

October 15, 1986 (Vol. 2, no. 6)

Dear Colleague:

Li Po of the T'ang dynasty wrote a poem entitled "Song of the Moon of O-mei Mountain." It contains the following lines:

Moon of O-mei Mountain, autumn's crescent,
your image on the P'ing-ch'iang River flowing:
by night I leave Green Valley for Three Gorges,
thinking of you unseen, descending to Yu-chou.

Burton Watson comments: "Beyond appreciating their concreteness, it is naturally difficult for a foreigner to assess the emotional effect which such place names may have for the Chinese reader, just as it would be difficult for someone not a native of the northeastern section of the United States to grasp the poignancy of a title such as The Happy Journey to Trenton and Camden." However, I think you will need to have had direct experience of Trenton and Camden to have these place names mean something for you. This is not the case in China. I doubt, for instance, that Li Po has ever been to O-mei Mountain. Yet he can use that place name and many others and be assured of an emotional response because certain places have managed to soak up, for historical and literary reasons, an enormous amount of meaning. All you have to do is to mention Wu Gorge, Hsiang-yang, Lo-yang, or Yu-chou to get the Chinese reader feel a palpitation of the heart. Think what an easy time Chinese poets have compared with those in America. On the other hand, the Chinese poets and writers enjoy this advantage only because their predecessors have labored over the centuries to build up these places so that they are more than centers of political and commercial activity. American poets have a long way to go before their posterity can benefit from their labor in such a way that when a neophyte poet carelessly throws in a Minneapolis or a Madison he can expect to get the reader's adrenalin up. (See Burton Watson, Chinese Lyricism, pp. 128-129).

In this country, the names of states have extraordinary evocative power. Americans may not know where places are, but to most of them California does not draw a blank but is, on the contrary, a whole world of things including sunshine, surf, and flakiness. Iowa, by contrast, is corn and small-town, a vacuous wholesomeness barely redeemed by the Creative Writers' Workshop. Wisconsin is a flavorful word; so why does the license plate seek to diminish its semantic potency by assigning it the single bland label of America's Dairyland?

Illinois is The Land of Lincoln. Which makes me wonder why so few American boys are named after this great hero of the nation. Is Abraham taboo? Are parents fearful that their son might be called "Honest Abe"? I also wonder about the paucity of given names in this land of individualists. There are hundreds of thousands of Beths and Joes. If you are in love with a Joe or a Beth, that quite ordinary name soiled by nonchalant use in the daily exchanges of the marketplace will have to be charged by you and you alone with the ecstasies of heaven. It seems unconscionable that the generic "Joe" should bear such a private tumult of feeling. In communal China, strange to say, given names are unique. In China, as the song goes, "You are the only one."

Best wishes,

Yu - Fu