Female Poets of the Tang Dynasty

Throughout Chinese literary history, critical attention has overwhelmingly centered on male poets. In the canonical anthologies that have shaped education for generations of Chinese schoolchildren, women's voices are rare, and often entirely absent. While it is true that male poets greatly outnumbered female poets in most historical periods, this imbalance should not obscure the fact that a significant number of women did write poetry, and that some did so with exceptional skill, originality, and influence.

This translation is dedicated to bringing a small selection of these women back into view, focusing primarily on poets of the Tang dynasty—a period of extraordinary literary vitality in which female poets, despite social constraints, made enduring and distinctive contributions to Chinese poetry.

Xú Huì 徐惠

Xú Huì (徐惠, 627–650) was a child prodigy and a favored concubine of Emperor Taizong. Rising through the ranks from Talented Lady (*cairen*) to Handsome Fairness (*jieyu*) and finally to Complete Appearance (*chongrong*), she attained one of the highest positions available to women at court. Believed to have composed around a thousand poems, only five survive today, making her the only Tang empress or consort whose writings are quoted in official histories. After Taizong's death, she reportedly fell ill from grief and died the following year; she was posthumously honored as Virtuous Concubine (*xianfei*) and granted burial within the imperial mausoleum.

拟小山篇

仰幽岩而流盼
抚桂枝以凝想
将千龄兮此遇
荃何为兮独往

Imitating "The Lesser Mountain"

I gaze upward to the secluded cliffs, letting my eyes wander afar;
I touch the cassia branches, my thoughts held fast in stillness.
To meet this moment once in a thousand ages—
Why is quan left to go alone?

Notes:

In *Imitating The Lesser Mountain* the poet's gaze moves with quiet contemplation—流盼 ("flowing glances") becomes "letting my eyes wander afar," evoking slow, drifting attention. Cassia branches 桂枝 symbolize purity, transcendence, and the reclusive ideal, while 'being lost in thought' 凝想 conveys thought held fast in stillness. The line 'To meet this moment once in a thousand ages' 将千龄兮此遇 recalls Chu-style hyperbolic emotion, a meeting once in a thousand ages, with 兮 creating suspended feeling. Finally, 荃何为兮独往 references Qu Yuan's fragrant grass (荃), often symbolizing purity, here an emblem of the worthy or noble person, lamenting why such virtue must proceed alone; leaving *quan* untranslated preserves its symbolic resonance.

秋风函谷应诏

秋风起函谷
劲气动河山
偃松千岭上
杂雨二陵间

低云愁广隰
落日惨重关

此时飘紫气
应验真人还

Autumn Wind at Hangu Pass, Written in Response to an Imperial Summons

Autumn winds rise at Hangu Pass;
their forceful qi stirs rivers and mountains.
Bent pines lie across a thousand ridges;
mingled rains fall between the Two Tombs.

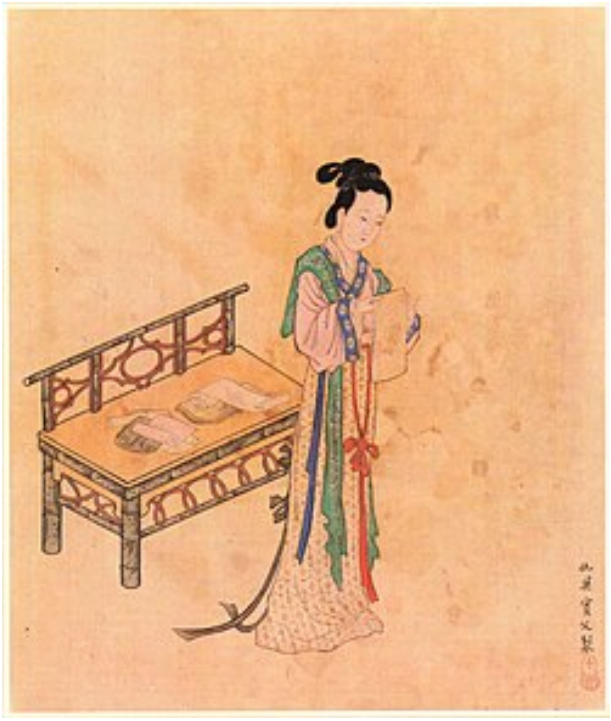
Low clouds brood over the broad lowlands;
the setting sun casts gloom on the layered gates.
At this moment, purple vapors drift—
the sign fulfilled: the perfected being returns.

Notes:

Autumn Wind at Hangu Pass, Written in Response to an Imperial Summons was composed in response to an imperial summons (应诏), situating the poem in a politically charged yet symbolically nuanced context. Hangu Pass (函谷关) serves as both a strategic frontier and a cosmological threshold between civilization and wilderness, Dao and empire. Forceful *qi* moves the rivers and mountains, while bent pines across a thousand ridges suggest endurance under historical pressure. Landscape imagery—low clouds over the lowlands, the sun setting over the layered gates—mirrors political and emotional tension in classic *xing* fashion. Purple vapors (紫气) signals auspiciousness, linking the scene to Daoist legend and the return of a perfected being or sage (真人). The poem's final lines merge Daoist and imperial ideals: the re-emergence of the perfected being at the right moment evokes the Laozi legend while affirming duty to the state, exemplifying early medieval synthesis of cosmology, moral integrity, and political service.

Xuē Tāo 薛涛

Xuē Tāo (薛涛, 768–831), courtesy name Hongdu **(洪度),** was a Tang dynasty poet renowned for her literary talent and cultural influence. The daughter of a minor official, she was orphaned young and registered with the courtesan guild in Chengdu, where her poetry and artistic skills brought her to the attention of Wei Gao, military governor of Xichuan, and she became his court's official hostess. Later, Xuē lived independently near the site of Du Fu's "thatched hut" and may have supported herself by making fine paper for poets. She is also said to have taken Daoist orders, achieving a degree of social independence. Her work, once compiled in *The Brocade River Collection*, originally numbered around 450 poems; today,
seventy-six survive.



酬人雨后玩

南天春雨时
那鉴雪霜姿
众类亦云茂
虚心能自持

多留晋贤醉
早伴舜妃悲
晚岁君能赏
苍苍劲节奇

Reply to Someone Admiring [Bamboo]
After the Rain

When southern spring rains fall,
how can one discern a form like frost or snow?
All kinds of things too speak of lushness—
only the empty-hearted can hold themselves firm.

Let the worthy men of Jin linger long in wine;
early on, I kept company with the grief of Shun's consorts.

In later years, if you can truly appreciate it,
you will see: green upon green—the wonder of resilient joints.

Notes:

Reply to Someone Admiring [Bamboo] After the Rain celebrates bamboo without ever naming it, a classic literati strategy. Its "虚心" (empty heart) evokes the empty culm of bamboo, signalling humility and receptivity, while "劲节" (resilient joints) symbolizes moral integrity under pressure. The poem praises bamboo after spring rain, when its vitality is most visible, and contrasts its steadfastness with the luxuriance of other plants. Allusions enrich the moral portrait: the worth men of Jin (晋贤) evoke cultivated reclusion and wine, while Shun's consorts, Ehuang and Nüying, connect bamboo to loyal grief. The closing lines reflect on later appreciation of bamboo's enduring green and extraordinary joints, blending Confucian–Daoist ideals with a likely autobiographical resonance.

听僧吹芦管

晓蝉呜咽暮莺愁
言语殷勤十指头
罢阅梵书聊一弄
散随金磬泥清秋

Listening to a Monk Playing the Reed Pipe

Morning cicadas sob; evening orioles grow mournful—
speech itself seems earnest in those ten moving fingers.
Setting aside the reading of Buddhist scriptures, he idly plays once;
the notes disperse, following the golden chime, into the clear autumn.

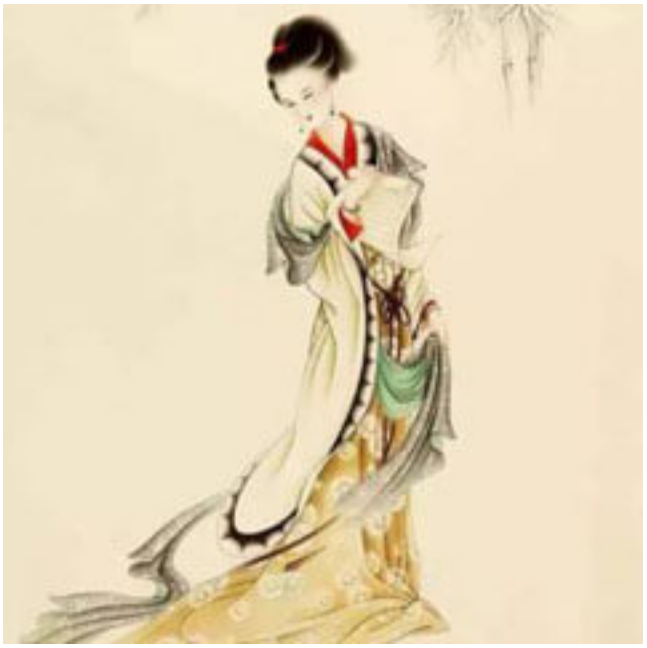
Notes:

Listening to a Monk Playing the Reed Pipe frames sound itself as language. Morning cicadas and evening orioles are not merely natural sounds but emotional tonalities,

charging the auditory field before the monk even plays. The striking line 言语殷勤十指头 (“speech itself seems earnest in those ten moving fingers”) elevates music above speech, evoking a Chan notion of direct transmission without words (不立文字). The monk pauses his reading of *fan shu* (Sanskrit/Buddhist texts) to casually play the reed pipe (聊一弄), emphasizing spontaneity over performance. The resonance of the *jinqing* (metal ritual chime) situates the music within monastic space and time. In the final line, 散随金磬泥清秋, the notes disperse, following the golden chime, into the clear autumn, embodying a classic Chan aesthetic: sound arises, fulfills its moment, and dissolves without residue.

Lǐ Yě 李冶

Lǐ Yě (李冶) lived during the late Tang dynasty, from the latter part of Emperor Xuanzong’s reign (712–756) to early in Emperor Dezong’s (780–805). A respected Daoist nun in Wuxing (modern Huzhou, Zhejiang), she moved in literary and intellectual circles, enjoying a degree of social independence and freedom afforded to women of her station. Known for her intelligence and wit, she was called to Emperor Daizong’s court during the Dali period (766–779), where she was treated well but soon returned to her Daoist vocation. Later, under Emperor Dezong, her poems—some critical of the empire—were used against her, leading to her death. Despite later polemical accounts casting her character in negative terms, contemporary evidence suggests she was an accomplished poet and a keen, socially engaged thinker.



感兴

朝云暮雨镇相随
去雁来人有返期
玉枕只知长下泪
银灯空照不眠时

仰看明月翻含意
俯眄流波欲寄词
却忆初闻凤楼曲
教人寂寞复相思

Stirred Feelings

Morning clouds and evening rains persistently keep each other company;
departing geese and returning travellers each have a time to come back.
The jade pillow knows only the tears that long soak it;
the silver lamp shines in vain upon the sleepless hours.

I look up at the bright moon, its meaning turning within me;
I gaze down at flowing waves, longing to entrust them with words.
Yet I recall when first I heard the melody from the Phoenix Tower—
a tune that taught one loneliness, and renewed longing once again.

Notes:

Stirred Feelings exemplifies the *xing* tradition, where external scenes stir inner emotion. Cyclical natural imagery—morning clouds, evening rain, departing geese and returning travellers—frames the speaker's emotional stasis, while classic boudoir objects, the jade pillow and silver lamp, register intimate sorrow and sleepless hours. The poem gestures toward communication across distance through the moon above and flowing water below, yet these remain symbolic, unfulfilled. A remembered melody from the Phoenix Tower deepens the emotional resonance, as music does not simply express longing but teaches it, reactivating loneliness and yearning. Moving from cyclical nature to private grief, cosmic gesture, and remembered sound, the poem conveys enduring sorrow without rupture, quietly persistent and restrained.

相思怨

人道海水深
不抵相思半
海水尚有涯
相思渺无畔

携琴上高楼
楼虚月华满
弹著相思曲
弦肠一时断

Lament of Longing

They say the sea is deep—
it is not even half the depth of longing.
The sea still has its shore;
longing stretches vast, without a boundary.

Carrying my qin, I climb the high tower;
the tower is empty, flooded with moonlight.
I play a tune of yearning—
and in that moment, strings and innards alike are torn.

Notes:

Lament of Longing uses hyperbole to convey the vastness of longing: the sea, emblem of depth, cannot compare to human desire, which has no boundary. The poem moves from this metaphysical comparison to a solitary, elevated experience—the lover ascends the tower, bathed in moonlight, withdrawing from the human world. Music embodies emotion directly: the strings of the qin enact longing, and when they snap, the poem's double meaning conveys both broken strings and visceral heartbreak. This progression —from boundless desire to solitary ascent, musical expression, and ultimate rupture— renders the poem direct, spare, and devastating, a near-perfect crystallization of *xiangsi* poetry.

Bào Jūnhuī 鮑君徽

Bào Jūnhuī (鮑君徽) was a Tang dynasty poet who lived during the reign of Emperor Dezong (780–805 CE). Renowned for her literary talent, she was called to serve at the imperial court, composing poetry for ceremonial occasions and imperial events. Her work blends refined elegance, emotional sensitivity, and symbolic natural imagery, reflecting both personal reflection and the moral and aesthetic ideals of her time. Bào Jūnhuī remains an important figure among Tang women poets, celebrated for her artistry and her contribution to courtly literary culture.

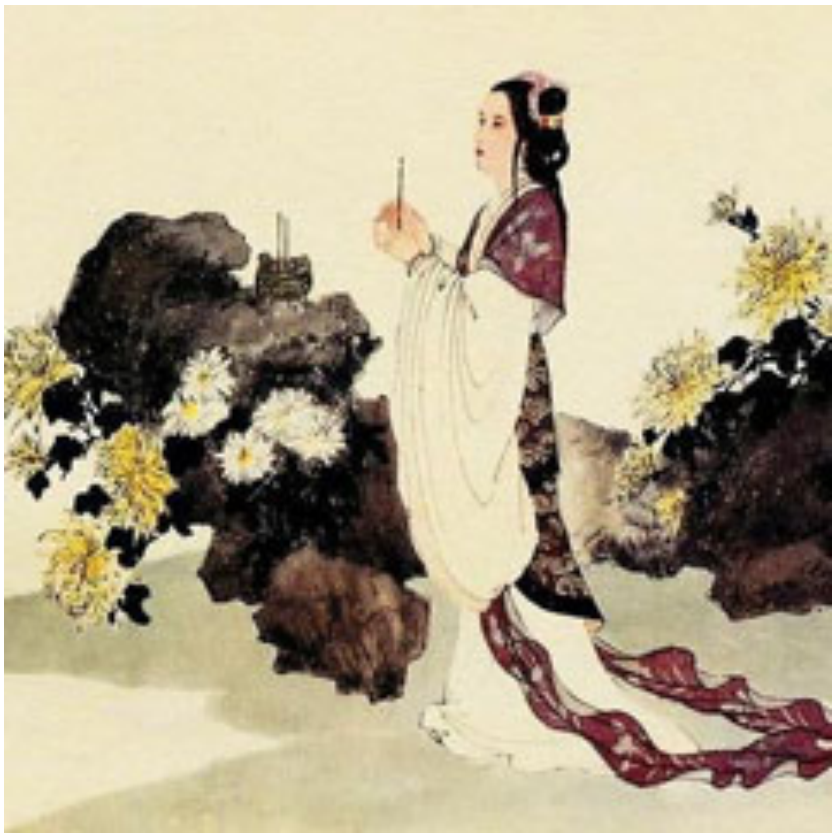
东亭茶宴

闲朝向晓出帘栊
茗宴东亭四望通
远眺城池山色里
俯聆弦管水声中

幽篁引沼新抽翠
芳槿低檐欲吐红
坐久此中无限兴
更怜团扇起清风

不如尽此花下欢
莫待春风总吹却

莺歌蝶舞韶光长
红炉煮茗松花香
妆成罢吟恣游后
独把芳枝归洞房



Tea Banquet at the Eastern Pavilion

In a leisurely court morning, toward dawn I step beyond the hanging blinds;
a tea banquet in the Eastern Pavilion opens to views on all four sides.
Looking far, city walls lie within mountain hues;
looking down, strings and pipes mingle with the sound of water.

Secluded bamboo draws from the pond, freshly shooting green;
fragrant hibiscus droops by the eaves, about to release its red.
Sitting long here, one finds inexhaustible delight—
how I cherish the round silk fan, stirring up a cool breeze.

Better to exhaust this joy beneath the blossoms,
and not wait till the spring wind blows it all away.

Orioles sing, butterflies dance—the radiant season stretches on;
by a red stove tea is brewed, scented with pine pollen.

After dressing and ceasing verse, roaming at will,
alone I take a fragrant branch and return to the inner chamber.

Notes:

Tea Banquet at the Eastern Pavilion depicts cultivated leisure in a semi-official space, neither private chamber nor full court, where outward movement from blinds to pavilion windows mirrors a psychological opening. The poem layers the senses—sight of city walls, mountains, bamboo, and hibiscus; sound of strings, pipes, and birds; touch of a cool breeze from a round silk fan; and the aroma of tea infused with pine pollen—embedding tea within a full aesthetic environment rather than making it the focus. Botanical imagery conveys character: secluded bamboo (幽篁) embodies integrity and moral cultivation, while hibiscus (芳槿) signals fleeting beauty and the urgency of enjoyment. A tonal shift urges living fully beneath the blossoms rather than waiting for spring winds. The red stove and pine-scented tea stabilize time, slowing the passage of the season. The poem closes with a striking inward gesture—carrying a fragrant branch back to the inner chambers (洞房), a literal or symbolic private chamber—transforming shared social delight into intimate memory.

关山月

高高秋月明
北照辽阳城
塞迥光初满
风多晕更生

征人望乡思
战马闻鼙惊
朔风悲边草
胡沙暗虏营

霜凝匣中剑
风惫原上旌
早晚谒金阙
不闻刁斗声

Moon over the Pass

High, high—the autumn moon shines bright,
northward it illuminates Liaoyang City.
Beyond the frontier, its light has just grown full;
where winds are many, halos are born again.

Border soldiers gaze homeward, hearts full of longing;
warhorses, hearing the war-drums, start in alarm.
The northern wind mourns through frontier grasses;
Hu sands darken the enemy camp.

Frost congeals upon the sword within its scabbard;
wind-weary banners droop across the plain.
Sooner or later, we shall pay court at the Golden Gates—
and hear no more the clatter of night-watch gongs.

Notes:

Moon Over the Pass evokes frontier life and soldierly endurance, drawing on Han–Tang border verse but with a restrained tone. The elevated autumn moon unites home and distant Liaoyang, yet emphasizes separation, while wind and light distort perception across the vast frontier. Soldiers endure longing, warhorses start at drums, and the enemy camp looms dark but indistinct. Frosted swords and sagging banners signal readiness and exhaustion, while hope of recall to the imperial court sustains loyalty. The poem closes not with triumph but with quiet desire for peace, as the night-watch clappers fall silent.

Yú Xuánjī 鱼玄机

Yú Xuánjī (鱼玄机) was born around 844 during the reign of Emperor Wuzong, a period of political reunification following regional rebellions. Her father, a high-ranking official, ensured she received an exceptional education: she could compose regulated verse with a wide, natural vocabulary, respond to challenge-poems, and play the lute (*qin*). Married at sixteen to the official Li Yi, Yú was spiritually drawn to Daoism; after discussing it with her husband, she left him at nineteen to become a nun, pursuing a life of religious devotion while continuing her literary and musical practice.

寓言

红桃处处春色
碧柳家家月明
楼上新妆待夜
闺中独坐含情

芙蓉月下鱼戏
螮蝀天边雀声
人世悲欢一梦
如何得作双成

Parable

Red peach blossoms everywhere carry the hues of spring;
green willows at every home stand bright beneath the moon.
Up in the tower, fresh makeup awaits the night;
within the inner chamber, one sits alone, holding feeling.

By moonlit lotus, fish play at the water's edge;
at heaven's rim, rainbow arcs amid sparrow calls.
In the human world, sorrow and joy are but a single dream—
how can one ever become a paired immortal?

Notes:

Parable uses indirect imagery to convey meaning, showing rather than explaining. The opening couplet contrasts a world of abundant springtime and moonlit order with private solitude: beauty is prepared but unused, and social promise meets only waiting. Nature, by contrast, pairs effortlessly—fish play beneath lotus blossoms, and rainbow and birds answer one another—highlighting the ease of harmony that human experience lacks. The poem closes with a poignant turn: human joy and sorrow are a fleeting dream, and the aspiration to become a paired immortal remains unattainable, leaving desire unresolved yet quietly illuminated.

遣怀

闲散身无事
风光独自游
断云江上月
解缆海中舟

琴弄萧梁寺

诗吟庾亮楼
丛篁堪作伴
片石好为俦

燕雀徒为贵
金银志不求
满杯春酒绿
对月夜窗幽

绕砌澄清沼
抽簪映细流
卧床书册遍
半醉起梳头

Discharging One's Heart

At leisure, my body has no pressing tasks;
amidst wind and scenery, I wander alone.
Clouds break above the river moon;
I loosen the anchor of my boat at sea.

On the qin I play at Xiao Liang Temple;
poems I chant at Yu Liang Tower.
Thickets of bamboo serve as companion;
a single rock is enough to be a friend.

Sparrows and swallows prize only themselves;
gold and silver I never seek.
Cups full of spring wine glow green;
facing the moon through the night-window, all is still.

Around the terrace winds a clear pond;
my hairpin reflects in the slender stream.
On the bed, my books are everywhere;
half-drunk, I rise to comb my hair.

Notes:

Discharging One's Heart depicts leisurely self-cultivation, blending the release of personal feelings with detachment from worldly ambition. Each quatrain explores a different aspect of literati life: wandering in nature, practicing art and poetry, enjoying simple pleasures, and savoring domestic and sensory experiences. The poem moves from expansive landscapes to intimate interiors, weaving cosmic perspective, cultivated spaces, refined leisure, and tactile intimacy into a unified aesthetic. Embracing Daoist–Confucian ideals, it finds companionship in bamboo and rocks, rejects material gain, and uses music, poetry, reading, and wine for contemplative fulfillment. Tranquil yet lively, it ends with playful humor, half-drunk combing of hair, celebrating a harmonious synthesis of mind, body, and environment.

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