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Commentary on Translating Tao Yuanming and Li Shangyin

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Tao Yuanming (c.376–427), was descended from a well-connected and influential family, yet became dissatisfied with corruption at court and the life of a scholar-official. Tao eventually quit, saying, “I will not bow just to earn five pecks of rice.” He spent the rest of his days as a tipsy recluse. His poems extol the virtues (and struggles) of the life of a simple farmer, as well as the joys of wine. These themes, plus his rejection of official life in corrupt times, made him a wistful ideal for many later Chinese scholar-officials, especially during turbulent periods of Chinese history. Tao’s straightforward poetic style and limited number of literary allusions also make him one of the more accessible poets for Western readers.

“Cloudy Skies” is one of Tao’s more well-known poems, which is written in four Chinese characters/words per line and includes a short explanatory preface. In translating this piece, I tried to use similarly straightforward English and simple sentence structure to capture the flavor of the original.

Li Shangyin (c.813–845), on the other hand, is famous for his lush imagery and numerous allusions. In the titles and almost every line of both of these translated poems, he draws on references to Chinese classics, history, mythology, and even Tao Yuanming’s poetry. (In fact, the line translated as “distant southern friends” in the poem “Autumn Arrives” actually reads “distant southern clouds”—a direct reference to Tao’s “Cloudy Skies.”) Li’s reliance on imagery and allusions means that his poems can be difficult to translate. For example, in China the personification of both frost and the moon are female. This sets the stage for Li’s night-time competition between the “charms” of the two, but also makes it impossible to use Western personifications such as Jack Frost or the Man in the Moon in the translation.

The two poems translated here are written in a style that developed later and which has seven characters per line. In this later style, it is more common to link or juxtapose two images in a single line. In translating, I tried as much as possible to keep the images intact and leave any resulting ambiguity unresolved, as this mirrors the ambiguity that sometimes appears in Li’s poetry.