Returning to the High Tang

I wrote a book on the poetry of the “High Tang” back in 1980 when I was still at Yale; and I want to return to that topic to see what looks different to me after thirty-five years. This is an interesting enterprise, letting us think how fields change and how we change. I want to warn the younger scholars in the audience: The danger of writing a book is that it has no expiration date; the author is still cited and held responsible for his claims made in his early thirties. That is, I suppose, how it should be; and fortunately I don’t basically disagree with what I wrote then. Nevertheless, I see rather different things in the period now.

What *has* changed is the way the “map” of tradition now appears. In place of a stable set of categories that could be used at least provisionally, the Chinese “tradition” now seems a vast fluid field of inventions, evasions, forgetting and selective memory shaped by now forgotten motives, opportunities, and accidents. What seemed certain then is now uncertain. This is not the way it Chinese literary history usually taught. In China it seems inscribed in stone, so replete with scholarly detail that graduate students are routinely directed to some tiny, insignificant corner where they can still write their names. Once, however, one develops the critical twitch and starts asking questions, the illusion of stability often becomes merely the trace of some later formation. We very soon discover that the scholarly field is not only not complete, but that we are just barely beginning.

In this spirit I turn to a cornerstone of the received tradition, the “High Tang.” Anyone who studies China has heard of the “High Tang,” *sheng Tang* 盛唐. If you study Chinese poetry, you know that is supposed to be the best, the highpoint.

If you look at the Song reception of Tang poetry, however, it quickly becomes clear that for most of the dynasty the readers, the critics, and the poets weren’t much interested in High Tang poetry apart from Li Bai and Du Fu and a much lesser attention to Wang Wei and Meng Haoran. For the Song the Tang meant largely what we would call the “Mid-Tang” and “Late Tang,” essentially the ninth century. Song poets and critics were not only disinterested in High Tang poetry they were equally disinterested in pre-Tang poetry, with the exception of Tao Yuanming. Indeed, when one starts searching for the term “Sheng Tang” 盛唐 before the 13th century, one finds that the term refers to a Song county and is not used in relation to poetry or to literature until late in the dynasty. It does not appear applied to poetry until the *Canglang shihua* 滄浪詩話 by Yan Yu 嚴羽.[[1]](#footnote-1) We don’t know Yan Yu’s dates or the date of *Canglang shihua*, but it was probably written in 1220s or perhaps the 1230s, half a millennium after the High Tang itself.

*Canglang shihua* was almost instantly influential, and the “High Tang” began to appear everywhere from the 1240s on. Largely unread poets began to be read again; they began to appear in anthologies and even to dominate them. Yan Yu not only invented the period term, he made it the very center of a narrative of Chinese poetry that has survived to this day. The sheer audacity of this venture is shocking. Suppose I wrote a book proclaiming that the largely unread poetry of the early reign of Henry the VIII was the highpoint of English literature, “High Tudor,” that reading the other poets of the period should prepare for reading Henry Howard, Earl of Surrey and Thomas Wyatt, that the Elizabethan reign represented a sad falling away from such perfection, and that things have gotten steadily worse over the course of the five centuries leading to the present. Suppose that view spread quickly and became the standard view in all accounts of the history of English poetry from now on.

You might easily suppose that by the “High Tang” Yan Yu meant Li Bai and Du Fu, who did indeed receive much attention in the Song. But if you read Yan Yu carefully, it is much stranger than that. At one point Yan Yu tells the student of poetry to first read the “famous High Tang poets,” *sheng Tang mingjia* 盛唐名家, and only then read Li Bai and Du Fu—rather than read Du Fu and Li Bai and then the High Tang poets. There is a poetic collective here, necessary for reading Li Bai and Du Fu. He is, in effect, creating a then largely unread sphere of perfection at the very heart of the history of Chinese poetry, and the very condition for reading Li Bai and Du Fu.

The “High Tang” was not just a new period in Chinese poetry but a narrative function in an account of classical poetry from the Han to the Song present, given not simply as literary history, but as a curriculum for “the study of poetry,” *shixue* 詩學. In contrast to Huang Tingjian’s view of past poetry as a great reservoir of poetic material for contemporary reuse, Yan Yu’s student was to learn the poetic past chronologically. The largely unread poetry of the pre-Tang was reintroduced as an essential part of this curriculum. Yan Yu firmly believed that everything had gone downhill after the High Tang; and in different passages he gives contradictory advice about what the student should do after reading the history of poetry up to the High Tang, Li Bai and Du Fu. In one iteration Yan Yu tells the student to stop there and read no further, as if the student of poetry can thereby be transported to that glorious moment. In this iteration, to read the poetry of the long downhill course that followed, lasting for almost five hundred years, would be to risk infection. In another iteration, in his characteristic discursive voice of an angry schoolteacher, he tells the student to keep reading poetry after the High Tang; and if the student does not see how bad it is, that student is hopeless and can never learn anything. I might add here that this literary historical narrative as a reading curriculum was probably Yan Yu’s most enduring influence on the Chinese literary landscape. Before Yan Yu anthologies of poetry were still often not chronologically organized—as anthologies in the Tang itself had not been. After Yan Yu and to the current day, virtually every anthology has been organized chronologically on some level.

What then constituted the perfection of High Tang poetry that plays such an important role in Yan Yu’s curriculum? Its characteristic is that it has no characteristics, no imitable “traces.”

詩者，吟詠情性也，盛唐諸人，惟在興趣；羚羊掛角，無跡可求。故其妙處，透徹玲瓏，不可湊泊。如空中之音，相中之色，水中之月，鏡中之象，言有盡而意無窮。

Poetry is "to sing what is in the heart." In the stir­ring and excitement of their poetry, the High Tang writers were those antelopes that hang by their horns, leaving no tracks to be followed. Where they are subtle, there is a limpid and sparkling quality that can never be quite fixed and determined—like tones in the empty air, or color in a face, or moonlight in the water, or an image in a mirror. The words are exhausted, but the meaning is never exhausted.

The elusiveness of such perfection should be understood in the context of contemporary poetics, advocating *fa* 法, “method,” and using earlier poetry as recognizable models. In Yan Yu’s own time the dominant model was so-called “Late Tang” (that is, after the An Lushan Rebellion), which Yan Yu strictly excluded from his syllabus.

Such perfection can be grasped only by a kind of “enlightenment,” which becomes within reach only by following the history of poetry to that point. You might think that the student of poetry could then truly return to perfection, but Yan Yu’s was a world of epigones: once the student grasped the possibility of such poetry, he would, in Yan Yu’s own words, be able to achieve only half of what his masters had achieved, but he would, at least, be able to avoid the worst.

Yan Yu’s supremely weird, belated, and melancholy poetic pedagogy in effect replaced the world of poetry as it *had* been known and installed a new narrative, which, though revised and augmented, remains in place to this day. One cannot remove the High Tang because it has a pivotal function in the narrative, which otherwise would crumble and leave only a chronology of names. Its success was astoundingly quick. The *Shiren yuxie* 詩人玉屑 (preface 1244), an anthology of poetics and criticism, begins its opening section on the theory of poetry by quoting Yan Yu.

Understanding Yan Yu’s intervention and the role of the “High Tang” in his literary historical narrative frees us to return to this era and look at it in a fresh way. Rather than an era in its own right, it may have been simply a transition, elusive for that reason and inimitable for that very reason. It is neither here nor there, in between eras that do have traces and are imitable. On one side was an age of court poetry, with strict rules of exposition, diction, and conventions closely tied to the topic. On the other wide was the highly self-conscious poetry of the Mid-Tang and Late Tang, which the Song understood all too well. And rather than an elusive, “pure poetry” that happened in history but did not belong to it, we may find a poetry that is indeed deeply grounded in its moment, and succeeds through the fluidity of that moment.

Yan Yu seems to have had in mind a particular group for his “High Tang.” He was not looking at the court officials who continued the traditions of court poetry. Wang Wei was an exception, but the preponderance of his extant work was different. He was also not looking at the archaists, represented in Yuan Jie’s *Qiezhong ji*. By and large he seems to have been thinking of the poets included in Yin Fan’s 殷璠 754 anthology *Heyue yingling ji* 河嶽英靈集. At least these are the poets that have come to define the “High Tang” to this day, including Li Bai, but not Du Fu, the vast majority of whose extant work postdates the anthology. Most were *jinshi* graduates, with Li Bai and Meng Haoran being striking exceptions; almost none came from distinguished families, with Wang Wei being the exception. They all, however, belonged to a network of poetic exchange.

It is useful to compare the title of this anthology with the other extant contemporary anthology of poetry the *Guoxiu ji* 國秀集, a production of the imperial academy. We can never decide whether *guo* is the “dynasty,” the “capital,” or the “heartland.” Choosing one of these, we can call it *A Collection of the Flower of the Capital*.” However we translate it, the title is oriented to the imperial center. The poets included are named with their offices; and while there are a number of those listed simply as *jinshi* (probably meaning that they did not pass the examination) and “private gentleman,” *chushi*, there are an impressive number of poets who held central government offices.

By contrast, *Heyue yingling ji* can be roughly translated *Collection of the Geniuses of the Rivers and Great Mountains*. *Heyue* is a variation on *shanhe* 山河, “mountains and rivers,” the term used for “dynastic territory,” what the *guo* “has.” Even though Wang Wei served in the central government, the title of the anthology positions its “geniuses” away from the capital. The anthologist Yin Fan was himself from Danyang, near modern Zhenjiang, and earlier compiled an anthology of Danyang poets. He is talking about the poetry of the empire rather than of the imperial center.

Although the poets of *Guoxiu ji* were, by and large, not the great courtiers, the two anthologies are weighted differently, which brings us to the question of whether the *jinshi* was important in this period. The answer was a distinct “yes,” for those who passed the examination and entered service; they were recognized as “talents.” For the real power-holding elite the answer was “yes,” *only if* the person who passed was himself from a distinguished family. Tang scholars knew quite well that *jinshi* graduates made up only a diminutive proportion of the empire’s office-holders; and those with power seemed to be making sure that very few ever rose higher than the bottom of the official ladder. Real power in the Tang was always held by a small group of families, who intermarried and support one another. And as Nicolas Tackett has nicely demonstrated, these families belonged to the two capitals, Chang’an and Luoyang. It was their children who attended the imperial academy; and when they had to take the examination, they were familiar to the officials in charge of the examination. They took many of the places as successful graduates, but there was usually a leavening of provincials and members of the cadet branches of the great families.

Perhaps the best way to understand the place of the *jinshi* graduates in elite society is to go back before the High Tang, to the opening of the *jinshi* ranks under Empress Wu, then ruling but not yet reigning. Zhang Zhuo 張鷟 was a *jinshi* graduate of 675 and renowned for his talent. He is the protagonist and probable author of “Youxian ku,” 遊仙窟, preserved in Japan. This is the ultimate *jinshi* graduate fantasy, taking the old story of an erotic encounter with two goddesses deep in the mountains and relocating it in contemporary Tang history, Tang geography, and, most of all, in elite Tang society. On his way to take up the entry-level post of county sheriff, Zhang encounters two beautiful widows in an opulent villa in the mountains. The widows identify themselves as Cui’s of the Qinghe branch, one of the most prestigious of the great families. The great families reproduced prolifically, so the author has to show that they are not just any Qinghe Cui, but *the* Qinghe Cuis. This is accomplished by having one tell of the marriages of her and her sister, both to equally illustrious families, their husbands having held high rank and conveniently dead in battle. This establishes them as the Tang “Who’s Who?” of status and confirmed by wealth of their household.

Madam Cui initially treats the young *jinshi* graduate Zhang Zhuo with utter disdain; in response we hear for the first time a familiar refrain from a member of the rising lower gentry. Zhang Zhuo answers that his family had held prominent posts for generations in the Han, but had fallen on hard times, and now they are back—in the person of Zhang Zhuo himself. I’m sure every Zhang from the lower gentry said the same thing. Everyone had illustrious ancestors, real or imagined. Madam Cui is not impressed, and the story itself is a long demonstration of Zhang’s verbal, cultural, and toxophilite prowess to win the lady’s lust and be invited to her bed. This is, as it were, his second successful examination. It is hard not to see this as an allegory of the new class of examination graduates, imagining their acceptance into the ironclad ranks of the real Tang elite through a demonstration of talent. It was never to be.

In a later age these were, by and large the 754 *Heyue yingling ji* anthology poets. Many never rose above the level of county sheriff (*wei* 尉), at the very bottom of the ladder, posted in places far from the capital. Seventy-five years after Zhang Zhuo, however, they no longer had fantasies that things could be different. There is a new tone, and this may be part of understanding the poetry of the era. This was part of the agenda of *Heyue yingling ji*, seen in the very first entry on the poet Chang Jian:

髙才無貴士, 誠哉是言. 曩劉楨死於文學, 左思終於記室, 鮑昭卒於參軍, 今常建亦淪於一尉.

They say that there are never noblemen among the greatest talents, and this is indeed true! Long ago Liu Zhen (d. 217) died in the post of instructor; Zuo Si (*ca*. 250-*ca*.305) met his end in the post of record keeper; Bao Zhao (*ca*. 414-466) perished in the post of adjutant; and now Chang Jian has passed away as a mere county sheriff.

In Yin Fan’s eyes this was a community that, by virtue of its talents, was destined never to hold power and the common kind of social prestige. Although many *jinshi* graduates were not particularly good at poetry and although they were scattered in many places, they constituted themselves as a community outside the ruling elite by and large through poetry, which was for them the instantiation of their talent. Of course, they wanted prestige and power, but found it out of their reach. They often proclaimed their disinterest in prestige and power, knowing that such a claim was an alternate route to the very thing they claimed to disdain. The phrase 得一名 is sometimes used for passing the examination, and granting *ming*, “name” and “reputation” had been the prerogative of the imperial center. But this community claimed the power to grant *ming* apart from the imperial center—and this *ming* was the *family* name, unlike the other great “separate spheres,” the Buddhist *sangha* and the Daoist “church,” where one took a new name. There had been regional groups apart from the imperial center in earlier history (I think of the Eastern Jin); but this would be the best candidate for the beginnings of an empire-wide literati culture at least partially independent of the state. At the heart of that independence is claiming the power of authoritative judgment regarding “fame,” and simultaneously denying that authority to the center. The emperor can grant office and political power, but he cannot successfully declare someone a great poet.

In Yin Fan’s preface we see an interesting inversion of socio-political reality. If those with power saw the talented poets without family background as interlopers in a stable political system, Yin Fan imagined that those without talent but possessing status and political power might use their authority to get included among the talented poets.

且大同至於天寶，把筆者近千人，除勢要及賄賂者中間灼然可尚者，五分無二，豈得逢詩輯纂，往往盈帙.

From the Datong Reign (535-45) down to the Tianbao Reign (742-55) nearly a thousand have held the brush in hand. Excluding the politically powerful and those who gave bribes [for a mention], scarcely forty per cent of that number are eminent and estimable. Certainly one can’t anthologize every poem one encounters and fill scroll-cases all over the place.

如名不副實，才不合道，縱權壓梁竇，終無取焉.

If a person’s reputation does not match the actual situation or if their talent is not in accord with the Way, then even if their power overtops that of Liang Ji or Dou Xian, I would never include them.

Yin Fan puts himself in the role of the community’s gatekeeper, keeping out the untalented, but powerful members of the Tang oligarchy, who in Yin Fan’s imagination might seek inclusion. “Reputation,” *ming*, is here not conferred by the state, but rather by a consensus of the community Yi Fan claims to represent. Any intrusion of state-sanctioned power in the judgment made by Yin Fan’s world must be resisted.

The great families were an urban oligarchy, and their poetic production was largely in the region of the two capitals or, if rusticated, looking back towards the capitals. Our other community, of talented poets, excluded from power, circulated in the empire outside the capitals, in the empire’s “mountains and rivers.” In this community we see poetry used in lateral communication, sent to or exchanged with others in the provinces. They visited local officials and—no doubt in gratitude for hospitality—celebrated them. It became a network of mutual recognition, completely separate from the power of the center to assign status and prestige. From local officials to temples to country gentlemen politely called “recluses,” reputations circulated in poems. It is not that we do not see this earlier, but the volume of extant production and the geographical extent was unprecedented. If Chang’an and Luoyang ruled the empire, this period created and culturally mapped the “empire” in its larger sense.

For the urban oligarchy the empire outside the capitals was a tax base and source of luxury goods, but a most unwelcome domicile, unless sent as a prefect to one of the more pleasant cities—and even then, they would look back with longing to Chang’an or Luoyang. Our community of poets celebrated the larger empire and helped make it a map of places with aura—we still find their poems inscribed in metal and stone when we travel in China. There were many early poetic expositions on journeys, *zheng fu* 征賦; these duly noted every historical site on a route and the stories associated with that site. But all this differs from the truly poetic investment in “place” in the High Tang. Our High Tang poets may have spent their careers moving from one provincial post to another or traveling in search of patrons or just wandering; but the collective consequence was the beginning of a tourist map of the empire.

崔顥，黃鶴樓 Cui Hao (*ca*. 704-754), Yellow Crane Tower

昔人已乘白雲去, Someone long ago already rode  
the white clouds away,

此地空餘黃鶴樓. and all that remains in this place   
is Yellow Crane Tower.

黃鶴一去不復返, Once the yellow crane went away,  
it never again returned,

白雲千載空悠悠. for a thousand years the white clouds  
just go on and on.

晴川歷歷漢陽樹, On the sunlit river are clearly seen  
 the trees of Hanyang,

春草萋萋鸚鵡洲. and spring plants grow in profusion  
on Parrot Isle.

日暮鄉關何處是, At sundown where is it?—  
the pass that leads toward home,

煙波江上使人愁. misty waves on the river  
make a person sad.

Some earlier voyager on the Yangzi River might have had a boatman pointing out “Yellow Crane Tower,” *Huanghe lou* 黃鶴樓 (in modern Wuhan, Hubei), and telling some version of the legend. But once Cui Hao’s famous poem on the tower and Li Bai famous quatrain on parting from Meng Haoran were in circulation, the response would be: “So *that’s* Yellow Crane Tower.” The “name”/”fame” of the place was granted by its poems. Architecture was far less durable than the poems; and such buildings were often rebuilt so that one could always see the place referred to in the poem. And, of course, there is still a “Yellow Crane Tower,” *Huanghe lou*, in Wuhan.

Then there is Xiangyang (also in modern Hubei). It had its own songs, largely forgotten until Li Bai, the voracious reader, remembered them. It had many sites and stories and geographical lore. In the seventh century Chen Zi’ang had written on it, passing by on his way to Chang’an; but some of the pieces of local lore on which he drew never became part of the poetic city that took shape in the High Tang. Meng Haoran poetically publicized Yang Hu’s *duolei bei*, “stele for shedding tears,” the recluse Pang Degong, and the nymphs of the Han River encountering Zheng Jiaofu. Li Bai, coming to visit Han Chaozong and Meng Haoran, brought back the famous *yuefu*, the drunken Jin governor Shan Jian, the Xi family pool, the *jieli* hat worn upside down. One need only look at the rich corpus of later Xiangyang poems to see how these associations became the poetic city, some subset of which had to be mentioned in every poem. If you check out the contemporary Xiangyang website, you will still see them. Chen Zi’ang’s other local allusion entirely disappeared.

When we see the sheer durability of their publicity, we begin to understand why poetic travelers were so welcomed and entertained in their peregrinations. If you lived in a small city with a long history or an out-of-the-way temple set in a spectacular landscape, the poet was your advertising agency—a cheap hire for food, drink, party, and a place to sleep for a while. From a backwater you might suddenly become a famous place in the empire, to which other travelers might come just to see what the poet had seen. The temples would often set the poems up in the courtyard or have them written on the wall. By the ninth century temples were tired of too many would-be poets, and insisted that poems be written on boards that could be hung up or taken down and warehoused. If a poem became well-known, it would, of course, be prominently displayed.

Jiankang—Jinling in the Tang—had been razed and erased in the Sui conquest. I suspect Sui orders to erase the city were pretty much confined to within the city walls, leaving many famous places in the outskirts. If the original buildings had fallen into disrepair, they would have been replaced so that the architectural city probably had the most prominent sites of the textual city. The city was, of course, richly celebrated in the Southern Dynasties, and earlier in the Tang, we have “laments on the past,” *huaigu*. But Li Bai truly recreated a poetic Jinling, tinged with nostalgia, and other Tang poets followed. There were other places: Handan with its beauties and carousing, Jibei with its gallant knight-errants, and the rich, anachronistic lore of the frontier. As a cultural space judged from contemporary writings, the China of 750 looked far more interesting than the China of 700.

The High Tang did not complete the map. Du Fu added Chengdu. With some predecessors, Du Mu added Yangzhou. But by the end of the Tang there was a cultural “poetic” map of the rest of China that made the empire no longer just a Rome, an immensely successful city-state—it had become an imperial territory made up of many “places.”

It was more than a map; it was a community. These poets praised one another and all those who entertained them, and they celebrated ways of life beyond the emperor’s reach. We can be sure that that almost all wanted office; but failing that, they could conjure up in their poetry a way of life that they not only proclaimed was preferable, but whose attractions were discursively realized. The difference between them and pre-Tang recluses was precisely their community and the pleasure of sending their poems back and forth. Through poetry they shared their solitary pleasures. And those who were celebrated by some passing poet became the margins of that community, people who *ming*, name and fame, were circulating widely because of the poets. Wang Shiyuan was able to rebuild the poetic collection of the poet Meng Haoran because people kept copies or, perhaps, remembered the poems. This was a largely invisible world before the High Tang, and it seems to have remained largely invisible to the Tang ruling elite.

We have some sense of this in the fate of Meng Haoran’s collected poems. Meng Haoran was a provincial landholder in Xiangyang, and early in his career there seems to have been at least a few local poets to write with. At the very beginning of Xuanzong’s reign, one of his friends, Zhang Zirong 張子容, set off for the capital to take the *jinshi* examination, and he passed. We know little of his career, except that he served twice as a county sheriff in Jiangnan; since one of those appointments was fifteen years after he passed the examination, it is likely he rose any higher, which was, as we have seen, common for *jinshi* without family background. In college he dreamed of being on Wall Street, did well, and spent his life as the manager of a Bank of America branch in a town in Arkansas.

Zhang Zirong’s initial examination success clearly inspired Meng Haoran to take the examination; he failed. Thereafter he returned to Xiangyang, traveled in the lower Yangzi region, building a reputation as a “free spirit,” and in the last years of his life he served on the staff of Zhang Jiuling, who in 737 had been “exiled” to the post of military Commander-in-Chief (da dudu) of the Jingzhou region. His fame as a “free spirit” brought him a visit by Li Bai.

After Meng’s death in 740 his reputation attracted the interest of Wang Shiyuan 王士源, a Daoist whose *Kangcangzi* 亢倉子 was included in the canon in the early Tianbao reign and apparently enjoyed imperial favor.[[2]](#footnote-2) Wang Shiyuan, whose native place was close to Xiangyang but does not seem to have known Meng personally, undertook the compilation of Meng Haoran’s poetry collection, which involved gathering (and sometimes) purchasing poems.[[3]](#footnote-3) This, of course, implies that Meng Haoran did not keep a master copy of his poems.

By this route we come to Wei Tao 韋韜. He was a member of a high elite family with a history of service to the dynasty and himself having a distinguished career. In the context of Xuanzong’s passion for Daoism in the Tianbao, he took an interest in Wang Shiyuan, whom he had never met (as Wang had never met Meng Haoran). He found Wang Shiyuan’s edition of Meng Haoran’s poems with his preface. And here we see the final stage of Meng Haoran’s entry to the inner circle of the imperial world.

宜城王士源者，藻思清遠，深鑒文理，常遊山水，不在人間。著《亢蒼子》數篇，傳之于代。余久在集遺，嘗與諸學士，命此子不可得見。天寶中，忽獲《浩然文集》，乃士源爲之序傳。詞理卓絕，吟諷忘疲，書寫不一，紙墨薄弱。昔虞阪之上，逸駕與駑駘俱疲；吳竈之中，孤桐與樵蘇爨。遇伯樂與伯喈，遂騰聲于千古。此詩若不遇王君，乃十數張故紙耳。然則王君之清鑒，豈减孫蔡而已哉？余今繕寫，增其條目，復貴士源之清才，敢重述于卷首。謹將此本，送上秘府，庶久而不泯，傳芳無窮。

This preface tells us a great deal. First, it tells us that Meng Haoran, one of the most prominent members of the new community—appearing not only in Yin Fan’s *Heyue yingling ji*, but even the more elite *Guoxiu ji* (as one of the rare poets without office represented), was apparently unknown to Wei Tao before he saw Wang Shiyuan’s edition. Wei Tao is clearly interested in Wang Shiyuan, and in Meng Haoran only because Wang Shiyuan did an edition with a preface. It is also a rare glimpse into ordinary manuscripts—faint ink and brittle paper 紙墨薄弱—even when the interval separating Wang Shiyuan’s edition and Wei Tao’s copy cannot have been all that long. Wei copies it out in a fine hand—presumably on the best paper—and sends it to the imperial library, the very repository of what Wei assumed to be permanent.

Most of the “High Tang poets” have survived in bits and pieces. The five or six that survived in relatively complete versions survived in one case by serendipity, and, in other cases, for a reason.

I would like to argue that as this community, forming around the composition and circulation of poetry, took shape, they were thinking about empire and its limits. The easy and obvious example is their development of the older poetry of the recluse into a celebration of private life. Du Fu has left extensive poetic documentation of life seeking patronage in the capital, which was the only way one could “get ahead” in a career for those who did not belong to the oligarchy of great families or, like himself, was on the margins of an old, very respectable family. He praises, flatters, and thanks, attends the morning levees of grandees; punctuated with thoughts of giving it up and going off, like a Meng Haoran.

But there was a more profound critique of the empire taking shape. The best way to put this perhaps to ask the question this way: does an emperor “have” the empire, or does the empire “have” an emperor? The question gestures to the two dominant models of imperial rule. There is the ideologically “correct” model that the emperor labors for the good of his people and takes responsibility for their well-being. Taizong’s theatrical performance of such a role caught the imagination of the middling elite and gave us the *Zhenguan zhengyao* 貞觀政要—though his “empire” is located in the capital region.

From another point of view, the empire was the personal possession of the emperor. He possessed his empire in representations in the capital region, by a constant stream of information, and by a tribute of luxury goods, representing the diversity and wealth of his territory. The emperor then distributed much of those luxury goods to those close to him, ensuring both their stake in maintaining the empire and reminding of the emperor’s necessary mediating role in their stake in empire.

As Yin Fan had excluded the nobility from the ranks of great talents and had also excluded the powerful from his anthology, we begin to see in the High Tang an interest in what the emperor—and by extension the great families—cannot have. Talent and the recognition that followed from having talent was Yin Fan’s answer. But I want to bring up a peculiar case—as minor as it might seem—the very simple thing the emperor theoretically might own, but cannot have. And this brings us to a famous story, whose actual significance has gone unrecognized. The great Tang Emperor, dwelling in Chang’an, cannot have lychees, a delicious fruit, widely available where it grows, which begins to lose its savor the moment it is picked.

When Zhang Jiuling wrote his *fu* on the lychee 荔枝賦 sometime between 727 and 731 in administrative exile, the poetic creation of the empire was well underway. Zhang, from Guangdong, praised the flavor of his local fruit, and made a prophetic suggestion: unless rushed to Chang’an by the courier system, it could not be enjoyed. This was a “delicious” challenge, pitting local fruit against imperial power and its institutional instantiation, the courier system. The challenge was taken up in the famous story of Noble Consort Yang and her favorite lychees transported to the capital by the courier system. This was an ostentatious example of the idea that the emperor “has” the empire, rather than vice versa.

We will never know how the lychees transported by courier to Chang’an compared with the lychees freshly picked. Du Fu, who claims to have tasted Chang’an lychees and those fresh off the trees, reflected on the issue in Kuizhou. One of my favorite poem sequences by Du Fu is “Jie men” 解悶, which I translate as “Getting Rid of the Blues.” It is all about food and poetry, that which circulates in the empire and that which cannot circulate—except in representation. The sequence was written early the Dali reign, which Yan Yu was to see as the beginning of the fall from the perfection of the High Tang—though he would certainly have exempted Du Fu.

From the very first quatrain, we know we are in Du Fu’s world:

I

草閣柴扉星散居， Thatched pavilion, ramshackle gates,  
dwellings scattered like stars,

浪翻江黑雨飛初。 waves roll, the river blackens,  
the rain begins to fall.

山禽引子哺紅果， A mountain bird brings its chicks  
to feed them red berries,

溪女得錢留白魚。 the girl by the creek gets a coin  
and leaves a white fish.

Everything is local—the place, the weather, the moment—but there in the middle of the last line is the empire, the coin. And Tang poets almost never talk about *qian*, the coin of the realm. On the coin will be the characters *Kaiyuan tongbao* 開元通寶, value that *tong* 通, “circulates” throughout the empire. It can be used for an exchange anywhere, including backwater Kuizhou where Du Fu was living. But the fish is fresh—and however delicious, it’s not going anywhere, not even to the emperor himself, no matter how much he would pay. Du Fu does not say “buy” or “sell”: he just reports what he sees: an imperial coin and in its place a local fish.

You might think I am overdoing the reading of the little quatrain here, but I know Du Fu. When I first read this, I did not know exactly where the next poem would go, but I could see the issues that were in play.

II

商胡離別下揚州， A foreign merchant takes his leave  
going downriver to Yangzhou,

憶上西陵故驛樓。 I recall once climbing upstairs  
in the old post lodge at Xiling.

為問淮南米貴賤， In Huainan find out for me   
whether rice is dear or cheap—

老夫乘興欲東遊。 following my whim, this old fellow  
wants to go roaming east.[[4]](#footnote-4)

Here we see circulation: not just a merchant but a foreign merchant; not the visually innocent exchange but large scale commodity prices; we see Du Fu speculating on moving himself “if the price is right.” Coins and portable carbohydrates are the stuff of empire, and the empire itself may be nothing more profound than a stable system of circulating surplus carbohydrates. But in the first two poems he sets his terms: focus on the local and immediate versus long-range planning, based on information and mobility, always engaged with food.

Du Fu shifts to the High Tang poets, whose works circulate everywhere, like imperial coins and grain; but the poems differ because, in circulating, they remember the local and food is always there. The representation of the local had been the prerogative of the imperial center; here it circulates throughout the empire.

VI

復憶襄陽孟浩然， I also recall Xiangyang’s   
Meng Haoran,

清詩句句盡堪傳。 line after line of lucid poems,  
all worth handing on.

即今耆舊無新語， These days among the gaffers  
 fresh phrases are no more,

漫釣槎頭縮頸鯿。 they merely fish by a log  
for the neck-contracting bream.

The fish for dinner of the first poem returns here, echoing a famous line by Meng Haoran, fishing. They still fish in Xiangyang, but their poet is gone, the one whose lines make the local fish famous. Coins and carbohydrates may link the empire together, but the poets make the particular and local part of the whole; they create the empire in a different sense. The emperor can know of them, “have intelligence” of them, but he can never eat them. The emperor can personally possess only representations.

The sequence concludes with a group of poems on the lychees—the fruit that can be fully appreciated only locally and immediately. The last poem returns to Xuanzong’s folly, abusing the courier system and causing local harm, to have what the emperor and his favorite can never have—fresh lychees. Du Fu had passed through one of the two preeminent lychee regions of China; he had tasted the fruit fresh off the tree. The tenth poem in the sequence says it all:

X

憶過瀘戎摘荔枝， I recall passing Luzhou and Rongzhou  
and picking lychees,

青楓隱映石逶迤。 half hidden among green maples,  
winding off into the rocks.

京中舊見無顏色， The ones I used to see in the capital  
were lacking beautiful color—

紅顆酸甜只自知。 the red berries’ sweetness   
could be known by myself alone.

Only the person who has been there can know. If one understands Yan Yu, Du Fu has already fallen from High Tang perfection; he is making a conceptual claim rather giving the experience poetic presence. Like Yan Yu he is thinking about the past, and earlier about the High Tang. Still he gives body to Yin Fan’s contemptuous rejection of the urban oligarchy in the capitals: this you cannot have—talent or lychees.

Poetry gave the emperor representations of the beauties of his empire, all that he possessed only in representation, discursively. He could never go there or go there only in representation. There is fine little Xuanzong story in Niu Sengru’s ninth-century story collection *Xuanguai lu* 玄怪錄, called “Minghuang in the Kaiyuan reign Visits Guangling” 開元眀皇幸廣陵 (p. 57):

On the 18th year of the Kaiyuan reign (730) on the fifteenth of the first month, the emperor addressed Daoist Master Ye, saying: “The splendors of all the four quarters of the empire are displayed on this evening. Do you know which place has the ultimate beauty?” Master Ye said in response: “For the sumptuous beauty of lanterns and candles, for the display of every kind of entertainment, for the charm of gentlemen and women, infused with powder and mascara, there is no place in the empire that bests Guangling [Yangzhou].” The emperor said: “What technique can permit me to view this?” The Master replied: “Why only Your Majesty?—all your entourage may do so.”

The emperor and his entourage cross a magic bridge and look down on Yangzhou in all its splendor on the Lantern Festival night. Meanwhile the party-goers in Yangzhou look up and see the emperor and his party and take them to be immortals. Master Ye suggests that the emperor have “Skirts of Rainbow, Feather Robes,” which the emperor commands. Then the emperor and his party return.

It is a fine moment: only by magic can the emperor view the beauties of his empire, which in turn marvels at him. But the uncrossable distance remains, even as he stands there above Yangzhou looking down. Wondering if was just an illusion, the emperor later learns through his information network that the people of Yangzhou witnessed the appearance of gods in the sky on the night of the fifteenth. Each could only “observe” the other.

Yan Yu’s “High Tang” was a purely poetic perfection that occurred in Chinese history but transcended it. Once we escape that aura, we see a moving moment that was very much part of history, a new empire of representations that included the local, a world that belonged to a new community and was shared with each locale through which they passed. There are indeed “traces” in this poetry. Perhaps Yan Yu didn’t quite get it right with his good, but imperfect intuition. There are traces that inscribe their negativity, representations of what it out of reach by belonging to a moment and a place and a person. Unless one can learn the pleasure of these negative traces, to accept representations rather than trying to “have” what is represented, one is always eating decaying lychees.

1. The term is used twice by Yan Yu’s probably younger contemporary Liu Kezhuang, who was in the same circle as Yan Yu, but at least one of those mentions clearly postdates *Canglang shihua*, and it seems likely that Liu got the term from Yan Yu. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. See Paul Kroll, “Wang Shih-yüan’s Preface to the Poems of Meng Hao-jan,” *Monumenta Serica* 34 (1979-80). pp. 349-369. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Nugent [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. \*Wang Huizhi. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)