

BEN WANG

# Anticipating the Spring to Come

*This is an edited transcript of an address by Dr. Ben Wang to the Manhattan Schiller Institute Conference, Jan. 14, 2017.*

**Dennis Speed:** Ben Wang is many things. He's an award winning, published writer, translator, author of multiple books on Chinese Classical literature, primarily poetry; senior lecturer in languages and humanities at China Institute, and many, many other things. He's lectured everywhere, and teaches at the United Nations—you name it. But, the most important thing about this gentleman that I think is important, is his *love* for what he does. And I'm not going to say more about it, because I think you're going to see him express it. The actual topic, let me just say, as I see it, is "The Soul of an Ancient Culture: Classical Poetry and Literati Painting of China." This is something he's going to be lecturing on in the subsequent weeks, and people can find out other information about that at the table. So, Ben.

**Dr. Ben Wang:** Now, I'm going to veer away from realism. One of my favorite writers, poets, and playwrights, is America's great Tennessee Williams. Blanche DuBois, one of the greatest characterizations by Williams, says: "I don't want realism. I want magic." But of course, life is inseparable from realism, but I'll try to veer away.

So today, I'm going to talk about the poetic lines written almost exactly 1,300 years ago. (I was counting when I was sitting there.)

In the Chinese language, in Chinese culture we have a saying, "keep revealing, keep going over the old, and the new will come to you." And one of my favorite writers of the 20th Century, Muriel Spark, writes, famously, in *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie*: "The glory of the past is the inspiration of the future." So even though I'm talking about a dead poet's lines, I feel they last forever. To the Chinese literary critics, every good Classical Chinese poem, every line, might have eighteen

layers of underlying images. So as I'm getting older, the four lines in total that I'm going to introduce were the lines that I studied when I was eight and nine years old! And now I'm eighty, and I'm still talking about it, because over the years, I dug up many underlying images which I couldn't understand when I was four.

I warned Dennis when I came in—Dennis had told me that I had forty minutes to talk about whatever I wanted. Outside I didn't say anything, because I'm a guest, but inside, I was saying "forty minutes only? These four

lines would take me four *hours* to do!" And then I looked at you, the ladies and gentlemen, and I'm not trying to kiss you up; I really meant it, I looked at you and sized you up and I figured you out, and I said, "These guys could stay with me for at least four hours for these four lines!" [laughter] Of course, I'm not going to do that,—don't be scared! This one is old, but still my hearing is good. I already promised Dennis that I would behave myself. Well, China Institute, and other places, I warn them first.

So, because of the time constraint, I would like to



EIRNS/Jason Ross

*Dr. Ben Wang*

read about the poet whose works I'm going to introduce. It's on the screen, the first page, please. His name is Li Bai, and this is an excerpted version of a book which is to be published soon; it's at my publisher's:

Li Bai of China's great Tang dynasty, most famous for its poetry, is the most celebrated poet of the period, and in Chinese literature, earned the reverend sobriquet of "Celestial of Poetry" from the Chinese readers and scholars over the centuries. Li Bai's distinction lies in that he brings a special eloquence and bravura to his poetic works with an exceptionally notable flow and grandeur during an era when lack of them would be an exception.

Li Bai's poetry on the whole is vivacious, hopeful, and philosophical in outlook. This special transporting quality that is featured in all his works, appears to grow out of this outlook that he held regarding life and art. His pursuit of spiritual freedom and beauty in life, his divine communion with Nature, as well as his keen sensitivity to the Chinese language that is a unique blending of music and picture—in that spoken Chinese is singing and written Chinese is painting—so because of this I would like to think the Chinese language is eminently suited for poetry, for its concision. All these elements join forces to contribute in establishing him as a poet, peerless among his peers, a master of all masters.

Without further ado, I would like to introduce the two selected lines. During the Tang dynasty, two poetic forms flourished. Pentasyllabic poems and heptasyllabic poems, because the Chinese language is a monosyllabic language, in that every character has only one syllable, so when I say, "pentasyllabic" that means five characters per line; when I say "heptasyllabic" poem, that means seven characters per line. Either they are quatrains or regulated verse, which means two quatrains put together, eight lines in total. And they are always an even number, even though the number of each line is an odd number; but the total number of a poem must be an even number so they balance out. To the Chinese everything must be balanced because of this *yin* and *yang* union, perfect union between *yin* and *yang*.

Way back in ancient times, Chinese poetry—I'm talking about between 1100 and 500 B.C.—all the poems as they are printed out in the *Book of Songs*,

translated by the great Arthur Waley, were written in four characters per line, quadrisyllabic. But then, quickly during the Han dynasty, which began about 200 B.C., the Chinese started to produce pentasyllabic poems, because by adding one character to the quadrisyllabic poems, the Chinese found there's more musicality to it—as we're doing bum, bum, bum, bum,—bum. Sounds much better than bum, bum, bum, bum.

So a student over the years suggested to me, "Teacher, actually Classical Chinese when you're reading it, it's rap!" I said, "You're right. I think rap comes from China!" [laughter] So, after a few hundred years, the bum, bum, bum, bum,—bum, some Chinese scholars, poets said, "why don't we make it seven characters? Then it's, bum, bum, bum, bum, bum, bum,—bum!" There's more of a rhythm. So pentasyllabic developed quickly developed into heptasyllabic poems. And during the Tang dynasty, in these two poetic genres, in pentasyllabic form and heptasyllabic form, poetry flourished.

We have to study these two couplets. They are selected from two poems. One is from "Tune of Clarity and Serenity," and this poem is written in the style of a ballad. I'm sure you all know, a ballad is a song. I mean, poetry is inseparable from songs, and this is written in the style of a ballad. So the tonal scheme—there are four tones in the Chinese language; two of them are high, and two of them are low. So when you are writing Classical poetry, you must abide by the high-high, low-low-high; and the second line low-low, high-high-low. So there's a perfect balance, so the high tones are the masculine force tones. They are set to characters that should logically belong in the masculine force-dominated universe; whereas the low tones should, ideally, be set to characters, pictures, that should logically belong to the feminine force-dominated universe. So the tonal scheme is very strict.

But in the ballad style, the tonal scheme is not rigorous. So the first two lines—this is from a poem written in the style of ballad—so the tonal scheme is not that rigorously composed.

Before I go on, I must emphasize one important fact, which is, it seems that the Chinese writer, composer, poet—they seem to be quite impossible to be separated from nature. Everything is metaphor, metaphor, metaphor: a petal falls, that means the poet is getting old, the golden halcyon days are going. If there's a drizzle, that means a little vicissitude, or a little ache of the heart. So it's always like this. That's why when I saw the movie,

“Il Postino,” when I heard the word “*Metaphor*”—and I said, “metaphor, yes, Chinese poetry is all about metaphor.” Because to the Chinese, to come right out, to talk about “I, you, me, I’m suffering. . .” is just so vulgar! So everything is borrowed. A flower, a fleecy cloud, a piece of cloud floating, and everything connects with human life, with human existence.

### Tune of Clarity and Serenity

With this in mind, we’ll study, we’ll look at this. The first line—first let me read the two lines. See if you, without understanding a thing, see if you feel anything about it (see **Figure 1**).

*yún xiǎng yīshang huā xiǎng róng*  
 (cloud think clothes robe flower think face)  
*chūn fēng fú kǎn lù huá nóng*  
 (Spring wind caress doorsill dew essence rich)

Only fourteen syllables because it’s a heptasyllabic couplet. So the first character is “cloud.” Now, every Chinese character is picture. In other words, there is no Chinese character, not one character that is not a picture; a picture of nature—we put them together. And so, seemingly at first glance, the Chinese language is totally visceral. But when it gets to the poetic level, then the visceral joins forces with the cerebral: Then beauty and poetry occur, happen. So the first character *yún* is “cloud.” The top, do you see the dots and windowpanes, that’s rain coming down. If rain is coming down, you see clouds are hovering, dark clouds, so the first character is a picture in which the top part is the rain, the bottom part is the cloud.

And the second character *xiǎng* is “heart.” The bottom is the radical meaning, the root of the character which is the heart. Now, the Chinese heart is the mind, because in ancient times there were two things the Chinese didn’t know the truth of: One, is when human beings emote, it is our mind that is working; but the Chinese thought it was the heart, because when you are about to cry you feel a little squeeze of the muscles here, near the area of the heart. But you don’t get a headache! So the Chinese didn’t know—and we feel the palpitating of the heart, the beating of the heart; but the brain, inside it’s still, it doesn’t move. If it starts to move, you know you’re about to die or something! [laughter] So the Chinese always go one step below. So what to the Western people is the mind, to the Chinese is the heart.

The word in English, “heartbreak,” guess what it is in Chinese? Literally translated, it would be “intestines broken.” You say, “that sounds disgusting!” But think

FIGURE 1

A heptasyllabic couplet  
 (from *Tune of Clarity and Serenity*)  
 by Li Bai (761-763)

### 雲想衣裳花想容

*yún xiǎng yīshang huā xiǎng róng*  
 cloud think clothes robe flower think face

### 春風拂檻露華濃 (743)

*chūn fēng fú kǎn lù huá nóng*  
 spring wind caress doorsill dew essence rich

about it. How is the body part, heart, different from intestines? They’re all body parts; you know, we feel like “my guts are rending, are breaking”; here, guts are close to the intestines. So when we hear “intestines broken,” we feel, oh, that’s so poetic. [laughter] But literally translated, you’d say “this is disgusting, I fail to see any beauty in this poem! What are these intestines. . .?” So we always translate “intestines broken” as “heartbroken”; but actually it’s not correct. But then, no translation is the real thing. As the famous Roy Campbell, a very great man of letters of the 20th Century and the early part of the century—he was a poet and a writer, and also a philosopher—he says something about translation, and—no offense to all the ladies here, no offense, I hope—he says, “Translations, like wives, are never faithful if they are the least bit attractive.” [laughter] And even though it doesn’t sound very respectful to women, yet I tend to agree with him. I’m so sorry. I know I’m totally socially wrong, but I didn’t say it, Roy Campbell said it.

So, the second character has the heart on the bottom. Unfortunately, I don’t have a white board so that I could show you the evolution of this picture, how it started out a heart-looking character form, and then it went through linear changes throughout the centuries until it finally got to look how it looks now, the second character of the first line from the left. The bottom is “heart.” So whenever you see that, that means that the character has something to do with the mind or the heart. So the second character is the heart radical, and the top component—I cannot get into details because of the time—the top component means “have a relationship between two”—either two people or one person to an inanimate

object. It means to think about something, to miss something, to yearn for something, to wish for something; or romantically yearning, or “I think about you”; or just simply, without emotions, “I think . . .” it’s going to rain, or that kind of “thinking.” So one picture can have a thousand meanings. This is really the case with the Chinese language. I had to put down one English word underneath to give you an idea, so I put down “yearn.” But it can be “think,” “wish,” “want,” a lot of English words.

So, the clouds, the first character is cloud or clouds; and then “think,” or wish or yearn for.

And then the third character, you see the top dot, in the old days, is the head of a person, and then his shoulder, and then his robes—It’s not difficult for you to imagine the aesthetic sense for the Chinese people. We feel that clothes have to be large, clothes have to be loose in order to be good-looking; I think it has something to do with the way ancient Chinese people were, because of the diet system. Most ancient Chinese people were very thin because of the diet, and they liked to wear, especially if they’re important people, they like to wear very loose clothes in order to look bigger and more important. Does that make any sense? So the third character is “robe,” clothes, or dress, any clothes.

And in the third character, do you see this character “clothes” appears on the bottom of this character—the fourth? It means “robe,” “dress” and “robe,”—*yīshang*—put together it’s a general word for “apparel” in general—clothes, dresses, including the robe, or the cape that you wear that gives a flowing effect.

And then the fifth character is “blossom,” “flower.” And the sound *huā* [very open sound], look at my mouth—*huā*. Because the ancient Chinese saw grass, it’s just grass; all of a sudden, Spring comes, warm weather comes and it blooms and opens up, and the sound is *huā*! You see how visceral the language is; in the picture, the top is the radical which is “grass.” In the old days, it’s “grass.” The bottom is “transformation,” or “chemistry.” So the ancient Chinese didn’t know what happened: All of a sudden, the warm weather comes, this grass opens up chemically, transforms into a flower, the tip of the grass. So it’s grass, as the radical; the bottom is transform. The grass has transformed itself into a blossom . . . so the tone, the sound, is *huā*, it’s a high tone. Can you do it? You’re good! You’ll come to study Chinese with me!

And then, the second character is repeated, which is actually a poetic taboo to have two of the same character appear in the same line. It doesn’t take great imagi-

nation to understand this point. Here, too, if you use a verb in the same sentence repeatedly, it’s very boring. “I like you. I like your brother, I like your sister,” you just get so bored. Change—I’m fond of him, or I love your mom, or I adore your father. You change a word—instead of “I like your father, I like your mother. . .” So particularly when you are composing a poem it’s almost a taboo, a major *faux pas*, to have two of the same character be so close to each other. So obviously the poet is doing this intentionally to emphasize this “yearn for.” And the last character is “face.” The classical Chinese character for “face.”

So put together: cloud, yearn for, dress and robe, and blossoms, yearn for, face.

At this point I must tell you a little bit about the historical background of the composition of the poem, including these two lines. During the Tang dynasty, poetry flourished, so Li Bai was summoned by the Emperor Illumination—this is my loose translation—Emperor Illumination. He was considered one of the towering emperors in the history of Chinese literature.

So on a Spring day during the Tang dynasty, the Chinese developed the peonies; and peonies became a very fashionable and trendy flower. Everybody liked peonies and they come in different colors. So in early Spring, the second or the third lunar month of the calendar, around late April, the peonies were in full bloom, and the Emperor said to the head eunuch, “get Li Bai over here,” because he was the resident poet in the palace, which was a rare honor. But what did Li Bai do with this honor? He abused it; he drank all day long—none of his favorite things. Guess what the other thing is? Beauty. Beauty in nature and beauty in a person, namely, women. So he idled away his days in his indulgence in these two—wine and women. He had no time to compose poetry for the Emperor. He said, “I could care less. I didn’t want to come, you called me. You sent for me, I didn’t send for you.”

The Emperor would ask about him, asking him to compose poetry. He said, “no, no, no, I’m busy having fun, enjoying *la joie de vivre*.” So he’s summoned to the palace and the Emperor’s favorite concubine, Imperial Consort I should say, who caused the downfall of the great Tang dynasty—she was a true *femme fatale*; one of the greatest *femme fatales* in the history of China, beautiful beyond description.

So on this Spring day, peonies were in full bloom, and she was particularly lovely, at twilight time. So the Emperor sent the eunuch to fetch Li Bai; Li Bai was stone drunk already, on fine wine of course. He said,

“Don’t bother me.” He said to the head eunuch, “Tell the Emperor I’m busy.” The eunuch said, “Busy? Doing what?” He said, “Getting drunk! Do you mind? I like my wine.”

So the eunuch said, “I can’t go back to the Emperor, he’ll kill me! He’ll order my execution! Please, please, do me a favor, I beg of you.” So, Li Bai says, “Oh, what a pest! The court is beckoning me, and summoning me, and getting me to the palace, just for me to compose. I’m not a poetry composing machine, you know!” So he’s mumbling his displeasure as he walked to the King and his Imperial Consort; they’re in the Imperial garden appreciating the peonies blooming. And so when he got there, he was drunk and he said to the chief eunuch, “take off my boots,” and he just laid down, which was totally against etiquette. Ultimately, because of his wild behavior, in the end, the Emperor nicely, kindly sent him home, saying, “you’re free, go do whatever you want.” He was given a lot of money and then he left. He had stayed in the palace for about five years, and in the end he said, “five years too long!”

Of course, he’s extremely sensitive to beauty and the peonies, and the Spring night, and the Spring moonlight, the Moon is rising, and this gorgeous Imperial Consort, she’s sitting there and she and the Emperor are drinking. So, he takes one look and of course, he’s impressed. And Li Bai says, “what do you want me to compose, Your Majesty?” The Emperor said, “compose a poem in praise of the beauty of my beloved.” So, he said, “Hmm! OK, is the paper and the ink stone, and ink paddy prepared?” The Emperor said, “Long prepared,” and everything was presented to him. So it took Li Bai a second, and he came up with this one line.

## Beauty and Love

And before I go on, there are two topics, in my opinion—in my very humble opinion, as a translator, as a writer—two most challenging and difficult topics to write about, even to talk about: That is, beauty. One is beauty, beauty of a person, particularly. What do you talk about—long lashes? The color of the eyes, and the fine skin, and—we all know that. Why is that challenging? Because we know beauty, we have seen beauty, everyone, especially a person of my age. I’ve seen beautiful people all my life—like Dennis! [laughter] I think he’s really handsome.

What’s the other difficult topic, to write about, or to talk about? Love. Again, because we have all experienced that. So in order to write about beauty, the beauty

of a person, or about nature—or to write about love between two people—you have to be a genius, like Mozart. Mozart is for children, or for geniuses—so says Alicia de Larrocha. So says Ben Wang.

So I think these two are the most difficult topics. So, Li Bai being Li Bai, the greatest poet in the history of Chinese literature, he sat down for few seconds; he took one look at the backdrop, and the beauty and the scent and the beauty of the blossoms and the beauty of this Imperial Consort—almost without missing a beat—he came up with this line. So I learned this line in school, when I was in my teens; the first time I read it I was about eight or nine. Teachers taught us to interpret this line as “When you see the fleeting of clouds, you think of her robes. When you see blooming, flowering blossoms, you think of her face.” Which is beautiful enough. And that is the interpretation of almost all teachers and students in China.

But as I have lived for so long, more and more I feel that is not the only thing. Because in the Chinese language, as I said, human beings—to talk about human life is a little low and very vulgar, so here, the cloud is functioning, can be interpreted grammatically as being the *subject* of the line, which means: “as the clouds are flying by, and they look down, what do they see? Her robes. And the clouds are yearning for her clothes. “Why can’t we be more like your robes”? So even heavenly objects are envious of her. And when the peonies are blooming, they are the subject—*huā*—they yearn to look more like her. “Why can’t we look more like you”? As youthful people, human beings may think we are beautiful, but look at that face! So, the blossoms yearn for her face, as clouds are yearning for her robes.

And I think to describe a beauty in that line, and the Imperial Consort started to laugh so happily—wouldn’t you, ladies here?—not only, “when we see clouds, we think of her robes, when we see a blooming flower we think of her face” but “the clouds and the flowers—they are envious of her!”

I would say there is only *one* Western counterpart, that is *Salomé*, as she is described by Oscar Wilde. Oscar Wilde wrote *Salomé* in French, and then he himself translated it into English. And how did he describe Salomé’s beauty? You know Salomé from the Bible? Oscar says, “Salomé, she looks like a white rose, as it is reflected in a silver plate in the moonlight.” And I think *that* can be the Western counterpart to this *yishang*. This is her face.

And the second line, the first character, Spring; the

second line starts with the first character “Spring”; second character “wind, breeze”; *fú* is “caress,” “flowed by”; *kan* is “doorsill”; *lù* is “dew”; *huá* is “the essence,” “the essence of dew.” It’s the Chinese equivalent of “the essence of perfume”; *nóng* is “rich” and *nóng*, the last character of the second line is “water” and “farming”; “water to farming,” it means “rich.”

So the first line is about her apparel, her clothes and her face. And the second line is about her movement. “When she moves, it’s Springtime.” The Spring breeze is caressing the doorsill, blowing, and the scent, the fragrance is her scent.

So the face and the robes are not enough; the second line is her movement and her scent, the scent that she emanates, this Imperial Consort. Do you see the beauty of this woman? And everything is metaphor; nothing is real.

In order to translate this poem, I cannot put—I always say to my students, to my friends, to my audience, I would say, “Classical Chinese poetry deserves annotation, but not translation. You need to explain. Otherwise you just look at the facial,— by the face. Of course, there is surface luster, but ultimately, you need a helping hand to guide you, word by word, character by character, to know the quintessence of the beauty. That’s why I decided to do what I did—for you to imagine. So the translation is in a very unique but bizarre way. Actually, I did not translate. All I did was to just put the almost equivalents of those characters like that, just for you to get an idea. But once you have heard me talk, I hope it gives you something.

### Passing Parrot Isle

Now the second couplet that I chose to talk about is from a poem called “Parrot Isle”; the word “passing” is what I added. This Parrot Isle is known for its natural beauty. There are a lot of beautiful parrots in the beautiful blossoms and plant life, in the Spring in particular. And I’m sure it’s because it’s so beautiful, that it can’t last forever; nothing that beautiful can last forever. Garbo didn’t last forever.

So the Parrot Isle in the 14th Century, it sank, the

FIGURE 2

### Another Heptasyllabic couplet

(from *Passing Parrot Isle*)

by Li Bai (701-763)

煙開蘭葉香風暖

yān kāi lán yè xiāng fēng nuǎn

smoke/mist open orchid leaf fragrant wind warm

岸夾桃花錦浪生 (760)

àn jiā táo huā jǐn làng shēng

riverbank pressed-between peach blossom colorful brocade wave birth

isle; it’s like Atlantis. So now it’s almost a myth, although once it was there: It was called “Parrot Isle” [pronounces it in Chinese]. During the Tang dynasty it was there.

Obviously Li Bai was not only a great poet, a wine-lover, and an aesthete, but also he was a great traveler. He loved to travel. Of course, he traveled on the Yangtze River; this isle was in the Yangtze River, the southern river in China. There are two rivers: in the north the Yellow River, in the south there is this Yangtze River. This isle is in the Yangtze River. He passed by this isle many times and in different seasons. So one Spring he passed by, and as he was taking in the sight, he was so impressed, that he composed a poem, and these two lines,—I would say, this couplet is the highlight of the poem. And this is Li Bai’s description of the beauty of Mother Nature. The first two lines are about the beauty of a mortal, a human. But this second couplet that I chose is a description of Mother Nature. So even though the isle has since been sunk, yet these two lines, as long as there is Chinese language, these two lines will prevail (see **Figure 2**).

yān kāi lán yè xiānmng fāng nuǎn

(smoke/mist open orchid leaf fragrant warm wind)

àn jiā táo huā jǐn làng shēng

(riverbank pressed-between-peach blossom colorful brocade wave birth)

The first character is “smoke,” “mist,” or “fog.” Obviously, it’s Springtime, warm weather, and it’s mixed with cold weather, early Spring; *yan kai*, the mist, is split, is opening, dispersing. Third character is

orchid. Forgive me for not teaching you the beautiful etymology because of the time. The fourth character, you might have thought that orchid would be followed by “blossom” because that third character only refers to the species of the flower. It doesn’t mean the opening flowery blossom. So usually it’s *lán* followed by *hua*. But surprisingly, Li Bai being Li Bai, he would not be so common or so regular, so he has to do something different. So the line “orchid leaves,” the *leaves* of an orchid, meaning he is giving the reader, he providing some literary, poetic mystery—he doesn’t tell you the flowers. He saves it. Let’s see what he does.

So the mist, the fog is lifting, and the fog does not open up anything, but the fog is so dense, sure looks like it’s hiding the orchid leaves. But the fact is, when the fog, when the mist is touching the leaves, automatically the fog opens up. But here, this second character *kai* can be a transitive verb that means “to open up,” “to disperse.” So the abstract is doing something to something of the substance of the real object, which is orchid leaves, and that is already the magic versus realism—the first four characters.

The fifth character is “fragrant”; for this character I will teach you the etymology. There are two components. The top component is grain—rice or wheat, or sorghum, any grain. Does it look a little bit like a plant, like a tree, the top part of the fifth character *xiang*, and the translation is “fragrant.” Look at the Chinese character: The top is grain, the bottom is the Sun. The grain is basking in the Sun, and when the ancient Chinese farmer is walking past the rice field or wheat field, and he smells the grain is growing, and what does he smell? Mmm! Fragrance. Not Chanel No. 9. [laughter] To the ancient Chinese, fragrance is when the grain is in the Sun. That is the Chinese character for “fragrant” or “fragrance.”

And the sixth character is “wind,” as we studied it before, *fēng* is “wind.” And the last character is “warm.”

So the first line reads, “The mist or the fog has opened up and you see the orchid leaves and the fragrant breeze is so warm.” Of course, it is a Spring day. But it doesn’t say “the orchid blossoms are fragrant,” although orchid blossoms are very fragrant—they have a special, intoxicating fragrance.

In the second line,— this poem is not written in the style of a ballad. It’s written in the style of pentasyllabic, regulated verse. So the total scheme is extremely

important, but I wish I had more time so I could talk in detail about the total scheme. But to put it very simply: The two lines must be arranged like this. The part of speech of the parallel characters must ideally be the opposite, antithetical. But if they are parallel, it’s okay too. But at least they have to be related, whether it’s antithetic or parallel. But the tone of the matching characters must be the opposite, meaning the line, say, is bb aa bb a; second line must be aa bb aa b. So, high-high low-low high-high low; matched by, low-low high-high low-low high. So both in picture and in music, it’s *yin* and *yang*—if the two forces are perfect, then life is perfect. There is this perfect balance between the two forces.

So the first character is a noun, and it’s abstract; it’s some object that’s not tangible—it’s intangible, it’s mist—*yān* and smoke goes up, so the sound is first a high tone—*yān*. *Kāi* is “open,” so we have high tone and high tone. And then you have *lán*, “orchid,” is again high. But in the first and the third character there is an exception to the rule. They can be the same as the first and the third in the second line; that’s allowed. Otherwise, it’s too, too difficult to compose a poem. Because a poem, this art form, is very, very contrived, man-made, after a lot of thinking and arrangement. But ultimately, the lines must look very natural. So that is art.

So the first character of the second line is nothing intangible, because it means “riverbank.” So one is “smoke,” one is “riverbank,” which is soil basically, it’s earth versus “mist,” which is abstract and intangible. And the second character—what’s amazing is that the second character of the first line, *kāi*, is “open,” and the picture is a door. And then you see the bolt on the door—you remove the bolt and the door can be opened. And the second character of the second line is what? Putting two things underneath your arms and pressing them between the flesh very closely, tightly, so it doesn’t fall down. So one is open, one is pressed against each other. Do you see the two verbs being so different? In the first line, the second character is *kāi*; and the second character of the second line is *jiām*, it’s low. So the *yang* and *yin*, the masculine force is matched by a character of feminine force, *àn jia*.

What does it mean that riverbanks are pressing against each other? Let’s study the following, then I will explain.

And the third character of the second line is

“peach” which is the match of “orchid” of the third character of the first line. Are you with me so far? Because this is the highest literary genre in Classical Chinese. So to explain this, it takes a little concentration. I hope I make myself very clear. Good, I’m so glad.

So the third character is “peach,” just the generic word for peach tree; it doesn’t necessarily mean peach blossom at all; but the fourth character is *huā*—it’s flower blossom, therefore peach blossom. So the match to “orchid leaf” is “peach blossom.” Do you see that? So peach blossoms would emanate a most intoxicating fragrance, much richer, much more intoxicating than the subtle fragrance of the orchid blossoms.

So the peach blossoms are blooming. How do we know they are blooming? The following character, the fifth character tells you. The fifth character is a colorful brocade, and brocade is made of silk, or of gold, or something beautiful already. This character is brocade, but colorful and with multi-colors. And the sixth character is “waves,” because if you have riverbanks obviously they’re by the river, and on the river what is there? Water. The waves are moving, but the waves are in brocade colors, more gorgeous, more multi-colored, which is of course the reflections of the peach blossoms. Are you with me? So you know what that is that smells so good. That’s why in the first line he only introduces the orchid *leaves*, because it’s early Spring, and the orchid does not open up until late Summer, or most of the time, early Autumn. So actually it is the peach blossoms which are in full bloom and that turn the waves into something even more colorful, a gorgeous brocade. And the waves are generated, they are flowing—why? Because when the waters see the flowers so beautiful and so fragrant, they come out to see what’s going on, and thus, waves are created.

So that’s the second line, and that’s the beauty of Mother Nature.

So the two lines: The last character of the first line is “warm,” and of the second line is “be born, birth,” or “generate.” So nothing can be born from coldness. As T.S. Eliot wisely pointed out in his “Waste Land” in the first line: “April is the cruellest month. . .” because of the dead soil, the Earth, and the life of plants trying to struggle out of the Earth’s soil, as it is beginning to get a little warmer. So it is with warmth that something grows. So this is the line. And the fragrant wind in the

first line is matched beautifully by the “brocade-like waves.” Do you see the matching game? And the sound goes like this [recites]. So you see, the first one ends *nuǎn* and the second line ends with *sheng*, which is usually how a Tang dynasty poem will end—however wistful and sad the poem might be, yet the tone at the end will always save the day. The tone of the last character must always be either rising or high to save the day.

Now, I’ll read it one more time. [recites] So that’s how it goes.

### Literati Painting

Li Bai had to wait almost 700 years for another great master to emerge, in poetry, calligraphy, and painting, all of them, and together when the three genres were all matured, they came to a beautiful union, and it becomes another cultural genre, only limited, strictly limited to Chinese culture, which is called *wenrenhua*, or literati painting.

And about this painter, quickly—Shi Tao is his name. He’s also a calligrapher and painter. He’s from 1643-1707, you see, almost 700 years after Li Bai.

By the time Shi Tao emerged, the Parrot Isle had long gone, had long sunk into the Yangtze River. But from these two poetic lines, because Shi Tao loved—well, the only similarity between the unwitty me, and this great Shi Tao, is our mutual love, of or for Li Bai. But then, almost all Chinese people love Li Bai.

Social phenomena and political phenomena can have their day, but culture and poetry last forever. So if you come across a Chinese friend who says he or she doesn’t even know Li Bai, quickly wave them goodbye, never to see them again! [laughter]

About Shi Tao, one of the towering artists of literati painting—which is a unique genre blending poetry, calligraphy, and painting—Shi Tao was a descendant of the founding emperor of the Ming dynasty. A great admirer of Li Bai, Shi Tao fashioned this work of art out of a couplet from a heptasyllabic, regulated verse (with eight lines) by the master poet, which glows in its poetic splendor as it is ablaze with color and spirit, and which has exerted tremendous influence on later artists of the genre (see next page).

So if you see this painting, which is beautifully designed, he has imagined Parrot Isle, because by the time he was born, the island had long gone. But from the poet, he gathered from his imagination,—I think





*Literati painting by Shi Tao.*

human imagination can do a lot, and this is beautiful. Not only the color. Now colors rarely appear in Classical Chinese paintings. The Chinese people believe ink can open up to ten shades of colors. We don't need color. But in this case, he must, because there are two poetic lines, they are ablaze with colors, so he painted this.

And he saved—the other side is the Blue Mountain—and on the other side, the top right, these are the

two lines, in a special calligraphic style, which is called “clerical calligraphic style,” usually practiced to put down official governmental documents in ancient times. Shi Tao was good at all four major calligraphic styles. So I would, if I were the painter, I would definitely set this painting into a free style with a bravura spirit, which is called “running” or “cursive” style. But not our great master. He deliberately put down “clerical” style to match this, because he is saying this is great, there is poetic merit. And the cursive style calligraphy, or running calligraphic style will only belittle these two great lines.

And also the way he executed this clerical style—his clerical style is not dry or pedantic: The characters come to light; they are beautiful. So those are the two lines. And someone asked me about the color, and the smaller characters. It says, “this is from Li Bai’s poem ‘Parrot Isle,’” and then he signed his own literary sobriquet.

Now, this is a very short talk, but I really hope ... I mean, you know in exactly two weeks it will be Chinese New Year, and we call it the Spring Festival, because we feel it is the season which functions as a harbinger of the coming Spring, and so we call it the Spring Festival. So the prospect of the coming Spring in this merciless, cold season—we’re anticipating the Spring to come.

So the prospect of Spring and the talk of this eternal beauty of Chinese Classical poetry—is almost like a dual blessing. It’s a dual blessing which can lift ourselves and which can give special distinction to our existence. So if my small talk, my brief talk can enhance your interest in Classical Chinese poetry, or Chinese culture, or poetry, in general, however little there is, I will not have come in vain.

Thank you so much. [applause]