Chapter 41. Du Fu

Who is China’s greatest poet? For the last thousand years there have only been two serious contenders, Li Bo and his young admirer Du Fu 杜甫 (712 – 770), with their famously contrastive energies, deep Yin and deep Yang. Here they are together:

1. Li Bo’s poem to Du Fu, “Sent to Du Fu from my home below the walls of Sandhill City, by the old kingdoms of Qi and Lu”

After all, why did I come here, to be left high and dry in Sandhill City?
An ancient tree grows outside the city walls, where dusk merges with the sounds of autumn.
The wine of Lu can’t get me drunk, the songs of Qi just repeat old sentiments.
When I think of you, it’s like Wen River, carrying my message south in its raging flood.350

沙丘城下寄杜甫

我來竟何事。高臥沙丘城。
城邊有古樹。日夕連秋聲。
魯酒不可醉。齊歌空復情。
思君若汶水。浩蕩寄南征。

2. From Du Fu’s poem to Li Bo, “With Li Bo, looking for Fan the hermit”

Lord Li, your handsome verse is so often like that of Yin Keng.
We were both pilgrims at Meng Mountain, and I cherish you like an older brother.
We dozed in autumn, drunk under a single quilt, we walked in the sun holding hands.351
3. Li Bo’s poem, “For Du Fu, in play”

I met Du Fu on top of Rice Kernel Mountain.
It was high noon, and he was wearing a huge rain hat.
How did you get so skinny since we met?
“It’s because I write such poetry of anguish!”

4. Du Fu’s poem, “To Li Bo”

Autumn now. We’re still two tumbleweeds who can’t meet up,
shaming the Great Alchemist because we haven’t yet made the elixir.
Hard drinking, madly singing, letting empty days pass,
strutting and swaggering, whose hero are we trying to be?

Edit: The previous translation of Du Fu’s poem was incorrect. The correct translation is:

秋來相顧尚飄蓬
未就丹砂愧葛洪
痛飲狂歌空度日
飛揚跋扈為誰雄
Both Li Bo and Du Fu are equally an affront to the poetry that preceded them. Both reveal most intimate secrets — Du Fu’s are secrets of the vast human realm, while Li Bo’s are of the vast… well, I don’t know.

So which is China’s greatest poet? Chinese littérateurs have argued this a thousand years. Indeed, you could write a history of Chinese poetics based entirely on this contest. So let’s set the record straight right now: Li Bo and Du Fu together are China’s greatest poet. It’s a bit like the conundrum of two football players in the 1977 movie *Semi-Tough*:

Billy Clyde Puckett: There are no 10’s.
Shake Tiller: Janey Woods is a 10.
Billy Clyde Puckett: No, Janey Woods is a 9. Janey Woods and her sister Patty together are a 10.

伯夷：沒有十分女。
叔齊：欸？張麗是個十分女啊。
伯夷：不。張麗和她的妹妹一共為十分女。

Fig. 53. Movie poster for *Semi-Tough*. 
For Li Bo that human realm is the theater where the divine puts on its plays, and the human being a perceptual apparatus that somewhat limits the shows that can be presented. He’s a tumbling down of luminosity across this space, a shattering of light. He is only here as play.

Mathematicians distinguish between two sizes of infinity, the countable and uncountable. The natural numbers 1, 2, 3… are a countable infinity — they never end, but you can still count them. But between, say, the numbers 4 and 5 there are many, many more numbers than that — you can continue to divide that space forever, and establish more numbers, and between each of those numbers are even more numbers, endlessly. Both Du Fu and Li Bo are infinities, but Li Bo is uncountable — right there between your 4 and your 5 is already everything.

Thus if you want to write good Chinese poetry, you’ll be told to imitate Du Fu, never Li Bo. Indeed,” writes Steven Owen, “the originality and variety of Li Bo’s work is such that it is very difficult to isolate features that are true for more than a handful of poems.” This goes beyond an ability to rhyme “apples” with “Indianapolis,” though it is of course related.

These are the victories of the military lineage.
They cannot be transmitted in advance.

— Sun Tzu’s Art of War (Sunzi bingfa 孫子兵法), ch. 1