾(扬眉)入吴关。  
提携馆娃宫(吴宫名)，查渺(遥远)诘(哪里)可攀。  
一破夫差(吴国王)国，千秋竟不还。(LIN & LI, 1997, p. 617)

His-shi

His-shi, a girl spotted on a stream in Yüeh,  
Was born of parents from Chu-lo Hill.  
Her beauty overshadowed women past and present,  
And her lovely face put lotus flowers to shame.  
She washed yarn, played with the green water,  
And spent her leisure with the clear ripples.  
Indeed her white teeth rarely opened to speak,  
And her thoughts tarried in the blue sky.  
Exalted by Kou-chien, who was looking for a supreme beauty,  
She entered the Kingdom of Wu,  
Where she was raised above others in the Kuan-wa Palace.  
Distant and elusive she is nowhere to be found:  
The moment Fu Chai's Kingdom was destroyed,  
She disappeared, and, in the ages that followed, was seen no more. (HUANG, 1985, pp. 109-110)

The poem is tightly structured. After extensive portraits of XI Shi's dazzling beauty, the poem makes an abrupt turn at the very end and comments on the tragic fate of such a rare beauty and thus brings the poem to a

climatic conclusion. Though the conclusion is “poignant”, the overall narrative is “neat and lucid” (HUANG, 1985, p. 109). Compare this with the following poem (see Example 2). In this poem, readers get subjective responses and feelings about XI Shi’s beauty instead of just the details of her physical attributes.

Example (2) 子夜吴歌

夏歌

镜湖(湖名)三百里，菡(荷花)发荷花。

五月西施采，人看隘(狭窄)若耶(溪水名)。

回舟不待月，归去越王家。(LIN & LI, 1997, p. 565)

The Ballads of the Four Seasons<sup>1</sup>

Summer

On the Mirror Lake three hundred li around

Gaily the lotus lilies bloom.

She gathers them—Queen His-shih, in Maytime!

A multitude jostles on the bank, watching.

Her boat turns back without watching the moonrise,

And glides away to the house of the amorous Yueh king. (LI, 1965, p. 149)

This poem is taken from a series of four poems. “Ziye Wu Ge” belongs to the Southern Yuefu (乐府) genre and is mainly about love (ZHU & XIONG, 1995, p. 113). The other three poems are: “Spring” (“Chun Ge” (《春歌》)), which is about a beautiful country girl who is gathering mulberry leaves refuses a married governor’s offer, and it immediately reminds us LI Bai’s “The Field” (“Mo Shang Sang” (《陌上桑》)). “Autumn” (“Qiu Ge” (《秋歌》)) is about a woman in the imperial capital thinking of her husband far away guarding the frontier; “Winter” (“Dong Ge” (《冬歌》)) is about a girl sewing a soldier’s jacket for her lover that still fights in the frontier. Maybe because summer is the season of youth and vitality, this poem presents a beautiful picture with river, lily flower, XI Shi’s beauty, and the amazed crowds commingled all together. The scenery is already beautiful, but a rare beauty coming onto the scene makes it all the more amazing. Yet man and nature live harmoniously and the ordinary people and the Queen are not confrontational either. Unlike the preceding poem, not a single word directly talks about XI Shi’s beauty, but the meaning appears beyond the words. There is a repetitive use of “watching” in the translation which is also worthy to be noted of. The crowds gather around to watch XI Shi while she is gathering lilies, but without watching and looking around, she turns back and goes to the King of Yue. Not only XI Shi’s beauty, but also her pride and nobility are suggested. But what kind of Emperor is he? He is “amorous”. A free translation though, the word effectively foreshadows XI Shi’s gloomy future.

Example (3) 口号(口占，随口吟诗， [the author’s annotation] 吴王美人半醉

风动荷花水殿(水边楼台)香，姑苏(苏州)台上见吴王。

西施醉舞娇无力，笑倚东窗白玉床。(LIN & LI, 1997, p. 629)

The Fair Queen of Wu

The breeze passes through the lotus flowers—

All fragrance is the waterside pavilion.

The king of Wu is feasting on the Ku-su Tower.

She is fair and unresisting.

<sup>1</sup> An alternative title of this poem is “Ziye Sishi Ge”.

Now, smiling, she leans near the east window  
Against a couch of white jade. (LI, 1965, p. 74)

Immediately readers notice the changes about XI Shi (see Example 3). Lotus flower appears again, but this time it takes us to King of Wu's palace instead. XI Shi becomes Queen of Wu already and she is dancing while her husband is feasting. This picture is touched with pathos compared to the two preceding pictures. Nature's beauty just lingers sluggishly, only to work up enough fragrance for XI Shi to dance; XI Shi is no more the proud Queen who raises her head high among her people, she is instead, juxtaposed alone with King of Wu and appears "unresisting". She is "smiling" but also half drunk. What she is evading from and what she is trying to forget? References to drinking plays a key role here: Drunken XI Shi may allude to YANG Gui-fei (杨贵妃) (719-756), because YANG Gui-fei is known as a good dancer and she also drinks. And if this link is plausible, this poem is not just lament the past, it speaks to the present. And, if not too farfetched, LI Bai is prophetic about YANG Gui-fei's tragedy and uses XI Shi's story to warn her.

Example (4) 乌栖曲

姑苏台上乌栖时，吴王宫里醉西施。  
吴歌楚舞欢未毕，青山欲一作犹衔半边日。  
银箭金壶(古代计时工具)一作金壶丁丁漏水多，起看秋月坠秋伯。  
东方渐高奈乐一作尔何。(LIN & LI, 1997, p. 554)

Song of the Roosting Crows  
The time when the crows are roosting on the terrace of Ku-su  
Is when, in the Wu king's palace, Hsi Shih is growing drunk.  
The songs of Wu and dances of Ch'u—their pleasures had not reached its height,  
As the green hills were about to swallow a half side of the sun.  
From waterclock more and more drips away, from the basin of gold with its silver arrow,  
And they rise and they watch the autumn moon sink down in the river's waves,  
As in the east the sun grows higher, what shall their joy be then? (Owen, 1981, p. 121)

XI Shi is still drunk and dancing, and unaware of the fact that crow already enters the palace (see Example 4). And the tradition of linking crow with bad luck immediately sets the whole tone of the poem. In fact, readers can find many repetitive usages of crow in LI Bai's poems: "Yellow Crow at the Field" (Yitian Huangque Xing) (《野田黄雀行》) contains the line "栖莫近宫燕" (LIN & LI, 1997, p. 555); "Three, Five, Seven Words" ("San Wu Qi Yan" (《三五七言》)) has "秋风清，秋月明，落叶聚还散，寒鸦(寒冷的鸟)栖复惊" (LIN & LI, 1997, p. 627). This is an example of "investing" or "entrusting" images with meaning. Owen (1981) observed the "dreamlike" (p. 122) feature of this poem. The author believes that maybe because LI Bai's snapshots of nature have some illusive quality about them.

In "Ziye Wu Ge: Xia Ge", XI Shi even does not wait for the moon to come out or even cast a glance at the moon and just leaves, but now before she finishes entertaining, "The sun is being swallowed by the mountains" (Owen, 1981, p. 122). The setting sun is usually regarded as an omen of a ruler's decline. The images of the moon can also be linked with the thought of the woman. "For the roundness of the moon is a symbol of the reunion of lovers, and at the same time a remote and inaccessible presence. It conveys better than any word the desire of the woman stretching toward the infinite" (Cheng, 1986, p. 48). If this holds true, the poet is assuming a female voice at the end and presents the picture through her consciousness. Actually XI Shi still keeps Yue's

tradition, because she still dances “楚舞”, but can she go back to her home country after the mission completed? The last sentence seems to give the answer. Ah, humanity!

The “Baizhu Ci Sanshou: Zhi Yi” follows the same line of thinking (see Example 5).

Example (5) 白纛辞三首 之一

扬清歌一作音，发皓齿(洁白的牙齿)，北方佳人东临子。  
且一作旦吟白(古曲名)停绿水(古曲名)，长袖拂面为君起。  
寒云夜卷霜海空，胡风吹天飘塞鸿(边塞的大雁)。  
玉颜(美人)满堂乐未终，馆娃(西施，此指美女)日落歌吹(深)一作中。(LIN & LI, 1997, p. 559)

Three Baizhu Poems: Number 1

Crisp voice, white teeth, a beauty from the North is singing and dancing.  
Water stops to listen, her long sleeves rise up to accompany.  
Yet dark winter clouds and frost dry up the sea and border winds fill up the sky.  
Before she finishes, the sun sets and her song lingers up in the air. (Translated by this author)

XI Shi's physical beauty and singing skills get repeated. But she sings in the cold season and dark hour in a harsh climate. Do the frontier birds refer to Yue's troops at her time or the barbarians that Tang soldiers fight in the frontier? “馆娃” as shown in the first poem, refers to XI Shi herself, though the annotation cited suggests its possibly general use here.

There is one more poem that LI Bai works on the theme of the passing of time and the transience of life (see Example 6).

Example (6) 送祝八之江东，赋得浣纱石

西施越溪女，明艳光云海。  
未一作来入吴王宫殿时，浣纱(洗纱)古一作故石今犹在。  
桃李新开映古查(年久的树桩)，菖蒲(草名)犹短出平沙(平坦的沙地)。  
昔时红粉(美人)一作颜照流水，今日青苔覆(盖住)落花。  
君去(离开)西秦适(到)东越，碧水青江几超忽(远)。  
若到天涯思古人，浣纱石上窥明月。(LIN & LI, 1997, pp. 600-601)

Seeing Zhuba Off to East of the River, and Writing on Getting a Wash Yarn Stone

XI Shi, a girl spotted on a stream in Yue,  
Her beauty brightens clouds and sea.  
Before she enters into King of Wu's palace,  
She washes yarn and the stone she used still remains.  
Peach and plum trees blossom and juxtapose with the old stocks,  
Bushes being too short seem to come out of flat sand ground.  
In the past her beauty mirrors the flowing water,  
But now fallen flowers get buried beneath green mosses.  
You [Zhuba] leave Qin in the West for Yue in the East,  
And you may wind through rounds of green waters.  
If you think of old acquaintances in that far away place,  
Take this wash yarn stone with you, and you will see bright moon reflected on it. (Translated by this author)

Two common occasions that Tang poets write poetry—seeing off a friend and *huai gu* (怀古) are combined in here. XI Shi's beauty or tragic fate is diluted, and the contrast between past and present, splendor and

desolation, permanent nature and impermanent things are fore-grounded. “These images of past human glory contrast sharply with the bleak scenery. The ultimate insubstantiality of human glory and achievement compared to the eternal physical presence of nature” (LIN, 1986, p. 327).

So far, LI Bai mainly narrates the historical tale about XI Shi and these poems fall into the genre of *huai gu* (怀古). Owen (1981) observed the following when he analyzed “Wu Qi Qu”:

LI Po possessed a capability that relatively few Chinese poets before him had in any great degree—a fictional imagination. ... To treat a historical theme, most poets before the 740s would turn to the *huai-ku*, a meditation occasioned by a visit to an ancient site. The *huai-ku* might indeed contain a few lines of speculation on what the site had been like in the past, but the center of the poem was inevitably the poet's present: what he saw, what he felt, and (reducing the imaginative act to a mental process) what he imagined. (pp. 121-22)

In “Xiaogu Ershou: Zhi Er” and “Yu Hu Yin” he compares himself to XI Shi and Dongfang Shuo (see Examples 7-8).

Example (7) 效古二首

之二

自古有秀色，西施与东邻。

蛾眉不可妒，况乃效其颦(皱眉)。

所以尹婕妤(汉武帝妃)，羞见邢夫人(汉武帝妃)。

低头不出气，塞默(沉默)少精神。

寄语无盐(战国丑妇)子，如君不足珍。(LIN & LI, 1997, p. 622)

Poems Imitating the Past

Number 2

There are two young females: XI Shi and her neighbor to the east.

Do not be jealous of XI Shi's eyebrow, let alone imitate her way of frowning.

That is why Concubine YIN Jie-yu keeps a low profile before Concubine XING Fu-ren.

Lowering her head, YIN Jie-yu is silent and quiet.

Mark my words, XI Shi's ordinary-looking contemporaries, don't imitate XI Shi. (Translated by this author)

This poem draws strong parallels with LI Bai's another poem: “Gathering Flowers at Yudian” (“Yudian Caihua” (《于阗采花》)), which contains the lines:

丹青(绘画)能令丑者妍(美丽)，无盐(丑女)翻(反而)在深宫里。

自古妒蛾眉(美女)，胡沙埋皓齿。(LIN & LI, 1997, p. 557)

Able drawers can make the ugly look beautiful, thus the ugly reside in the palace.

Forever true that beauty gets jealousy, and beauty buried beneath enormous sands. (Translated by this author)

Compare them to Example 8.

Example (8) 玉壶吟

烈士(有节操道德人)击玉壶，壮心惜暮年(晚年)。

三杯拂剑舞秋月，忽然高咏涕泗(泪水)连。

凤凰初下紫泥诏(用紫泥封的诏书)，谒帝称觞(酒杯)登御筵。

揄扬(举引)九重(天的最高层，指代朝廷)万乘主(皇帝)，谑浪(戏闹)赤墀(红色的殿上地面)青琐(宫门)贤。

朝天数换(多次换)飞龙马(马名)，敕赐(皇帝赏赐)珊瑚白玉鞭。

世人不识东方朔(汉代名臣)，大隐金门(宫门)是谪仙(贬下凡尘的仙人)。  
西施宜笑复宜颦(笑和皱眉都相宜)，丑女效(仿效)之徒累身(连累自己)。  
君王虽爱蛾眉好(美丽)，无奈宫中妒杀人<sup>2</sup>。(LIN & LI, 1997, p. 567)

On a Jade Bottle

Holding a jade bottle and drinking, an upright man is lamenting his years,  
Holding swords, dancing with the autumn moon, he recites his poetry suddenly and sheds tears.  
Emperor's verdict comes and he receives an honor to dine with the Emperor.  
He goes and he is lauding the Emperor and teasing the people in the palace.  
He has the honor to switch a kind of Fei Long horse from one to another, and he gets valuable awards from the Emperor.  
But the ordinary people don't recognize Dongfang Shuo, who is a big recluse inside Gate of Jin,  
But actually Dongfang is a banished immortal.  
It is both appropriate for XI Shi to smile and frown,  
Ordinary-looking girls learning to imitate her behavior comes to no avail.  
The Emperor loves XI Shi's beauty,  
Yet he cannot stop the jealousy from the palace people which is almost to kill. (Translated by this author)

“Sword, horse, wine, gold, the moon... are the recurring features” of LI Bai's work (Seth, 1992, p. xvi). But the most outstanding feature of “Yu Hu Yin” is that LI Bai presents a special persona: He is gifted, wild and proud; he compares himself to Dongfang Shuo and XI Shi; he claims himself to be a “banished immortal”. And this person is none other than LI Bai himself, though it is precarious to identify the author with the narrator. XI Shi's story itself retreats to the background; she is only the rare beauty that the world is jealous of and the beauty the world wants to compete with<sup>3</sup>. Just like LI Bai whom the palace people, perhaps only with the exception of the Emperor at this time, want to defeat. And readers are overwhelmed by the “swift and fierce imaginative sweep, by a savage drive and vigor” of the poem (HUANG, 1985, p. 107).

### A Comparative Look

In *Tang Shi San Bai Shou* (《唐诗三百首》), there is a poem by WANG Wei (王维) (701-761) that treats the same subject matter (see Example 9). Let us take a look at it and see whether, like Owen (1981) observed, “WANG Wei's treatment of Hsi Shih legend offers a striking contrast” (p. 122) to LI Bai's or they show closer affinities.

#### Example (9) 西施咏—作篇

艳色(美丽的容颜)天下重(看重)，西施宁(怎能)一作又久微(卑微)。  
朝仍(还是)一作作为越溪女，暮一作暝作吴宫妃。  
贱日岂殊(不同)众，贵来方悟稀(指美色稀少)。  
邀一作要人傅香一作脂粉，不自著(穿戴)罗衣。  
君(指吴王)宠益(更加)娇态，君怜无是非。  
当一作常时浣纱伴，莫(不)得同车归。  
持谢(把这个道理告诉)一作寄言，一作寄谢邻家子(女子)，效颦(东施效颦之典)安可希。(LIN & LI, 1997, p. 403)

<sup>2</sup> Implicated, during the An Lu-shan Rebellion, in the affair of Prince Lin, LI Bai was condemned to banishment at Ye-lang in Yun-nan, only to have his sentence lifted before he arrived at his destination (Cheng, 1977, p. 208).

<sup>3</sup> Another evidence that suggests the parallel between LI Bai and XI Shi: LI Bai dubbed himself the Green Lotus Man, borrowing the name from a Buddhist saint, and in his poems he links XI Shi to Green Lotus.

Song about XI Shi  
 Her beauty casts a spell on everyone.  
 How could XI Shi stay poor long?  
 In the morning she was washing clothes in the Yue River,  
 In the evening she was a concubine in the palace of Wu.  
 When she was poor, was she out of the ordinary?  
 Now rich, she is rare.  
 Her attempts apply her powders and rouge,  
 Others dress her in silks.  
 The king favors her and it fans her arrogance.  
 She can do no wrong.  
 Of her old friends who washed silks with her,  
 None share her carriage.  
 In her village her best friend is ugly. It's  
 Hopeless  
 To imitate Lady XI Shi's cunning frowns. (WANG, 1991, p. 120)

Thematically, WANG Wei does three things in this poem: He is commenting on the fact that the world is indeterminate and we are all just like whips in the wind; he is satirizing those high officials who are nothing but lucky; and he is moralizing, though not without humor, those who imitate those above them to gain favors. Is LI Bai moralizing in those eight poems? At least in “Xiaogu Ershou: Zhi Er”, he does, though not generally.

Both WANG Wei and LI Bai are bent toward nostalgia. But LI Bai's poems read light and easy. In fact, his poems read like commingling or balancing wild imagination and gloomy realism. Or like what Owen (1981) pointed out, when he analyzes “Wu Qi Qu”, there is a tension between “the simple, sensual surface and its more complicated, tragic significance in terms of the Hsi Shih legend” (p. 122).

### Conclusions

The question remains then, why none of the eight poems of LI Bai gets anthologized in *Tang Shi San Bai Shou* (《唐诗三百首》) while WANG Wei's does? It is generally believed that “LI Po is a great master in painting natural scenery, especially the grand and sublime, but he is a clumsy hand at describing feelings” (HUANG, 1985, p. 124). For another instance, HUANG believed that:

In the collected works of LI Po, there certainly are many great poems, sublime poems lines, and beautiful turns of phrase which thrill and stun the reader, gratify his senses, and overwhelm his mind, but there are also a large number of poems which show signs of hasty composition. (pp. 111-112)

But LI Bai's treatment of *huai gu* (怀古) genre is unique. He is evocative and may be more evocative than WANG Wei. He is being not in pensive mood, not moralizing all through, but combining his personal, historical and cosmic perspectives.<sup>4</sup>

Technically, he does many experiments on the tonal effects among these poems, and his beginnings are not all very well. HUANG (1985) pointed out that:

As Yen Yü in his Poetry Talks of Ts'ang-lang (《沧浪诗话》) has observed, “LI Po's opening lines ‘reveal the mountain as soon as the door opens’ (太白发句谓之开门见山)”. When he fails to hit the target at one go, or, to sustain

<sup>4</sup> Because we do not know exactly when these eight poems are written, it is hard to survey which aspects transcend in the end.

Yen Yü's metaphor, when the opened door fails to reveal the mountain, his effort will flag, so that he often ends up by simply dashing off lines that are unworthy of the opening. (p. 111)

But this may be true only for lyrical poems, and at least it is not true for narrative poems. In fact, "XI Shi", "Ziye Wu Ge: Xia Ge", and "Xiaogu Ershou: Zhi Er" do not get very good openings, but their artistic excellence are not marred.

Last, but not the least, we cannot never be too careful with general assumptions. And it is these assumptions that may block our understandings and evaluations of literary works. Take the following judgments as an example, which are both wrong:

WANG Wei's typical mood is that of aloneness, quiet, a retreat into nature and Buddhism. What one associates with him are running water, evening and dawn, bamboo and the absence of men's voices. The word "empty" is almost his signature. LI Bai's poetry sparkles with zest, impulsiveness, exuberance, even at the risk of bombast and imbalance. (Seth, 1992, p. xvi)

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