

Implications of Mystic Intoxication in Chinese and Iranian Poetry

By Rebecca Weston

In analyzing the works of Chinese Tang poet Li Bo (701-762),¹ one notices the reoccurring reference to “drunkenness” or drinking of wine; though it can be taken at face value to represent a state of being in the literal sense—that is, what appears to be an intoxicated stupor—it seems more practical to consider a more figurative meaning. Namely, it is possible to interpret themes of wine and drunkenness as allegories for spiritual enlightenment, be it found in nature or simply life in general. Likewise, Persian poets Omar Khayyam (ca. 1048-ca.1124/1129), Fakhroddin al-Iraqi (1211-1289), and Shams al-Din Mohammed Shirazi (ca. 1315-ca. 1390), or as he is known by his nom de plume “Hafez,” exhibit work that can be aptly applied to this metaphorical structure, albeit keeping in mind that the consumption of alcohol is forbidden within Islam. In this respect, wine and intoxication within Persian or Sufi poetry can thus represent a state of ecstasy—an expression of love or passion² that is often translated into a spiritual union with God.

Given these similarities, it is pertinent to ask: to what extent should readers of these texts read between the lines—particularly concerning the work of Li Bo, a known consumer of drugs and elixirs³—to conclude such references had mystical implications, if at all? Furthermore, are such comparisons between Chinese and Persian poetic mysticism a result of transference, given the extensive exchange of ideas, philosophy, and religion along the vast routes of the Silk Road? To best answer these questions, it might be necessary to not only consider the very words of the poetry in question, but the context in which they were written by examining who, where, when, and if possible, *why* these works were created.

Although it would be ideal to find concrete evidence that represents a direct link between Chinese and Persian cultures that explains the striking similarities found in poetic themes of mysticism and wine, it is best to keep in mind that comparative studies is not always indicative of a singular cause-and-effect relationship between two cultures, especially those found separated by a few centuries. Certainly, such a narrow approach inaccurately advocates that civilizations, particularly those divided by substantial physical or temporal distances, developed in a vacuum. Breaking away from this restrictive belief, Jörn Rüsen instead suggests that “a specific culture is understood as a combination of elements which are shared by all other cultures. Thus the specificity of cultures is brought about by different constellations of the same elements.”⁴ Here, it is possible to view the manifestation of mysticism (including allegorical references to wine and intoxication) in a more universal light, and one that is not simply relegated to Chinese or Persian origins.

Despite this broad perspective the most obvious, if not problematic issue one notices is the sequential manifestation of mysticism in both Chinese and Persian poetry. Here, the life and work of Chinese poet Li Bo is categorized from the early- to mid-eighth century,⁵ whereas the work of Khayyam is representative of the early twelfth century and Iraqi and Hafez the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries.⁶ Given this information, it may seem logical to assume that Chinese poets had a feasible hand in the influence of Persian poetic

mysticism, rather than the other way around. However, as Richard Foltz argues, “the Islamization of Central Asia was a complex process which occurred on more than one level,” and it was the activities of Sufi shaykhs, “who took it upon themselves to spread Islam to the remotest areas.” Indeed, as ancient records have revealed, Muslim travelers and soldiers made their way into Central Asia and China as early as the seventh and eighth centuries—be it through trade or socio-political motives—bringing with them both cultural and religious influences that would in turn create a distinctive Chinese-Muslim ethnicity over time.⁷ It is clear that Persian and Chinese culture was duly impacted vis-à-vis overland interaction, but even so, what can be said about the prevalence of themes of wine and intoxication found in the poetry of individuals such as Li Bo and Khayyam?

Looking at the Tang dynasty of China, it is known that the large capital of Changan had a large foreign population; as Valerie Hanson writes:

Non-Chinese residents built religious institutions dedicated to the religions of their homelands. The Persian-speaking merchants continued to worship at two kinds of temples devoted to religions they brought with them from Iran. They sacrificed live animals at Zoroastrian fire altars, and they sang hymns about the forces of light triumphing over the forces of darkness at Manichaean temples.⁸

Perhaps it is within this environment that the consumption of wine as a ritualistic or mystical act was first introduced, as it was Iranian Zoroastrians who brought with them the “forbidden wine” that is markedly referenced in the lines of Omar Khayyam’s *The Rubaiyat*.⁹ While it is probable that conversion to Sasanian-influenced religiosity occurred in China in the seventh century, it is more likely that cosmopolitan centers along the Silk Road experienced an incorporation of religious practices that evolved with both Zoroastrianism and Buddhism as opposed to full conversion of one religion over the other. As Jerry Bentley points out, cross-cultural contacts did not necessarily indicate conversion—a word that “brings to mind an intense personal experience, a reorientation of the individual soul, a rejection of the old in favor of a new system of values”—but rather an absorption of foreign traditions by pre-modern cultures that included a cherry-picking of societal, political, or economic factors.¹⁰ Within this framework, historical records have indeed shown a stylistic influence of Zoroastrian fire temples upon architectural components of Buddhist structures.¹¹ However, cultural influence took many forms beyond evidence found in ancient structures; Chinese and Persian writing, for instance, not only suggest the confluence of religious custom but the transmission of specific concepts.

For poets such as Li Bo, who was “prodigious both as a writer and as a drinker” and an alleged follower of Daoism¹²—a spiritual belief that favored a simplistic, natural, and spontaneous enlightenment¹³—themes of intoxication converge with spiritual contemplation. Here, it can be inferred that references to wine in *Rising Drunk on a Spring Day, Telling My Intent* implies that alcohol and drunkenness represents a cognizant disconnect from the sober reality or present, thus allowing Li Bo to experience otherworldly sensations in a subconscious state (Li Bo also expresses this sentiment in *Drinking Alone By Moonlight*, stating “When still sober we share friendship and pleasure, then, utterly drunk, each goes his own way—”). To illustrate this point, Li Bo writes in *Rising Drunk on a Spring Day, Telling My Intent*:

We are lodged in this world as in a great dream,

Then why cause our lives so much stress?

This is my reason to spend the day drunk
and collapse, sprawled against the front pillar.

When I wake, I peer out in the yard
where a bird is singing among the flowers.¹⁴

It appears that in the first two stanzas that Li Bo is pulling upon Daoist principles of individual and naturalistic experiences in connection to the environment. Considering wine being a product of the earth, it is possible that drunkenness is viewed as a conduit for a natural state of being. Yet as he later wakes in what seems to be a pleasantly disoriented state of time and place, taking in his surroundings with spirited self-indulgence, he pours more wine with mild indifference, perhaps suggesting one's inability to distinguish between a conscious or sober pleasure and partiality to "drunken" oblivion.

Akin to Li Bo, Khayyam's *The Rubaiyat* exhibits noticeably similar existentialist themes. As Michael Axworthy states, his "philosophical writing largely revolved around questions of free will, determinism, existence, and essence," and although his work is often interpreted through a pious or mystical lens, it is nonetheless prudent for the reader to set apart Khayyam's voice as an individual and unique mode of expression.¹⁵ Nevertheless, parallels can be seen between Khayyam's use of transient and fixed sensations involving wine and those of Li Bo. For example, Khayyam writes in the following quatrains XLI and XLII:

Perplext no more with Human or Divine,
To-morrow's tangle to the winds resign,
And lose your fingers in the tresses of
The Cypress—slender Minister of Wine.

And if the Wine you drink, the Lip you press
End in what All begins and ends in—Yes;
Think then you are To-day what Yesterday
You were—To-morrow You shall not be less.¹⁶

Again, it seems as though Khayyam also employs wine—at least in a metaphorical sense—as a channel for an otherworldly experience and looking more closely at quatrain XLI, one can argue it echoes Li Bo's subjective questioning of the complexities of life and his subsequent rationale for drunkenness (or subconscious connection to the present) in *Rising Drunk on a Spring Day, Telling My Intent*. By the same token, quatrains LV and LVI of *The Rubaiyat* reads:

You know, my Friends, with what a brave Carouse
I made a Second Marriage in my house;
Divorced old barren Reason from my Bed
And took the Daughter of the Vine to Spouse.

For 'Is' and 'Is-not' though with Rule and Line
And 'Up' and 'Down' by Logic I define,
Of all that one should care to fathom,
Was never deep in anything but—Wine.¹⁷

Keeping these quatrains in mind, the latter stanzas of Li Bo's *Rising Drunk on a Spring Day, Telling My Intent* states:

I am so touched that I almost sigh,
I turn to the wine, pour myself more,

Then sing wildly, waiting for the moon,
when the tune is done, I no longer care.¹⁸

Taken at face value, one notices a striking resonance to Li Bo's conveyed triviality in Khayyam's words, specifically concerning the subject of worldly cares and wine. Yet if the reader is to believe that wine and drinking is a metaphor of a transcendent nature—representing themes of life, love, or mysticism for instance—the poem loses its literal meaning and instead takes on a quality of spiritual self-examination.

On the contrary, Iraqi's references to wine reveal both his eccentricity and draw to the Sufi *qalandar*, or "wild men," if not wholly giving the impression that his spirituality is but a hedonistic farce: "All fear of God, all self-denial I deny; bring wine, nothing but wine/For all sincerity I repent my worship which is but hypocrisy." However, one must again keep in mind that the drinking of alcohol is forbidden in Islam, thus rendering such a declaration ironic. Likewise, Hafez professes the same desire of self-indulgence as Li Bo and Khayyam, writing "Bring blood-red wine, and fill the cup again."¹⁹ Once more, the reader can detect the tongue-in-cheek nature of his words and conclude that the pleasures of wine likely signify common Sufi refrains of love, life, or the divine.

When considering the work of each poet in a broader historical context, it is conceivable that comparisons in content were fostered by unconventional philosophies of the period in which they originated, despite the glaring differences of chronology and location. Much like followers of Sufism who were often regarded as heretics for rejecting the obstinate rules of Muslim orthodoxy in favor of altruism as a path to spiritual enlightenment,²⁰ Li Bo's individualistic and ethereal imagery similarly reflected both the Daoist counter-culture to Confucianism and experimentation with mind-altering substances.²¹ Regardless of any poet's intended meaning, Li Bo, Khayyam, Iraqi, and Hafez all exhibit distinct yet comparable voices concerning the theme of wine, drinking, and the resulting sensation of intoxication. Whether or not interpretations of mysticism is a deliberate objective by these Chinese or Persian authors, it is unquestionably an issue for lengthy debate (especially when considering the lifestyles and personal beliefs of the individuals in question) and it is certainly worth considering that neither time nor space can rule out the possibility of universal concepts.

Notes

¹ Stephen Owen, "The Tang Dynasty," in *An Anthology of Chinese Literature: Beginnings to 1911* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1996), 397.

IMPLICATIONS OF MYSTIC INTOXICATION IN CHINESE AND IRANIAN POETRY

² Michael Axworthy, "Islam and Invasions: The Arabs, Turks, Mongols—The Iranian Reconquest of Islam, the Sufis, and the Poets," in *Empire of the Mind: A History of Iran* (New York: Basic Books, 2008), 85, 90, 107-09, 112.

³ Owen, "The Tang Dynasty," 400.

⁴ Jörn Rüsen, "Some Theoretical Approaches to Intercultural Comparative Historiography," *History and Theory* 35 (1996): 11.

⁵ Owen, "The Tang Dynasty," 397.

⁶ Axworthy, "Islam and Invasions," 105, 107, 112-13.

⁷ Richard Foltz, "Islamization of the Silk Road," in *Religions of the Silk Road: Overland Trade and Cultural Exchange from Antiquity to the Fifteenth Century* (New York: St. Martin's Griffin, 1999), 95-97, 106-07.

⁸ Valerie Hansen, "China's Golden Age (589-755)," in *The Open Empire: A History of China to 1600* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2000), 196, 205.

⁹ Axworthy, "Islam and Invasions," 93. See also: Omar Khayyam, "The Rubaiyat," Unpublished Manuscript, 6.

¹⁰ Jerry H. Bentley, "Cross-Cultural Contacts and Exchanges," in *Old World Encounters: Cross-Cultural Contacts and Exchanges in Pre-Modern Times* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 6-7.

¹¹ Richard Foltz, "Buddhism and the Silk Road," in *Religions of the Silk Road: Overland Trade and Cultural Exchange from Antiquity to the Fifteenth Century* (New York: St. Martin's Griffin, 1999), 57-58.

¹² William Theodore De Barry and Irene Bloom, comp., "Li Bo and Du Fu: Two Tang Poets in a Troubled World," in *Sources of Chinese Tradition: From Earliest Times to 1600*, Second ed., vol. 1 (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999), 565.

¹³ Foltz, "Buddhism and the Silk Road," 53.

¹⁴ Owen, "The Tang Dynasty," 403-04.

¹⁵ Axworthy, "Islam and Invasions," 92-93.

¹⁶ Omar Khayyam, "The Rubaiyat," 8.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 10.

¹⁸ Owen, "The Tang Dynasty," 404.

¹⁹ Axworthy, "Islam and Invasions," 107, 113.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 95.

²¹ Owen, "The Tang Dynasty," 400.