

Spending Time on Poetry: The Poetics of Taking Pains

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It was probably in 1796, at the age of fifty by traditional Chinese reckoning, that the Cantonese poet Li Jian 黎簡 (1747-1799) composed a regulated verse in the five-syllable line entitled “Painstaking Composition,” *Kuyin* 苦吟.

巷廬都逼仄,	Lanes and cottages all push on one another,
雲日代晴陰.	sun and clouds alternate shadow and light.
雨過青春暝,	A rain passes, green spring darkens,
庭涼綠意深.	the yard is cool, the sense of green is deep.
病從衣帶眼,	Illness progresses with the holes in my belt,
老迫著書心.	old age presses on my desire to write.
燈火籬花影,	Lamp-fire, shadows of flowers in the hedge,
玲瓏照苦吟.	a tracery shining on painstaking composition.

The poem itself embodies the very qualities associated with the theme. In the following discussion we will try to unpack the weight of history behind this poem—not simply the poem’s obvious indebtedness to earlier poetry, but the history of values embedded in the poem and its topic. This is a poem on composing poetry, specifically *kuyin* 苦吟, which is literally “bitter chanting,” but which by Li Jian’s time had long come to mean “painstaking composition,” as the poem’s title is translated. We will first consider Li Jian’s poem in its own right, then discuss some of the issues around expenditures of time and effort in composition, and finally take up the history of the word *kuyin*, whose metamorphoses are an essential part of the history of the formation of the values in this poem.

Like so many other eighteenth century literary figures, Li Jian was essentially a “professional” artist and man of letters, though in genteel circles such professionalism was covered by a thin veneer of “gifts” and appointments. Li Jian’s grandfather had been a student in the Imperial Academy and eaten the public grain, but his father was a rice merchant. Li Jian himself chose to pursue neither a public career nor the family rice business. Li Jian chose to be a “poet,” an artist, and eccentric, known as “mad Li.” In his youth Li Jian once made an excursion to neighboring provinces; but he soon returned to Guangdong, where he became famous for “never setting foot beyond the Southern Alps.” In his role as “mad Li” he achieved considerable fame in the complex network of regional

poetic circles in the second half of the eighteenth century, a network largely maintained by traveling officials who acquainted themselves with talented local writers and spread word of their virtues. Li Jian was also known as a calligrapher and a painter, skills that also could be converted into a livelihood through direct sales, as well as by “gift” exchanges. His fame as a talented eccentric brought him the teaching posts, the writing commissions, and the sales of his artifacts that supported him and his family. It is important to keep in mind that this is how he made his living—though to be thought of as purely “professional” would have compromised the very reputation that supported him. Resolving this contradiction lies at the heart of “spending time” on poetry.

It would be unnecessarily churlish to read the poem above as a mere advertisement of the poet’s devotion to the craft by which he made his living; at the same time, however, we should recognize how the image of the poet given here supports the image of the poet as a quasi-professional. Other, wealthier poets may enjoy leisure and write poems casually in such leisure; Li Jian, however, here seems to “spend” his leisure in composition or in observations that lead to composition. What might seem like simple “leisure” to others is, for Li Jian, serious, devoted “work.”

The poem does not say explicitly that Li Jian spent the entire day in “painstaking composition”—though we are free to read the last line as “still engaged in painstaking composition.” The poem does, however, clearly mark an interval: the course of a day, with its changing weather, into night. He notes the daytime changes of shadow and light (which as *guangyin* 光陰 simply mean “passing time”), which at night become the effect of artificial lamplight, shining through the hedge as a “tracery” (*linglong* 玲瓏), in which the variation of shadow and light is represented not as a temporal process but in a single moment. The end of the poem is rich with associations; for example, the candle or lamp lit at night as a figure of “continuing” the day into night (何不秉燭遊), with the present case not being the continuation of ordinary convivial pleasures but continuing composition. Moreover, *linglong*, placed in the first two positions of the last line, could not but evoke Li Bai’s famous “Resentment on the Stairs of Jade” (玉階怨) in which the woman pulls down the crystal curtains and, in the final line, “through the tracery gazes at the autumn moon” 玲瓏望秋月. The echo foregrounds the difference here, with the poet not gazing out at the moon, but illuminated by lamplight in the process of composing a poem.

We should never forget that the title of the poem is “painstaking composition”: that is the context in which we read all the lines, as they move from change to stasis, a final snapshot of a compositional process that is still ongoing: the poem is terminated in the representation of its continuation. *Kuyin* is fundamentally aural, and from a poem that is entirely visual, we move at last to light shining on a sound, with the poet as the invisible intermediary presence. Or if we presume that the poet is writing, we have an even stranger and more wonderful image of the “tracery” of darkness and light superimposed upon the black characters on the white sheet of paper.

Any contemporary reader would recognize that the *taxis* (*zhangfa* 章法) of this poem comes from Du Fu, a poet also fascinated by the play of shadow and light. Du Fu’s presence is particularly clear in the third couplet, which moves away from the immediate scene to place his life in the context of the present. The poet is literally wasting away from illness, the holes of his belt being gradually notched tighter and tighter. Again, the title

gives us a context: the poet is not only “spending time,” he is also spending his physical self. The matching line is stranger still: “old age presses on the desire to write.” “Presses on,” *po* 迫, is compulsion: he has to write, and his compulsion is self-conscious.¹ We have here an obvious overlay between the passing time of the day and of his life, and spending time on writing, with the final line then freezing that trajectory toward death in an image of continuing composition. We will return to that figure of compulsion in composition, in a famous quatrain attributed to Jia Dao: the compulsion is clearly to produce perfect lines, in this case, before death stops his efforts. But the very poetic lines produced in this process are a self-reflective shining on the poet “taking pains” in composing a poem.

The poet who is so passionately devoted to composing poetry that he spends his time on poetry and spends his life on poetry is the secret double of the professional poet, who must be supported in his efforts, or he will waste away in a very practical sense. Figures of expenditure are everywhere. And expenditure seeks a return on investment.

Time and Effort

Chinese poems are generally short; and, in comparison with metrical strictures in many other poetic traditions, they present few serious formal challenges. From this fact follows a simple, yet interesting question: how much time and effort is required to compose a lyric. “Time” and “effort” are distinct, but related components of the question, whose extreme answers are “quickly and easily” or “slowly and requiring effort.”

To pose this first as a purely formal opposition is useful because different and changing values and meanings aggregate around the opposed terms “fast” and “slow.” The tradition of Chinese literary thought clearly favored speed and ease of composition, though that virtue was variously explained: the poet’s speed might show his “talent,” *cai* 才, the ability to answer an occasion “swift as an echo”; speed might be the consequence of spontaneity, revealing the inner person; speed might also be a consequence of the “aid of the god,” *shen zhu* 神助, a cooperative version of the “inspiration” that Ion claimed; and last but not least, in a variation particularly favored in the Chinese tradition, speed of composition might follow from a more extended period of reflection or study—a rhythm of “first slow, then fast” that always makes the perfected product follow from the “fast” phase.

All the explanations of speed and ease of composition presume that the poet capable of such composition is exceptional; that is, the virtues of speed and ease are articulated against an imagined majority who write ploddingly and with painful effort. “Fast” composition may represent many positive values; but when fast composition is valued, slow composition always represents a dullness and lack of talent. Here, however, I would like to take up a few texts that affirm the opposite value, the virtues of spending time and effort on composition. In these texts talent is demonstrated precisely through the expenditure of time.

¹ And if there is a particular Du Fu poem in the background here, it would be *Lüye shuhuai* 旅夜書懷, with its line “How will my name be known from my writings?” 名豈文章著.

An expenditure of time and effort was an unambiguously positive value in longer and more learned genres such as *fu* 賦 in the pre-Tang period; it was not the dominant value, but it existed on equal footing with swift composition. Lyric poetry (*shi* 詩), however, was dominated by the dynamics of “stirring and response” (*ganying* 感應), where the potential interval of labor and reflection between “stirring” and “response” (or revision following the initial “response”) were not topics of critical attention until the eighth century.² Particularly in the ninth century we begin to see the literary “intentionality” that is familiar in the European tradition: the earlier poet might have wanted to express his sorrow at parting from a friend through the medium of a poem; in the ninth century we begin to see poets claiming that their intention is to compose a poem. In this changed sense of the poetic enterprise, now a vocation, the interval of composition may be foregrounded.

Working on poetry is closely related to the transformation of the term *kuyin* 苦吟, the “bitter chanting” that gave its title to Li Jian’s poem and which came to mean “painstaking composition” in the 820’s and 830’s. It is a nice case in the history of semantics, how a phrase used only occasionally in earlier periods and with a latitude of reference that included the shrilling of cicadas in a very short historical span turned into a very popular term for poetic composition. The “bitterness,” *ku* 苦, in the compound had long been associated with hard effort. *Kuyin* certainly implies an intensity of care in composition, but, in its ninth century context, it did not in itself refer an expenditure of time. The possibility of spending a significant interval, however, was welcomed by the term, and perfectly embodied in a quatrain dubiously attributed to Jia Dao (31864):³

二句三年得,	In three years I got two lines,
一吟雙淚流。	I chant them once, a pair of tears flows.
知音如不賞,	If the connoisseur does not appreciate them,
歸臥故山秋。	I will go back to rest in the autumn of the mountains of home.

We see here something like an economic claim of an investment of time and effort, in which the play on numbers (two lines = three years) is turned into something like a bill to be presented to the connoisseur (*zhiyin*, “the one who knows the tone”). The aesthetic promise here is of concentrating much into little, “much time” implying “much significance” and “much care.” One recitation brings out tears in both eyes: on a simple level, of course, this is simply that he wept (if the lines brought tears to only one eye, it would be very strange indeed), but the play on number suggests that the concentration into something small produces more in reading or use. As we will see, the quatrain poses a question that was central to the investment of time and effort: does time and effort make better poetry? And, more significantly, does one appreciate the quality of the final product in its own right or the effort expended to produce the final text?

² See Stephen Owen, *The End of the Chinese Middle Ages: Essays in Mid-Tang Literary Culture* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1996), pp. 107-129.

³ The quatrain first appears in Wei Tai’s 魏泰 (fl. 1105) *Lin Han yinju shihua* 臨漢隱居詩話 (*Song shihua quanbian*, p. 1214). The numbers used for Tang poetry are those given in Hiraoka Takeo, et al. *Tōdai no shihen* 唐代の詩篇. Tang Civilization Reference Series 11-12. Kyoto: Institute for Humanistic Studies, 1964-65.

Before addressing these issues, we might consider the couplet to which the apocryphal quatrain is attached, the couplet whose labor inspired the quatrain. The couplet is not at all a lachrymose one:

獨行潭底影, Alone I walked a reflection in the pool,
數息樹邊身. often rested the body beside the trees.

Why then should the poet weep in chanting these lines? The weight of the term *kuyin* may be the answer: as in the changed meaning of the term itself, the “bitterness” has been dissociated from both the poetic topic and the mood of the poet responding to the topic and has been transferred to the quality of the poetic effort to represent the topic. This parallels exactly the transformation of poetic “intention” from expressing a mood or circumstance to composing a poem. The poet’s tears on chanting the lines can be only aesthetic tears, for the perfection of lines and the cost of such perfection. Likewise, the connoisseur (*zhiyin*) does not respond to the mood that initially occasioned the lines but to the triumph of poetic phrasing. The “bitterness” (*ku* 苦) does not belong to the scene represented nor to the mood of the occasioning moment, but to the compositional history of effort immanent in the lines.

Obviously, the investment of effort is a troubled one: the connoisseur may not appreciate the effort—that is presented in the quatrain as yet undecided. And yet, if one may extend the mercantile metaphor into the aesthetic, value here very much needs a “buyer,” someone who appreciates. In poems composed under the opposite value system—the person who composes instantly through talent, strong feeling, or the aid of the god—the need for appreciation is rarely as explicit an issue as it is here. The persona of Jia Dao in the anecdote needs someone to see and appreciate the three years that went into the two lines. Jia Dao is, in effect, advertising. And if there is no one who can appreciate, who can see that value, then the enterprise is worthless, and the poet will go home to rest in retirement—an interesting parallel to the “rest” in the couplet that supposedly inspired the quatrain.

Let us return to the question posed earlier. Does the investment of time and effort produce a better poem? The apparently easy answer is: “yes.” We have a calculus of revision moving toward perfection, best embodied in the famous apothegm attributed to Michelangelo: “perfection is achieved through a series of disgusts.”

Scholars often trace the motif of poetic revision back to Du Fu, who wrote of revising his poems on several occasions. In the Song, however, we have a developed discourse of revising poems:

詩最難事也。吾於他文不至蹇澀，惟作詩甚苦。悲吟累日，僅能成篇，初讀時未見可羞處，姑置之；明日取讀，瑕疵百出，輒復悲吟累日，反復改正，比之前時，稍稍有加焉；復數日取出讀之，疵病復出；凡如此數四，方敢示人，然終不能奇。李賀母責賀曰：是兒必欲嘔出心乃已。非過論也。今之君子，動輒千百言，略不經意，真可責哉。

Poetry is absolutely the hardest thing there is. In other kinds of writing, I never am brought to such difficulty in making progress; only writing poetry is extremely painful. I will chant with a sad intensity for days on end, and only then can I complete

a piece. When I first read it and don't see anything embarrassing, I put it down for a while. But the next day when I pick it up and read it out, all kinds of flaws and imperfections appear. Then I chant it again with a sad intensity for days on end, reflect on it repeatedly and fix it—and compared to what it had been previously, there is some slight improvement. Then again after several days, I pick it up and read it out, and again flaws and errors appear. Generally, only after repeating this process a number of times do I dare show it to people, and nevertheless it is nothing I can consider remarkable in the long run. Li He's mother criticized Li He, saying: "This boy will stop only after spitting out his heart." The claim here is not excessive. Gentlemen of these present times will immediately dash off thousands of words with hardly any thought at all—this is really worth criticizing.

Tang Zixi yulu 唐子西語錄, cited in *Shiren yuxie* 詩人玉屑⁴

This is one possible answer to the question of why Jia Dao supposedly spent three years on a couplet. But in this Song version we do not reach the level of faith in perfection that we see in the lines attributed to Jia Dao. Tang Zixi reaches only the stage at which the lines can be shown to others without embarrassment, a level of poetry far short of the tearful appreciation of one's own achievement that can challenge others to recognize what has been done.

Tang Zixi does not think of himself as a genius. His final claim is that hard work and a capacity to be critical of his own work raises him above the careless worst. It is not a strong claim for spending time on poetry—though it condemns an implied majority who write quickly and easily (a nice inversion of the value reposed in speed of composition). In some ways this is the easy reading of the pseudo-Jia Dao quatrain: spending time on composition makes a better poem.

The more interesting claim would be that the expenditure of time and effort on poetry is a value in itself, quite apart from the perceptible perfection of the product. Here we need to call to mind "labor-value" in our own age, when a hand-woven textile will always be more expensive than a machine-woven textile. If we grant value to the hand-woven textile, it is not because it is in some objective sense "better made" than the machine-woven textile (machine-made rugs now duplicate the "abrash," the gradation of colors in a rug made of naturally dyed wool and indeed can reproduce any discernable quality in the hand-made product); we grant value to human "time and effort" in its own right and to individual human skill. Moreover, our aesthetic values adjust themselves to account for the labor value invested in the product; we look for what distinguishes the product of human effort from the machine-made product, and we grant greater aesthetic value to whatever quality marks the product with the trace of human effort; that is, we see the laboriously hand-woven textile "as" more beautiful.⁵ I want to pause on two points here: value for the consumer has left the objective qualities of the product and is discovered through the effort

⁴ This passage is not in the standard collection of *Tang Zixi wenlu* 唐子西文錄 in *Lidai shihua*.

⁵ These comments may seem troubling to some. Kant is quite correct that we experience aesthetic values as immanent in the object and ahistorical. Any investigation of the history of aesthetic judgments, however, shows us that aesthetic values are indeed historical. And further investigation shows that, when aesthetic values are shared by a community, there is a high correlation between aesthetic and commercial value. We cannot decide which of the two comes first.

invested in the product, transferred to an aesthetic value immanent in the product; second, aesthetic value *is* commercial value. Market value, labor value, and aesthetic value are intertwined in interesting ways.

This brings us to a lyricist who was very much on the precarious margin of being a professional, Jiang Kui. Song lyrics, *ci*, are indeed formally more difficult than *shi*—but they are not really all that difficult.

紹熙辛亥除夕，余別石湖歸吳興，雪後夜過垂虹嘗賦詩云：笠澤茫茫雁影微，玉峰重疊護雲衣。長橋寂寞春寒夜，只有詩人一舸歸。後五年冬，復與俞商卿、張平甫、銛朴翁自封禺同載詣梁溪，道經吳松，山寒天迴，雲浪四合，中夕相呼步垂虹，星斗下垂，錯雜漁火，朔吹凜凜，卮酒不能支。朴翁以衾自纏，猶相與行吟。因賦此闕，蓋過旬塗稿乃定，朴翁咎予無益，然意所耽不能自己也。平甫、商卿、朴翁皆工於詩，所出奇詭。予亦強追逐之。此行既歸，各得五十餘解。

On New Year's Eve of the year *xinhai* in the Shaoxi Reign (1191), I left Stone Lake to return to Wuxing. One night, after a snowfall, I passed Hanging Rainbow Bridge and composed a poem that went:

Fisherhat Wetlands stretch far and wide, the outlines of wild geese, faint
jade peaks receding in layers, guarded by robes of cloud.
The long bridge lies in stillness on this cold night of spring,
where there is only the poet going home in his single boat.

Five years later, in wintertime, I was going from Fengyu to Liang Creek, together with Yu Shangqing, Zhang Pingfu, and the monk Yixian Puweng; our route passed through Wusong. The mountains were cold and the heavens, remote, with clouds and waves merging around us on all sides. At midnight we called out to each other to go walk across Hanging Rainbow Bridge. The stars hung low, mixed with fires on the boats of fishermen; we shivered in gusts of the north wind, against which our goblets of ale did no good. Puweng wrapped himself up in a blanket, and we continued to walk along together chanting. It was then that I composed this lyric, but the final draft was completed only after ten days. Puweng chided me for this, complaining that I had added nothing to it; nevertheless, my fancy was caught up in this and I couldn't stop myself. Pingfu, Shangqing, and Puweng are all skilled in poetry, and what they produced was remarkable and beguiling. I also did my best to keep up with them. When we got back from this excursion, each of us had had done more than fifty quatrains.

Jiang Kui, Preface to *Qingong chun* 慶宮春 ⁶

There is an “exchange rate” between genres that implicitly defines the relative “labor-value” invested in poetry (*shi*) and song lyric (*ci*). One song lyric is composed to more than fifty quatrains by each person present. The quatrains are *de* 得, literally “gotten,”

⁶ See also Lin Shuen-fu's discussion in *The Transformation of the Chinese Lyrical Tradition* (Princeton, 1978), pp. 146-48.

as if to say that they were finished with the moment of composition; the song lyric, however, comes as only a first draft, to be worked at over a span of ten days to produce the final draft. It grows out of the moment, but it is not a thing of the moment (and, like the preface, spans the longer interval of visiting and revisiting).

Puweng comments that the time and effort invested in revising the lyric “added” nothing to it. The term for “addition,” *yi* 益, is also an economic term (“benefit”), a value added in processing raw material. Including this comment in the preface is an interesting move in that it opens a space for Jiang Kui to declare that the investment of time and effort was purely the passion of the craftsman, given without expectation of gain, rather than a mere artisanship that presumes the product improved by the time and effort invested in it. This is a troubled but interesting move: the poetic object gains value by the capital investment of energy, without itself being improved by the investment. The imperfect counterpart is that of a stock, which changes in value by a collective willingness to invest “value” in it, without any simple correlation between stock-value and an objective assessment of the value of the stock-issuing corporation.

Such a claim of added value that exists independent of qualities that can be critically discerned in the product is particularly appropriate for Jiang Kui, who lived as a client of the wealthy, returning their favors in the currency of song. An exchange economy appears often in his prefaces, as when he writes a *Manjiang hong* 滿江紅 to the goddess, the “Old Lady of the Lake” 仙姥, and gets a favorable breeze in return; or in the famous preface to “Fragrance from Somewhere Unseen” (*Anxiang* 暗香) and “Sparse Shadows” (*Shuying* 疏影) he pays Fan Chengda for a month’s room and board with two songs: “In the winter of *xinhai* (1191) I went in the snow to Stone Lake [Fan Chengda’s residence]; after I had stayed there a month, he handed me paper and wanted verse, seeking new songs.” In the second case, it is hard not to see the image of presenting a bill, when Fan Chengda hands him the blank paper, on which the lyricist is required to write “new songs.”⁷

Putting Jiang Kui’s prefatory anecdotes about occasions for composition of song lyrics together, we see a clear economy. Sometimes (as in *Manjiang hong* 滿江紅) he claims to compose quickly (though after long reflection on the technical problems in composing such a lyric); sometimes he is silent on the interval of composition; sometimes the lyric is clearly an investment of time and effort. But generally, the lyric is presented as having an exchange value, in contrast to the fifty quatrains (*shi*) that can be dashed off in an evening’s outing. And in the preface above we see that value as coming from time and effort, time and effort purified of the suspicion of mere artisanship that attends it: it is the craftsman’s passion, time and effort invested for its own sake. He is neither one of the pure literati who expresses himself spontaneously, nor is he an artisan who spends time to perfect his product; the position that Jiang Kui stakes out for himself here is “art for the sake of art” in a radical form.

⁷ We see a prior version of the song lyric used in the commercial exchange of services when a courtesan demands a lyric from Liu Yong before going to bed with him. And many of Liu Yong’s song lyrics are true “advertising” for particular courtesans.

Kuyin

We move farther back in time. There is an economy at work in “spending time” on composition, but that economy developed slowly in its early stages, developed over the course of the ninth century. We can see its growth in the term *kuyin*, which gave Li Jian’s eighteenth-century poem its title. Sometimes we must translate *kuyin* literally as “bitter chanting,” but in the intermediary stages in the ninth century we should keep in mind how the term is transforming into “painstaking composition.”⁸ The history of this term is a fine example of semantic evolution and how, when a phrase acquires a new popular sense—in this case chanting in the process of composition and revision—it is transformed within a matrix of changing values around poetry. And through the change in the meaning of the phrase, we can see larger values changing.

One of the earliest usages of the term *kuyin* is the early eighth-century writer Guo Zhen’s 郭震 quatrain on the “Cricket” 蝈 (03845):⁹

愁殺離家未達人	You terribly sadden one parted from home and not yet made it there,
一聲聲到枕前聞	each and every note is heard reaching his pillow.
苦吟莫向朱門裏	Don’t take your bitter chanting into vermilion gates:
滿耳笙歌不聽君	pipes and singing fill their ears, they will not heed you.

The rareness with which this term is used in eighth-century poetry tells us that this is not yet a set term; and while the cricket’s *kuyin* (here translated as “bitter chanting”) obviously becomes the double of the human, who has been excluded from the households of the rich, the “bitterness” is the quality of his experience, immanent in the sound of the voice of both the insect and the poet. The sound of crickets and cicadas never entirely left *kuyin* (31059), and Meng Jiao 孟郊 (751-814), the poet who gave the term its first memorable sense would later have his poetry compared to a “cold cicada’s cry.”

When *kuyin* becomes associated with Meng Jiao and the composition of poetry in the last decade of the eighth century, the “bitterness” is the quality of the poet’s feelings, immanent in the sound and words of what the poet chants. In “Master Meng” 孟生詩 (17929) from the 790’s Han Yu 韓愈 praises Meng, whose talents are unappreciated and who suffers from his rejection. Han Yu celebrates the affective power of that suffering:

清宵靜相對	In the clear night I face you calmly,
髮白聆苦吟	hair turns white, listening to your bitter chanting.

⁸ The *ku* 苦, “bitterness,” in the term annexes the old sense of *ku* in *kuxin* 苦心, “hard effort,” as when Du Mu writes “I take pains in writing poems” 某苦心為詩. *Fanchuan wenji*, p. 242.

⁹ Tang poems are referred to by their number in *Todai no shihen* 唐代の詩篇, compiled by Hiraoka Takeo 平岡武夫, *et al.*, Tang Civilization Reference Series 11-12; Institute for Humanistic Studies. Kyoto, 1964-65.

Although the relative dating of the two poems is uncertain, Han Yu's use of *kuyin* may well come from one of Meng Jiao's most striking poems on failing the examination for *jinshi*: "Stirred By Night Expressing Myself" 夜感自遣 (19722):

夜學曉未休	I study by night, by dawn not yet ceasing,
苦吟神鬼愁	at my bitter chanting ghosts and gods grieve.
如何不自閑	How come I do not feel at leisure?—
心與身為仇	the mind and the body are enemies.
死辱片時痛	To die in humiliation is a moment's pain;
生辱長年羞	to live in humiliation is shame for long years.
青桂無直枝	The green cassia has no branch that is straight:
碧江思舊游	I long for former travels on the sapphire river.

As in much Chinese poetry, there are fundamental indeterminacies here: we do not know if the *kuyin*, "bitter chanting," is his study itself or his poetic response to studying all night; we do not know if the "study" is practice composing poetry (required in the examination for *jinshi*, in which case "study" might be the "bitter chanting") or some other kind of study of early texts, whose recitation might also be bitter chanting. We also do not know whether the "bitterness" follows the experience of failing the examination (clearly suggested in the second half of the poem) or comes from the effort of study. These uncertainties, however, follow from our desire to avoid anachronism: to the ninth century writer, for whom Meng Jiao was one perfect image of the obsessed poet, *kuyin* would be working hard at composing his own poems. Gradually the focus on his commitment to poetry would outweigh any sense of his humiliation at failure in the public sphere.

Early in the ninth century *kuyin* retains a degree of latitude of use (for example, to describe the groaning of a man carrying a Taihu rock, 26657), but it has become primarily associated with the recitation of poetry. It is a distinctly aural term, as when Zhu Qingyu 朱慶餘 (*jinshi* 826) approaches Xiao Pass (望蕭關 27681) and worries about attracting the attention of marauding soldiers by the sound:¹⁰

暫來戎馬地	For a while I come to a place of warhorses,
不敢苦吟詩	and do not dare bitterly chant poetry.

Despite the insecurity of the occasion, the "bitterness" does not seem to come out of intense personal suffering. Rather the "bitterness" seems to be a property of the tone of recitation, a property which, as we will see, is quite noisy.

Phrases such as *kuyin* acquire associations from prior usage that are not implicit in the term itself and are shed only gradually. If Meng Jiao's *kuyin* was associated with studying through night until dawn, an absorption in poetry that keeps one awake would become another association, not only for Li Jian in 1796 but also for Zhu Qingyu almost a millennium earlier. Praising a young Licentiate Ma on parting (送馬秀才 27747), Zhu writes:

¹⁰ This poem is also attributed to Li Changfu 李昌符 (33159).

清貌不識睡 Your clear visage is unacquainted with sleep,
見來嘗苦吟 when I meet you, you have been chanting bitterly.

Somewhat more comically, the poet engaged in *kuyin* can be an irritation to his neighbors, as in Liu Deren's 劉得仁 "What Happened on a Summer Day" 夏日即事 (29824):

到曉改詩句 I revise lines of poems until it is dawn,
四鄰嫌苦吟 my neighbors detest my bitter chanting/painstaking composition.
中宵橫北斗 In the middle of night the Dipper stretches across the sky,
夏木隱棲禽 and summer trees hide roosting birds.
天地先秋肅 Heaven and Earth shrivel up before autumn,
軒窗映月深 railing and window are deep, catching the moonlight.
幽庭多此景 My secluded yard has many such scenes,
惟恐曙光侵 and I fear only morning light creeping in.

Here we have clearly crossed an important boundary in the meaning of *kuyin*: it has become a joy whose termination the poet begrudges. Rather than Meng Jiao's enmity between body and mind, this is an image of the poet who loves staying awake to work on his poetry and whose only anxiety is the coming of the dawn: *kuyin* has become a pleasurable absorption in composition. *Kuyin* is still very aural, though merely irritating the neighbors, rather than "ghosts and gods." We have a devotion to poetry as a craft, the only "bitterness" being the intensity of effort expended on the process of revision. Unfortunately, we cannot date Liu Deren with any precision (though it is probably no earlier than the 830s), but our word, *kuyin*, has clearly moved from personal experience to craft, and from pain to pleasure.

We should be exceedingly wary of precisions in dating Li Shangyin's poetry, but roughly datable poems confirm that as we move to the mid-ninth century, *kuyin* is shifting away from personal bitterness to a kind of "hard work" that accompanies attention to poetic craft. Li Shangyin's "West Creek" 西溪 (29139) offers an excellent example:

近郭西溪好, Close to the suburbs West Creek is fine,
誰堪共酒壺. who can join me over a jug of ale?
苦吟防柳憚, Taking such pains in poems, I can resist Liu Hui;¹¹
多淚怯楊朱. so many tears, I am frightened by Yang Zhu.¹²
野鶴隨君子, I follow the gentleman, the wild crane,
寒松揖大夫. I bow to the Grand Master, a wintry pine.¹³
天涯常病意, At world's edge I feel constantly ill,

¹¹ Liu Hui (465-517) was a Six Dynasties poet famous for his well-crafted lines.

¹² Yang Zhu wept at the crossroads because the way ("Way") was no longer clear and required decision.

¹³ This playfully refers to the pine that sheltered Qin Shihuang and which he subsequently made a Grand Master.

岑寂勝歡娛。

the pensive quiet is better than merriment.

Although this is not a poem brimming with good cheer, it affirms a quiet and resolute contentment that is far from Meng Jiao *kuyin* that made “ghosts and gods grieve.” *Kuyin* is specifically associated with the early sixth century poet Liu Hui was known for his finely crafted couplets and not for any personal “bitterness.” Yang Zhu sheds tears when he comes to a crossroad; this precedent for the tear-provoking uncertainties of “courses” in life is the counterpart of *kuyin*, an absorption in poetic craft.

The growing popularity of the term *kuyin* in the ninth century accompanies the increasing self-consciousness of the poet. Poems often represent the poet in the process of composing poetry, which we still find in Li Jian’s “Painstaking Composition.” Foregrounding the act of composition within a poem has a long history, but it is hard to read ninth-century poetry without recognizing that the image of the poet composing poetry had achieved a new importance. *Kuyin* can situate the poet as an aural presence in the scene, as in “Lodging Temporarily: Sent to a Friend” 寓居寄友人 (32423) by Liu Cang 劉滄 (*jinsshi* 854, late in his life):

雨餘虛館竹陰清	In the last of the rain in an empty inn the shade of bamboo is cool,
獨坐書窗軫旅情	I sit alone at my study window troubled by the sentiments of travel.
芳草衡門無馬跡	The barred gate with fragrant plants shows no tracks of horses,
古槐深巷有蟬聲	deep lanes with ancient sophora trees have the sounds of cicadas.
夕陽雲盡嵩峰出	Clouds in evening sunlight are gone, Mount Song’s peaks emerge,
遠岸煙消洛水平	mist melts away from the distant shore, the Luo’s waters are level.
今夜南原賞佳景	Tonight on the southern plain I will appreciate fine scenes:
月高風定苦吟生	when the moon is high and the wind settles, bitter chanting will emerge.

As in many other mid-ninth century poems using the term *kuyin*, there is not even a hint of serious distress here, much less the “bitterness” of Meng Jiao. The artful couplets of the poem, which themselves would be associated with *kuyin*, move toward a prospective nighttime *kuyin*, coming not from pain but from the “appreciation” of fine scenes in the moonlight. Indeed, he seems to imagine himself from something of a distance (or perhaps he and his friend, if we take the poem as an invitation), as an aural presence that emerges when the wind dies down.

Staying awake at night working on poems has the advantage of affirming the superior claim of the passion for poetry over sleep. This is indeed expending time on poetry, but the supplement of night composition cannot be to the exclusion of spending waking hours. The

passionate poet of the ninth century is always working on poetry, as in the first of a pair of quatrains, “Expressing My Mood” 遣興 (30294) by Zhao Gu 趙嘏 (born c. 806):

溪花入夏漸稀疏	Moving into summer flowers by the creek grow sparser bit by bit,
雨氣如秋麥熟初	the rainy weather is like autumn, when the wheat is just ripe.
終日苦吟人不曾	All day long taking pains on poems, no one understands,
海邊兄弟久無書	and from my brothers by the seaside for a long time no letters.

Although “no one understands,” the poet still engages in *kuyin*, “bitter chanting,” “taking pains on poems.” If we are to move to an economic model in which the labor expended deserves reward, then this is an essential moment. It is important—in order to avoid the charge of artisanship—that the effort be expended regardless of whether anyone understands (or even thinks there is some benefit in the effort); nevertheless, the poem advertises what is missing, and any appreciative person would surely understand the value of *kuyin*. *Kuyin* seeks recognition and recognition by someone whose capacity for understanding is superior to Liu Deren’s neighbors, who are merely irritated at the noisiness of the poet’s nighttime activities. Zhao Gu goes on despite the disregard of others, but without the hope of someone to understand the “idle” time expended in composition can be reduced to a merely silent idleness, as in Jia Dao’s “Autumn Evening” 秋暮 (31572):

默默空朝夕	In utter stillness I spend mornings and evenings for naught—
苦吟誰喜聞	who likes to hear my “bitter chanting?”

Han Yu obviously appreciated and acted as supportive patron for Meng Jiao’s “bitter chanting”; but the capacity to appreciate such a “bitter” flavor is not general.

For a century and a half before this period poets had been presenting poems to patrons in hopes of recognition. With the poets of *kuyin* such a quest for appreciation remains, but it has become largely depoliticized (even though, as we will see it can return to the political in a new flavor). We cannot rely on the authenticity of the Jia Dao quatrain cited earlier, but the following poem has a better textual pedigree.

賈島，戲贈友人 Jia Dao, Playfully Presented to a Friend

一日不作詩	One day I didn’t write poetry,
心源如廢井	my heart’s wellsprings were like a dried up well.
筆硯為轆轤	Brush and ink-stone were the well-pulley,
吟詠作縲紲	chanting served as the hempen rope.
朝來重汲引	With dawn I drew from it again,
依舊得清冷	as before I found what was clear and pure.

Xu Tang is equally unconcerned with world, but the proper object of the poet's affection is no longer "peace," but the bitter suffering of poetic composition ("Speaking What I Feel" 言懷 33371):

萬事不關心 The thousands of matters don't concern me,
終朝但苦吟 all morning long I only take pains composing poems.

The once explicitly painful *kuyin* has become the only pleasure left in life.

Through the course of the ninth century *kuyin* gradually became an absolute absorption in craft that involved the expenditure of time and energy. Such devotion was a vocation with strong and explicit parallels to the vocation of Buddhist monks. Monks, however, had an institution to support them; poets needed a patron. The support of monks supplied the donor with merit; the support of poets produced poems, poems that should be remarkable because of the time and energy invested in them. In this the poet has come to the very edge of professionalism.

Toward the end of the ninth century we can clearly see the emergence of this new "poet" in a piece by Du Xunhe 杜荀鶴 (846-904), "Respectfully Presented to Grand Master Li" 投李大夫 (38492):

自小僻於詩 I have been obsessed with poetry since childhood,
篇篇恨不奇 I hate if any piece is less than remarkable.
苦吟無暇日 I take pains in composing without a day of respite,
華髮有多時 my hair flecked with white for a very long time.
進取門難見 I work hard to advance, but the way through is hard to see;
升沈命未知 my fate, to rise or sink, is not yet known.
秋風夜來急 Last night the autumn wind blew hard,
還恐到京遲 yet I still fear it will be slow to get to the capital.

Here the obsessed poet is, at the same time, the quasi-professional obviously advertising his wares. Du Xunhe claims a continuous and absolute devotion to the craft that doesn't leave him any free time at all: what had been a leisure activity is now his "work." While we can trace that image of absorption in poetry back to Li Shangyin's "A Short Biography of Li He" 李賀小傳 (indeed Du's white hair mimics Li He's hair turning white in his twenties), here it given to us as an explicit claim rather than something to be inferred from behavior. More significant, it is a claim followed by a clear request for patronage in the second half of the poem: the poet seeks to advance, to be carried to the capital by some "wind" of recommendation.

The capacity to compose poetry was indeed part of the *jinshi* examination, but the successful candidate was supposed to spend the rest of his life deliberating state affairs, drafting edicts, or managing grain shipments and the local militia; he might be expected to write poetry on occasion, but the state was not feeding him to write poetry. If Grand Master Li decides to give Du Xunhe a sinecure, the man he will be supporting—so the poem claims—is someone who spends all his time writing poetry and is good for nothing else.

But the very fact that Du Xunhe can present that image of himself as a poet in a poem seeking preferment lets us know that this time and effort spent on poetry, undertaken as a personal obsession, might be worth something.

In some ways Du Xunhe's poem appears on a margin of cultural change. In the preceding half century there had been intelligent attacks on the literary examination as a means of political recruitment. Two truths were in collision: first, that many men brought into office for literary skills were often very bad officials; and second, that some of the most brilliant political figures of the Tang had entered service through the literary examination, their political skills untested until they were entrusted with serious public responsibility. Through various transformations this problem remained in the system of Chinese political recruitment throughout the imperial period.

Those transformations gradually excluded poetry from political qualification (despite attempted revivals). Yet, as in the case of our eighteenth-century Cantonese poet Li Jian, the passion for poetry, for *kuyin*, might be worth something and deserving support. Perhaps it was only an archaic cultural memory, yet the patron might feel he should spend money or his influence on the poet—for a product whose value was, at least in part, a function of the time and effort invested in it.