

# Seven Tang Chinese War Poems

Translated by Aaron Poochigian

## Under a Border-Fortress

Wang Changling (698-756)

Drink deep, horse, as we ford this autumn flood.

The water stings; wind flays us like a blade.

Sand stretches on and on; the sun is low;

far, far away, the shadows of Lingtao.

This bastion's many battles were the boast  
of all men's tongues, but that was in the past.

Glory has turned to granules and a shambles  
of scree and bleached bones half-hid under brambles.

## The Conscripts' Lament

Liu Zhongyong (8th Century)

For years and years now, hands on hilts and whips to hold  
a pass with a jade gate and river good as gold,  
we have been watching green graves turn snow-white then back  
to green again as Yellow River rings Mt. Black.

## Thinking of a Friend Lost in the Tibetan War

Zhang Ji (712-779)

You marched your troops into Tibet last year.  
Once nobody could see them from the towers,  
as much news traveled from your world to ours  
as from the dead realm to the live one here.

A staunch steed watching at a gutted tent?  
A tattered banner? There's no sign of you.  
I'd mourn you in a temple, if I knew,  
rather than vaguely weep toward where you went.

## A Flowering in Wartime

Tu Fu (712-770)

Rivers and mountains, when a State is falling,  
abide. The Capital is lush with Spring.

Blossoms well up like tears, and those birds calling  
voice our goodbyes: it's sorrow that they sing.

The nights are long; watchfires burn on and on.  
Mail costs as much as gold—extortionate.

Worry has stripped my hair into so thin  
a whiteness I can't keep a pin in it.

## Night in the Watchtower

Tu Fu (712-770)

Daylight is stunted now; the year just won't stop going round.  
Snowfall and hoarfrost glaze the dark hours, and we, frigid, shiver.  
Fifth watch sends out a challenge, drum and trumpet: jagged sound.  
Over the three Great Mountains throb the stars of Heaven's River.

Wives have been wailing in the distance ever since we lost.  
The woodcutters and anglers out at dawn are not Chinese.  
Warhorse and Sleeping Dragon, once our generals, now are dust.  
Please, tumult of the world, be quiet for a moment.

Please.

## Border Songs

Li Lun (739-799)

### I.

Gilt arrows fletched with feathers from a hawk.  
Silk pennant tapered like a swallow's tail.  
When he ascends and spurs them, without fail  
bivouacked thousands shout allegiance back.

### II.

Gusts tousling the grass; the forest, black;  
the general shoots his bow to hone his craft.  
He finds the head of his befeathered shaft  
stuck under dawn light in a chunk of rock.

### III.

Wildgeese aloft beneath a muted moon;  
the Tartar chieftains flee into the night.  
We horsemen chase them. Our provisions light,  
snow weighs our lifted swords and longbows down.

### IV.

Time for the camp to feast! Time for a bender!  
Let trumpets tell the whole world we have won!  
Let's all dance drunk with golden armor on  
as hills and creeks respeak our drums and thunder!

## Hearing a Flute at Night from the Wall of Shouxiang

Li Yi (746-827)

The sand that rings the base of Bagong Mountain gleams like snow;  
the moonlight gleams like frost beyond the wall that rings the city;  
and someone with a flute somewhere keeps fingering a ditty  
that makes the weary sentries gaze toward home the whole night through.

**Aaron Poochigian** earned a PhD in Classics from the University of Minnesota and an MFA in Poetry from Columbia University. His latest poetry collection, *American Divine*, the winner of the Richard Wilbur Award, came out in 2021. He has published numerous translations with Penguin Classics and W.W. Norton. His work has appeared in such publications such as *Best American Poetry*, *The Paris Review*, and *POETRY*.