

## Sacred Taoist mountains and the poet Li Po

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Mountains are often seen as places that are physically closer to the world of the gods or God, owing to their closeness to the heavens, their domination of the landscape, and the difficulty with which they are ascended. In fact, some religions denote the dwelling places of the gods either on or in the mountains. In the Taoist religion of China, some mountains are viewed as places from whence it is possible to communicate directly with, or meet with the gods or their messengers, or as a place to have a transcendental experience. The T'ang dynasty (618-903 CE) poet Li Po describes a meeting with a Taoist divinity on Mount M'ai-po, "Grand White," (a mountain which shares an epithet that was Li Po's cognomen as well), where he asks the divine being to impart his arcane teachings and give him the secret to an elixir that will conduce him to transcendent status:

*(from his series of 59 "Olden Airs")*

Grand White - so mottled misted-green!  
 The starry chronograms in thickset ranks above it.  
 Three hundred *li* away from heaven,  
 Aloof like this, it is sundered from the world.

In its midst here is a green-faxed gaffer,  
 Cloaked in clouds, he lounges with the pines and snow.  
 He does not laugh, does not converse either;  
 His tenebrous roost is located in a rugged cave.  
 I have come - and happened upon the Realized Person;

Kneeling long, I ask for his treasured acroama.  
 So resplendent - he suddenly smiles freely at me,  
 For conferral, takes up an exposition on refining drugs.

I shall transmit those remarks, engraved on my bones;  
 Raising up his person, now he is gone in a lightning-  
 flash!  
 Lifting my gaze far away, I cannot catch up to him;  
 In hazy state, my five emotions are inflamed.

- But it is I in future who will devise cinnabar granules,  
 And forever be separated from the persons of this world.  
 (Kroll, 1986).

The Chinese landscape contributed greatly to the development of these concepts of mountains as conduits to the gods. The Chinese could hardly ignore the presence of these conspicuous geographical features. Seeing as:

The most remarkable feature of China's relief is the vast extent of its mountain chains; the mountains indeed, have exerted a tremendous influence on the country's political, economic, and cultural development. According to a rough estimate about one-third of the total area of China consists of mountains. China possesses the world's highest mountain and largest plateau, in addition to extensive coastal plains (Britannica, 1982).

Tibet and Nepal share Everest - Tibet is part of China. In fact, the world's highest mountain, Mt. Everest (8,848 meters), in Chinese "Chu-mu-lang-ma Feng," and the world's largest plateau, the Tibetan plateau (about 1,400,000 square kilometers) which are part of modern day China, were not part of the T'ang dynasty China of Li Po. However, the rest of China is not without its share of mountains; mountains dominate the landscape with such notable exceptions as the Tibetan Highlands, Turim Basin, parts of the Gobi desert (in the north), Tsaidom Basin, North China Plain and Manchurian Plain. The rest of China is and was (depending on where the border shifted at the time) covered by the following mountain ranges: the Himalayas in the southwest, Nan-Ling in the

southeast, Kunlun, Nan Shan and Tsinglin Shan (central west to east), Tien shan and Altai in the northwest, and the Greater Khingan Range in the northeast, as well as, a large part of China's islands are mountainous.

The Kunlun Mountains alone extend 2710 kilometers from the Pamirs in the former Soviet Union on the west to the Sino-Tibetan ranges on the east, constituting the longest mountain system in Asia, uniting dozens of ranges that are among the highest on Earth. Within the autonomous regions of Sinkiang Uighur and Tibet and the province of Tsinghai, the Kunlun Mountains form the northern wing of the geologically lifted region known as High Asia - the highest such region in the world. The position of this system causes a dramatically asymmetrical structure. Although the average elevation of the watershed ridges in the southern ridges is about 6500 meters, when viewed from the south, the ranges rise only from about 1006 to 1949 meters above the Tibetan Plateau, which itself has an average height of between about 4420 to 5030 meters. However, in the north, where the Tibetan plateau is much lower with average elevations of 792 to 1190 meters, the watershed ridges of the northern ranges, with an average elevation of 5990 meters, create the impression of gigantic mountains that tower up to 4500 meters above the plain.

Born within a country with such an impressive geographical topography, it is hardly surprising that one of China's best loved poets, Li Po, also known as Li Bai, Li Bo or Li Tai-Po (born 701 CE - died 762 CE) was greatly influenced by his surroundings. The influence of this landscape is an oft-repeated theme in his poetry. One example, amongst many, is his poem entitled "Green Mountain:"

You ask me why I dwell in the green mountain;  
I smile and make no reply for my heart is free of care  
As the peach-blossom flows down stream and is gone into  
the unknown,  
I have a world apart that is not among men.

This poem also refers to Li Po's ongoing interest in Taoism, with his reference to "a world apart that is not among men", which

was important to him throughout his life. Paul W. Kroll stresses the importance of Taoism and Taoist literature for T'ang poets:

For to Li Po, as to all other T'ang poets, "Taoism" meant the sacred scriptures, solemn practices, and holy mysteries comprehended in the religious sphere of the Shang-ch'ing and Ling-pao traditions - a well-developed and, for the most part, elite spiritual domain that had defined itself during the Six Dynasties period and assumed notable importance in the lives of the medieval literocracy (Kroll, 1986).

Li Po's early childhood certainly opened him up to the world since his father, Li Ke, was a trader at a time when the Silk Road was China's main trade route west and his mother was most likely of Turkish origin. He was born in the town of Sui Ye, near Lake Balkash, and he probably travelled as a five-year-old boy across modern Zinjing and Gansu until the river system of Sichuan could be contacted, and got to what was to be the family home in Jiangyou. The name of the locality then was "Qinglian" (Alley, 1980).

Li Po probably spoke a Turkic language with his mother and sister. This has been inferred from the fact that he was able to interpret for an embassy to the T'ang court in Chang'an many years afterwards. Li Po was sent to study Chinese at a Buddhist temple on Kuang Shan ("shan" means mountain), 15 kilometers from his home. Nothing appears to be recorded about his life prior to this. However, it is known that he spent the years from eight to eighteen, studying and at times travelling to Chengdu, Mount Emei (Omei), and elsewhere. Apparently, the mountains lured him even then, as well as in subsequent years, as Rewi Alley notes:

The monks in the temple called Zong He Da Ming, on Kuang Shan, did a very good job of teaching, and the boy was a great reader of every book he could get hold of. Sometimes he would take them up the scenic mountain called Doutuian, which is 22 km from the county city, to read. Here were some fantastic peaks and caves, which delighted the boy greatly.

When he was 20, he went to Chengdu, and wrote the poem 'Climbing up the San Hua Lou.' Then when 23 he spent some time on Mount Emei, and wrote another poem on 'Climbing Emei,' then, when he

left, another called ‘Song to the Mountain and the Moon at Emei’ (Alley, 1980).

In fact, Kuang Shan made such an impression on young Li Po that he wrote “Farewell to Kuang Shan,” when he was leaving in 718 CE:

Early morning and green mountain peaks  
make a real picture, some being high  
others low, wisteria vines swaying the  
the wind then brushing the balustrade;  
so often have I gone up this hill path  
my dog following, and in the evening  
returned along with woodcutters, seeing  
temple visitors watching the clouds  
and listening to the monkeys amongst forest  
trees; in the near-by pond, monks washing  
their begging bowls, the cranes there  
flying away; blame me not for leaving  
this quiet and beautiful place, for now  
I would put the learning I have gained  
to the service of our brilliant rule (Alley, 1980).

Li Po was not destined to leave his mark on the politics of China. In 742, he did go to Changan, at this time the capital, and was presented to Emperor Hus<sup>2</sup>an-tzung (emperor from 712-756, known as Ming Huang, “The Brilliant Emperor”), who bestowed upon Li Po the honourable academic title ‘Guang Fen Han Lin’ and gave him a position in the Hanlin Academy. However, this did not last long as, in 744, he fell victim to court intrigue and was banished. During his banishment, Li Po spent a decade travelling through the mountains in east and southeast China. Then, during the An Lu-shan rebellion (755-57), Li Po once again incurred the disfavour of the emperor by associating with the Prince Li Lin, who was commander of the anti-An Lu-shan forces and who plotted ultimately to take supreme power for himself. Thus, after the emperor defeated Li Lin, Li Po was exiled to Guizhou. However, he soon received amnesty and spent the rest of his life travelling along the Yangtze River.

Li Po died in Dangtu, Anhui, in 762, at the age of 62, probably from cirrhosis of the liver or from mercury poisoning due to Taoist longevity elixirs, but legend has it that he died while drunkenly embracing the moon's reflection on the Yangtze. Li Po's relationship to wine is well known and some say that it offers evidence of his "romantic" spirit or some sardonically applaud it as the agent that succeed in "illuminating a poet previously benighted by Taoist superstition" (Marsano, 1992). Nevertheless, there is no evidence that Li Po ever renounced his Taoist beliefs. In fact, in a poem packed with Taoist allusions, called "I Am the Original Madman of So," Li Po ridicules Confucius and proclaims his lifelong devotion to the Tao:

I am the madman of the Ch'u country  
 Who sang a mad song disputing Confucius.  
 Holding in my hand a staff of green jade,  
 I have crossed, since morning at the Yellow Crane Terrace,  
 All five Holy Mountains, without a thought of distance,  
 According to the one constant habit of my life. (Li, 1998)

He stresses that the Tao is "the one constant habit" of his life.

Whatever is the truth about Li Po's death, there is no doubt that Li Po is one of China's greatest poets. This is an impressive accomplishment, seeing as Chinese literature is perhaps the oldest in the world with an uninterrupted history of more than 3,000 years, dating back at least to the 14th century BCE. It is considered that during the T'ang dynasty Chinese literature reached its golden age and in poetry all the verse forms of the past were freely adopted and refined, as well as, new forms were crystallized. Li Po used strange diction and rhyme and preferred older poetic forms such as songs or ballads, deliberately avoiding the *l6 shih* poetic form (popular during his time), with its strictly regulated verse of eight lines with five or seven syllables, each set down in accordance with strict tone patterns.

Thus, Li Po's poems have a free, flowing quality, as he explores mystical Taoist and actual mountains in his poetry. His use of nature images has earned him comparisons to the 10th century

Italian poet Leopardi. To illustrate this point, Barricelli compares the concluding remarks of Leopardi's "The Solitary Thrush" to the conclusions of Li Po's "Climbing the Peak at Lin-hai:"

I turn aside for flowers, rest on rocks - suddenly it's night  
water soft-seething, sending up mists,  
and from the blue darkness, bottomless, vast and wild,  
sun and moon shine sparkling on terraces of silver and gold ...  
Suddenly my soul shudders, my spirit leaps,  
in terror I rise with repeated sighs:  
only the mat and pillow where now I woke -  
lost are the mists of a moment ago!  
All the joys of this world are like this,  
the many-vented past a river flowing east.  
I leave you now - when will I return? -  
to loose the white deer among green bluffs,  
in my wandering to ride them in search of famed hills.  
(Barricelli, 1987)

The nature images used by both poets are imbued with special significance that transcends the use of imagery to evoke a sense of physical surroundings or emotional state. Barricelli notes:

The moon and birds and mountains I have alluded to in the poetry of Leopardi and Li Po are endowed with such universal significance, and by representing something abstract they guide their poetry from compound imagism to symbolism. Particularly in its metonymic associations, their imagery reveals their personality more clearly than the case of traditional landscape poets. (Barricelli, 1987)

Certainly, Li Po's poetry is packed with symbolic significance. In that respect, it is impossible to ignore Li Po's Taoist connection. He often uses Taoist imagery and diction in his poems and makes innumerable allusions to Taoist literature of his time. For example, in a poem where he praises the superancy of Mount O-mei among the many eminent peaks of Shu, he declares:

Coolly indifferent, prizing the purple auroras,

Indeed I have gained the techniques of the damask satchel.

Here he mentions the “damask satchel”, a magical object reputed to belong to the goddess Hsi Wang Mu. This satchel was thought to contain a scroll, which was the sacred text of the *Wy?h chen-hsing t’u* (Plans of the True Forms of the Five Marchmounts), one of the most “celebrated periapts of medieval Taoism.” Taoists believed that it had the magical power to keep its possessor from harm, especially in alpine areas, through the help of spiritual emissaries sent by the deities of the Five Holy Mountains (Kroll, 1986).

Li Po’s attraction to Taoism is hardly surprising in view of his interest in nature, especially mountains, and the fact that Taoism encouraged the love of nature as well as the artistic depiction of deities and minor spirits. Also, Taoism proposed a less formal, more intuitive approach to life in general and this approach was carried over into the arts and into theoretical discussions of them. Taoism stressed that the Tao (the way) resides in all beings and that its realizations cannot be taught. Paradoxes were used to point to the truth and emphasis was placed on contemplation of natural life and on reclusive retiring to nature, ideally onto mountains, where transcendental experience would instruct one in the mysterious ways of the Tao. In fact, it is claimed that the founder of Taoism, the 6th century sage Lao-tzu (reputed to be the author of Lao-tzu or Tao-te-Chaing, although many scholars dispute his existence), wrote the sacred text of Tao-te-Ching at the request of Yin His, legendary guardian of the pass (Kuang-ling). He wrote it on the Hsien-ku pass, which was the entrance into the state of Ch’in, and then disappeared forever. T’ang emperors officially supported Taoism because of their claim to be descended from Lao-tzu.

Li Po did not claim to be Lao-tzu’s descendant, but he did however see himself as a banished immortal. He claims that the presiding spirit of holy Mount T’ai-po opened up the Barrier of Heaven for him, thus assuring that his name would be recorded in the fatidical rosters of immortality and certifying his celestial state. Some of his contemporaries fancifully regarded him to be the essential spirit of the star after which the mountain was named.

Mount T'ai-po, or "Grand White," held special significance for Li Po because it had the same name as he did. Li Po's kinsman Li Yang-ping says that on the night that Li Po was born his mother had a dream in which she was visited by the moving star (or planet) called T'ai-po, thus, the child was given the name Po, "White" and the cognomen T'ai-po "Grand White." Mount T'ai-po was located in the Wu-king township, present day Mei district, in Shensi, on the westernmost spur of the Chung-nan range. Kroll states that it:

... was clearly the alpine *doppelgänger* of the star and provided an earthly communication point with it. Indeed, one medieval text states unequivocally that the mountain contained the essence of the star, fallen to earth. This sidereal essence manifested itself as the lovely white stone slabs, resembling fine jade, that were miraculously discovered on T'ai-po Shan in 742 and out of which the emperor ordered carved a 20-foot tall image of Lao Tzu, plus flanking statues of himself and two of his high ministers, to be erected in the temple of the deified Lao Tzu in Ch'ang-an (Kroll, 1986).

Interestingly, it was in 742 that Li Po was honoured with a title and an academic post by the emperor.

Mount T'ai-po held a special significance for Taoists and was the retreat of several early T'ang recluses, alchemists, and adepts. It was believed that it concealed the eleventh of the 36 "lesser grotto-heavens", as is recorded by the Taoist teacher and cleric Szu-ma Ch'eng-chen (647-735 CE). Li Po, however, was the first writer to portray the mountain in verse, writing two poems about it; one of them was the fifth of his series of 59 "Olden Airs" (reprinted at the beginning of this paper) and the other was "Climbing T'ai-po's Peak:"

To the west I ascend the peak of Grand White -  
 In dusky sunlight finish with my scrambling and climbing.  
 Grand White grants to *me* a colloquy,  
 And for my sake opens up the Barriers of Heaven!

I will mount the cooling wind and be gone -  
 Breaking straight out through the floating clouds.

Lifting my hand, I may draw near the moon,  
 Proceeding onwards, as if there is no mountain now!

Once parted and gone away from Wu-kung,  
 What time would I come back here again? (Kroll, 1986)

This poem describes a transcendent experience that the poet has on the mountain, taking him away from the mortal world, away from the province of Wu-kung, where the mountain is located, and into the realm of immortals, past the Barrier of Heaven. Thus, upon his return to earth he becomes the banished immortal. The quest for physical immortality is considered to be the highest good, the ultimate goal, in the Taoist religion, with their elixirs geared towards prolonging life. Therefore, Li Po's attainment of immortality would be viewed as the greatest achievement.

Another magnificent example of Li Po's fascination with the Taoist concept of sacred mountains is portrayed in a poem titled "Seafarers Speak of Yei Island," which describes an imaginary visit by the poet to the sacred Taoist mountain T'ien-mu Shan. Here he sees many fantastic creatures and the immortals, the Lords of Clouds, descend in a long procession:

Half way up appears the sun in the sea,  
 In midair is heard the Cock of Heaven.  
 Among thousands of crags and ravines the road meanders  
 ....  
 Bears roar, dragons chant - the thundering cascade,  
 Deep woods quake with fear and towering ridges tremble  
 Clouds turn dark with a hint of rain;  
 On the placid waters mists rise,  
 Lightning flashes and thunder rumbles;  
 Crags and peaks crash and crumble.  
 The stone gate in the fairy cave  
 Splits asunder with a shattering sound  
 Its blue depth is vast, the bottom is invisible.  
 The sun and moon shine on the Towers of Gold and Silver;  
 Clad in rainbow raiments and riding on the wind,  
 The Lords of Clouds descend in long processions,  
 Tigers playing the zither and phoenixes drawing  
 the carriages,

The fairies stand in rows like a field of hemp (Li, 1998).

Here Li Po takes us on a journey to a place where the physical world touches the world of the immortals. Perhaps, the Taoist sages in their quiet contemplation of nature, noticed the peculiar patterns formed by clouds around isolated mountains, noting the convective bands that can be traced upstream to individual mountain peaks (Sang, 1999). This phenomenon could have been viewed as an indication that mountain peaks were special places in physical connection to heaven, the realm of the immortals.

No doubt Li Po would have sat and pondered the significance of these unusual celestial phenomena around mountains, since as Arthur Waley points out, Li Po was always attracted to the “wilder aspects of Nature ... vast untenanted spaces, cataracts, trackless mountains and desolate ravines” (Li, 1998). High up in a lonely retreat, writing the poem “Alone Looking at the Mountain,” Li Po notices:

All the birds have flown up and gone;  
A lonely cloud floats leisurely by.  
We never tire of looking at each other -  
Only the mountain and I.

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