

tales of yore

# Three of the greatest Tang poets

Poetry has been a part of China's culture since the beginning. Through times of wealth and poverty, war and peace, poets from all walks of life added their thoughts and ideas to the nation's heritage, writes **Sarah Brennan**

playful, fantastical nature of his poems which reflect his beloved Taoism. He influenced writers from East to West, and a crater on the planet Mercury is named after him.



Illustration: Sarene Chan

**Du Fu (721-770AD) – Confucian scholar, failed civil servant, and arguably China's greatest poet**

Du Fu, born in 721, led a life filled with misfortune. His mother and brother died when he was young and, while he had a classical Confucian education, he failed the civil service exams twice. At last in 755, he received a minor posting in the Crown Prince's palace. But before he had even started work, the An Lushan Rebellion broke out.

Du was captured by rebels, escaped, and from then on led an unsettled life in poor health. He moved many times due to famine and poverty, dying at the age of 48.

But it was his unhappiness that made him a great poet. He wrote about the suffering around him, the Tang regime, and the war. He was faithful to his Confucian ideals throughout, and never for a moment forgot his king.

While he never achieved fame in his lifetime, after his death Du was recognised as a great master, with an extraordinary range of styles. His work has deeply influenced Chinese and Japanese poetry since, and he is widely regarded as China's greatest poet.

**Sarah Brennan is the author of the best-selling Chinese Calendar Tales and Dirty Story series. Check out [www.sarah-brennan.com](http://www.sarah-brennan.com)**

**T**he Tang Dynasty was a golden era in China: cultural exchange flourished along the Silk Road, and the capital Chang'an was a wealthy, cosmopolitan city where the arts, especially poetry, blossomed.

But of all the poets of the Tang Dynasty, Wang Wei, Li Bai and Du Fu were the greatest, each reflecting one of the "Three Teachings": Buddhism, Taoism and Confucianism.

**Wang Wei (701-761AD): Buddhist, statesman, poet, artist and musician**

Wang Wei was born into a wealthy, noble family, and passed the civil service exams with distinction. His first job as Court musician ended in demotion, when he breached etiquette by taking part in a lion dance. But by 728, he was rising through the civil service, earning

enough to build a beautiful Buddhist retreat in the Zhongnian mountains.

In 755, he was captured by rebels during the An Lushan Rebellion, and was forced to accept an official title from them. When the Tang government returned, this official position led to Wang's arrest as a traitor. Fortunately during captivity he had written poems critical of the rebels, which secured his pardon. Finally he regained his position in the Court, rising rapidly until, by the time of his death in 761, he had become deputy prime minister.

Wang's style of painting led to the founding of the Southern School of Landscape Art. He was also renowned for his simple, Buddhist-

**Chang'an was a wealthy city where the arts, especially poetry, blossomed**

influenced poems about nature. As a Song Dynasty poet said: "Read his poems closely and there are paintings in the words. Look at his paintings closely and there are poems in the paintings."

**Li Bai (701 – 762AD): Taoist, eccentric, nomad and wine-lover**  
Li Bai, born the same year as Wang, was a romantic, unconventional outsider – very different from Wang. His father was a Silk Road merchant and his mother was from Turkey.

He spent his youth reading the classics, taming wild birds, sword-fighting and studying Taoism. Then he began travelling around China, giving away his money, making influential friends and drinking a great deal of wine, while writing long, passionate poems about nature, solitude, friendship, and ... wine!

When he arrived in Chang'an, the Emperor was so impressed that he

personally seasoned his soup, and gave him a post at the famous Hanlin Academy. But, drunk as usual, Li insulted a powerful member of court, preventing his further advancement. Li resumed his travels, and in 762, was at last granted the official post he craved. Sadly he never knew: by the time the news reached him, he had drowned in a lake, while reaching for a reflection of the moon.

Li is regarded as one of China's greatest poets, renowned for the

**More** on [yp.scmp.com](http://yp.scmp.com)

etiquette (n)  
禮儀

rebels (n)  
叛軍

captivity (n)  
囚禁

pardon (n)  
赦免

solitude (n)  
孤單

regime (n)  
政權

