Given the political climate, some men of letters in the ninth century found it better to stay out of office and find meaning in other ways, such as socializing with friends over wine or pursuing a passion for tea.

In terms of culture, the ninth century was an exciting time, when many leading men of letters brought new energy to poetry, encouraged writing prose in the “ancient style,” and revitalized Confucian learning. Key figures included Du You (735–812), Han Yu (768–824), Bai Juyi, and Liu Zongyuan (773–819). In terms of politics, however, there was a sense that much had gone wrong. Many of the provinces had become effectively independent of the central government, and palace eunuchs had gained control of the throne. Men continued to take the civil service examinations, but political advancement was less straightforward.

The two essays below were written by poets who presented themselves as...
preferring the carefree life to the burdens of office. The first is by Bai Juyi, a jinshi holder who had had a relatively successful political career. He wrote this essay in retirement and claims in it to like his new identity as a master drinker, someone who prefers to drink wine with friends than worry about the problems of the government. Although Buddhists were enjoined to refrain from alcohol, offering wine had long been a common feature of entertaining guests and making sacrifices to gods and ancestors, perfectly acceptable in both Daoist and Confucian traditions. Among literati, drinking wine was also seen as a way to gain a higher level of insight and attain a carefree mindset, with Daoist overtones. It is said that after Bai Juyi’s death, the “Biography of Master Drunken Poet” was inscribed onto a stele erected next to his tomb in Mount Longmen (Shanxi). For generations, people who came to pay respect would pour a cup of wine as a sacrificial offering, with the result that the tomb area was consistently damp.

The second essay was written a generation later by Lu Guimeng, who had failed the jinshi exams repeatedly and held only minor posts as a prefectural aide. After he gave up on an official career, he returned to his hometown and lived what was called the life of the recluse. He was an admirer of tea master Lu Yu (ca. 733–804) and his *The Classic of Tea* (Chajing) and enjoyed discussing tea and Lu Yu’s work with eminent monks who visited him frequently. Lu Guimeng would go on to write *The Book of Tea Ranking* (Pindi shu), an important work on tea culture in the Tang. In his autobiography, Lu bragged about living near excellent sources of water for brewing tea, two of them at Buddhist temples, and, in fact, religion, especially Buddhism, was a key ingredient in the story of tea in China.

In these two essays, the authors are writing in a mildly humorous way, best captured by retaining the use of the third person.

**Biography of Master Drunken Poet, by Bai Juyi**

Master Drunken Poet cannot recall his name, place of origin, or official ranks and titles. As though in a trance, he has no idea who he is. For thirty years, he went from place to place seeking official posts. When approaching old age, he retired to Luoyang. His property has a five- or six-mu pond surrounded by thousands of bamboo trees, dozens of arbors, and all the typical features that make up an estate such as pavilions, terraces, boats, and bridges. He
settled down there contently. Even though he is not rich, he does not suffer from cold or hunger, and even though he is old, he is not senile yet. He loves drinking wine, indulges himself in playing the zither, and is given to poetry. He hangs out mostly with wine imbibers, zither lovers, and poets. In addition, as a Buddhist he studies the Theravada, Mahayana, and Vajrayana traditions thoroughly. Monk Ruman of the Song Mountain is his best Buddhist friend. He sightsees with recluse Wei Chu of Pingquan. Liu Yuxi [772–842] of Pengcheng and he are poetry friends. Huangfu Shu [fl. 816] of Anding is his best drinking buddy. Seeing them brings him so much joy that he often forgets to return home. Within sixty or seventy li of Luoyang, he has toured every Daoist shrine, Buddhist temple, and mountain retreat, as well as every place with springs, rocks, flowers, or bamboo. He visits any family known for fine wine, music, book collections, or dancers. When he gets invitations to a meal, whether from a local official or a commoner, he always accepts. In fine moments in beautiful surroundings, or on a snowy day or moonlit evening, if a like-minded person comes by, he takes out his wine jar and poetry collections for their amusement.

After a bit of drinking, Master Drunken Poet pulls out the zither and plays “Autumn Longing.” If he is in the mood, he has his servants form a musical ensemble and play “Rainbow Skirt and Feather Dress.” If everyone is having a merry time, he calls his house courtesans over to sing “Song of Willows,” with a dozen newly composed lyrics. They entertain themselves to their heart’s content and do not stop until everyone is drunk. While in high spirits, he often walks to the neighbors, hikes around the countryside, or rides a horse into the city. Sometimes he travels in a sedan chair to see the countryside. A zither, a pillow, and few volumes of poetry by Tao Qian [ca. 365–425] and Xie Lingyun [385–433] are always placed inside the sedan chair. On the right and left poles, he hangs jugs of wine. He searches out rivers and gazes at mountains, visits them whenever he is in the mood, plays his zither and drinks wine during the journey, and returns home only after he has enjoyed himself to the fullest. He has lived like this for ten years now.

During this period, he has written poetry every day, perhaps a thousand or more poems in total. Every year, he makes several hundred jars of wine. He has lost count of how many poems he has written and the number of jars of wine he has filled over the past ten years. His family worries that he goes too far, but he just laughs and pays no attention. Only after their repeated expressions of concern did he respond this way:
It’s human nature to have a special fondness for something—rarely do you find someone who is moderate in all matters. I am certainly not a temperate person. Imagine that unfortunately I was a greedy person intent on building up wealth, to the extent that I amassed valuables and grandiose houses, inviting disasters and endangering myself. In that case, would your advice have any impact on me? Or imagine that unfortunately I loved gambling, threw away tens of thousands of cash at will and lost the family fortune, so that my wife and children had to endure cold and hunger. In that case, would you be able to change my behavior? And what if unfortunately I was into elixirs, gave up on clothing and food, and focused only on transmuting lead and mercury, so that in the end I not only did not produce anything useful but also brought harm to myself. In that case, would your warnings make a difference? Now, fortunately, I am not into any of that; instead I am content with wine and poetry. Even if I indulge myself a bit excessively, what is the harm? Isn’t it much better than being addicted to those three vices? This is why Liu Ling [ca. 221–300] would not listen to his wife’s advice (on moderation in drinking) and Wang Ji [589–644] went to the Land of Drunkenness and did not return.

Afterward, he led his disciples into the wine cellar, where they circled around the wine jars. He sat on the floor with legs extended and his face looking upward. He let out a long and deep sigh: “I came to this world with talents and ability far inferior to those of the ancients. Yet I am wealthier than Qian Lü [Warring States period], have lived longer than Yan Yuan [521–481 BCE], have more food to eat than Bo Yi [late Shang], am happier than Rong Qiqi [595–500 BCE], and heathier than Wei Bin [286–312]. How extremely fortunate I am! What else do I need? If I give up on what I am fond of, how will I endure old age?”

He thus composed this “Poem on Expressing My Heart”:

Holding a zither thrilled Rong Qiqi;  
Drinking to excess freed Liu Ling.  
Looking ahead I see blue mountains.  
Readily I let my white hair grow.  
I don’t know  
How many years I have left in this world,
So from now till the day I die,  
Every day is a day to enjoy myself.

After reciting the poem, he smiled. He opened a wine jar and scooped out a cup of wine. After a few cups, he was drunk. From then on, he fell into an unending cycle of getting drunk, sobering up, reciting poetry, and getting drunk again. As a result, he came to the realization that life is really a dream, and wealth and high rank are as ephemeral as fleeting clouds. The sky is his tent, the earth is his mat; in the twinkling of an eye, a hundred years passes by. Joyfully, mindlessly, he forgets that old age is approaching. The ancients said that only in wine can one preserve oneself, hence he named himself Master Drunken Poet.

Written in the third year of the Kaicheng reign [838] at the age of sixty-seven. His beard may be completely white, his head half-bald, and his teeth all gone, but his passion for wine and poetry has not let up. Therefore, he says to his wife, “So far I have lived contently, but I don’t know what will happen to my passion in the future.”


Biography of Mr. Fuli, by Lu Guimeng

No one knows where Mr. Fuli comes from. People saw him plowing in Fuli [Jiangsu] and gave him this name. Mr. Fuli is unrestrained by nature and loves books by the ancient sages. He has studied the six classics and understands their main ideas. Among the six classics, he is especially fond of The Spring and Autumn Annals (Chunqiu), picking out the parts that are profound and subtle. He read a book by Wang Tong [584–617] in which Wang commented, “After the Three Commentaries were written, parts of The Spring and Autumn Annals were scattered.” Mr. Fuli strongly agrees with this assessment. During the mid-Zhenyuan reign period, Han Huang [723–787] wrote General Standards of the Spring and Autumn (Chunqiu tongli) and had the text carved onto a stone tablet, acting as if study of the Annals was his responsibility. Even though his book is full of mistakes and shortcomings, for almost a century no one dared to criticize its faults. Fearing that later scholars might be misled by it, Mr. Fuli wrote a book to single out and criticize Han’s missteps.
Mr. Fuli usually keeps himself amused by writing, not letting up even when suffering distress, illness, or other difficulties. He applies himself to revising, polishing, and making notes, and as the sheets of paper pile up, he tosses them into boxes. This goes on for years. After he finishes, even if an interested party leaves with his book and he later finds it in that person’s home, he does not bother to claim authorship. In his youth, Mr. Fuli concentrated on poetry and wanted to challenge the authority of the rule-makers. His poems evolved over time, and his styles vary. His earlier poems were crushing and swirling, mobile yet strong, as if trying to seize monsters and shatter battle formations. In the end, however, he sought simplicity and tranquility.

Personally fastidious, his shelves, windows, desk, and seats are all neat without the slightest dust. When he acquires a book, he reads it thoroughly until he is completely familiar with its content before shelving it. He scrutinizes every book he puts his hands on, often going through it several times. Every day he has a red-ink brush and yellow-ink brush in hand. Even though his collection is small, the books are all refined, reliable, checked against the authoritative texts, and suitable for wider circulation. When he borrows books from other people, if the bindings are broken or worn, he rethreads them; if there are errors in the texts, he corrects them. He enjoys hearing of other people’s studies and does not stint on giving them well-thought-out feedback. When untrustworthy types carelessly damage or soil his books or fail to return them, Mr. Fuli sadly puts the blame on himself.

Mr. Fuli is not rich but he never talks about financial matters. When people bring up the subject, he responds, “Pursuing financial gain is what merchants do. For someone who is a scholar to pursue it, wouldn’t that disturb the division of labor of the four classes? Besides, Confucius and Mencius would never approve.” The place where Mr. Fuli lives has a pond several mu in size, a thirty-room house, fields measuring a hundred thousand paces [about four hundred acres], more than ten head of cattle, and a dozen farmhands. His fields are low-lying, and one summer, after a heavy summer rain, the flood waters merged with the Yangzi River, so no one could tell whose land was whose. As a result, Mr. Fuli’s crops failed and his granary did not have even a peck of stored grain. Mr. Fuli picked up a basket and shovel and personally led his farmhands to build a levee. From then on, every year, no matter how fierce the surge, the flood waters never came over the top of the levee to inundate the crops. When someone ridiculed him [for performing manual labor], Mr. Fuli said, “Both Yao and Shun were dark-skinned and wiry, and
the Great Yu had calloused feet, but weren’t they sages? I am just a common person. If I don’t work hard, how can I support my wife and children? Should I be just a flea on a precious vessel or a rat in a granary?”

Mr. Fuli loves tea. He owns a small tea plantation in the foothills of the Guzhu Mountain [Jiangsu]; the 10 percent of the crop that he takes for rent is just enough to cover his own tea consumption. He wrote The Book of Tea Ranking (Pindi shu) as a sequel to both The Classic of Tea (Chajing) and The Tea Formulas (Chajue).³ Zhang Youxin [fl. 814] of Nanyang [Henan] had written On Water (Shuishuo), in which Zhang ranked the seven best sources for water suitable for brewing tea. Ranked number two is the water at the Stone Spring of the Huishan Temple, number three is the water of the Stone Well of Tiger Hill Temple, and number six is the Wusong River. All three places are less than one hundred li from Mr. Fuli’s place. Eminent monks and recluses often visit, adding to his enjoyment.

Earlier, due to his fondness for wine, Mr. Fuli got really sick. For two years he was bedridden, as his vital energy and blood were depleted. Since then, whenever a visitor comes, he takes out a wine bottle and cups but no longer drinks much himself. Mr. Fuli does not like to socialize with vulgar types and often refuses to see them even if they show up at his door. He does not own a carriage and has no interest in paying social calls. He never joins his relatives for seasonal ancestral rites or funerals. When weather and health permit, he sets out in a tiny boat that is fitted out with an awning, table, and seat, and supplied with books, a tea set, writing supplies, fishing tackle, and a young boat hand. If the place he visits is not entirely to his liking, he returns without hesitation, more speedily than the flight of a water bird or a frightened mountain deer. Because people call him the Wanderer in Rivers and Lakes, he composed and chanted “Biography of the Wanderer in Rivers and Lakes.” He pays no attention to what others say about him, good or bad, and glib tongues make no impression on him.

Mr. Fuli gets easily irritated and has trouble suppressing his anger. Even though he sees this as a failing, he has not been able to change. Because he has neither committed a major indiscretion nor held office, his name is not widely known. No one in the world really understands him. Could he be someone remarkable, like the anonymous old man fishing in the Pei River who invented acupuncture, the fisherman from Qu Yuan’s parable, or the old man sailing on the Yangzi River who saved Wu Zixu?

Notes


2. Red-ink brushes were often used for punctuating, commenting on, and annotating books, while yellow-ink brushes were used as “white-out” to correct the mistakes.

3. The Classic of Tea was written by Lu Yu, and The Tea Formulas was written by Monk Jiaoran (730–99).

Further Reading


