

# 十三

One step at a time  
the pieces connected  
I struggled sometimes  
and was often corrected  
and then I discovered  
much to my dismay  
I had spoken no English  
for an entire day



### Chapter 13 - Grinding an Iron Bar into a Needle

China's golden age for art and literature occurred over 1,000 years ago during the Tang Dynasty (618 – 907 CE). One form of literature which reached its zenith during that time was poetry. From the tens of thousands of poems written during the Tang Dynasty, an anthology of 300 poems was compiled in the mid-18<sup>th</sup> century called 唐詩三百首 Tángshī sānbǎi shǒu “300 Tang Dynasty Poems,” which Chinese school kids continue to memorize and recite to this day. Of those Tang Dynasty poems, several were written by one man from Sichuan by the name of 李白 Lǐ Bái. Many scholars believe he was actually born in Suyab (碎葉 Suì Yè) which is in present day Kyrgyzstan. When I first started reading Chinese literature in translation, I was immediately drawn to Li Bai. He loved his liquor and many people believed he wrote his best poetry when he was “in his cups”. He seemed to be much more fun-loving than many of his contemporaries – notably more than a man from Henan by the name of 杜甫 Dù Fǔ. Du Fu had a more serious outlook on life, and was not nearly as carefree as Li Bai. He was sometimes referred to as a poet saint (詩聖 shī shèng). They only really met a few times, but during those meetings, they forged a strong friendship. There are several poems in which each poet reflects the depth of their relationship.



I mention Li Bai because the idiom, “Grinding an iron bar into a needle” (磨杵成針 mó chǔ chéng zhēn) actually begins with Li Bai. When Li Bai was young, he was not a very diligent student. He was much more interested in watching birds fly and eating fruit he found on the ground, than he was in studying. One day on his way to school, he happened upon an old woman filing an iron bar. Curiosity got the better of him and he asked, “Old woman, what are you doing?” (Calling a person “old woman” or “old gentleman” in Chinese is a respectful way of addressing an elderly person.) The old woman responded. “I’m making a needle out of this iron bar.” To which Li Bai responded, “That’s going to take forever. Let me try.” Li Bai took up the file and filed hard for what seemed like a long time. Finally, he gave up. “I quit”, he said. To which the old lady responded, “That’s OK. I’m going to keep on filing, because I know that eventually this iron bar will become an excellent needle.” Li Bai never forgot the old lady’s words. Eventually he understood that his studies were like filing the iron bar. He became an accomplished scholar and one of the most famous poets of all time. Learning Chinese is not unlike “Grinding an iron bar into a needle.”

I can’t write about a poet and not include a poem. “Thoughts on a Quiet Night” 静夜思 Jìng yè sī was memorized by most Chinese of my generation if they were educated in Chinese schools. As a Confucian scholar, Li Bai spent many years on the road in the service of the emperor. When Li Bai wrote “Thoughts on a Quiet Night”, the mid-Autumn festival (the 15<sup>th</sup> day of the 8<sup>th</sup> month according to the Lunar calendar) was approaching and he was yearning to be home.

床前明月光 Chuáng qián míng yuè guāng

疑是地上霜 Yí shì dìshàng shuāng

举头望明月 Jǔtóu wàng míng yuè

低头思故乡 Dītóu sī gùxiāng

At the foot of my bed the moonlight is shining  
or is that frost on the ground?  
I raise my head and see the moon in the sky  
I lower my head and think of home

