

# Poetry 2012: The Written World



## Resources for Teachers

Country: China

Poet: Wang Wei

Poem: Living in the Hills

### *Contents*

1. About this Resource
2. 'Living in the Hills: Impromptu Verses'
3. The Poet & His Work (and His Translator)
4. Reading the Poem
5. Discussion: Urban & Rural
6. Research Activity: Translations
7. Creative Activity: Imitations
8. Further Reading & Weblinks

# About this Resource

Activities in this resource are aimed at pupils in upper secondary school (S4–S6).

## **Developing global citizens within Curriculum for Excellence**

These resources, featuring poems from around the world, can help realise certain key principles within this document, including

- *enabling learners to appreciate the values and opinions of others with particular reference to environments and cultures*
- *motivating learners to engage in local, national and global issues*
- *promoting the concept of shared humanity*
- *actively engaging [learners] in exploring a variety of traditions and cultures from around the world*

## **This resource**

- *helps pupils to develop an understanding of the complexities of language through the study of a range of texts*
- *provides learners with the opportunity to analyse and evaluate texts*
- *provides learners with the opportunity to create and produce texts*

from SQA's 'Key points for English'

[www.sqa.org.uk/sqa/45672.html](http://www.sqa.org.uk/sqa/45672.html)

(accessed 21 May 2012)

The 'Discussion' topic below may also be relevant to Geography, in the context of "[bringing] together the natural and social sciences".

## *Living in the Hills: Impromptu Verses*

I close my brushwood door in solitude  
And face the vast sky as late sunlight falls.  
The pine trees: cranes are nesting all around.  
My wicker gate: a visitor seldom calls.  
The tender bamboo's dusted with fresh powder.  
Red lotuses strip off their former bloom.  
Lamps shine out at the ford, and everywhere  
The water-chestnut pickers wander home.

Wang Wei (701–762)

from *Three Chinese Poets: translations of poems by Wang Wei, Li Bai and Du Fu*, translated by Vikram Seth (New York: HarperPerennial, 1993)

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Notes: in *Mountain Home: The Wilderness Poetry of Ancient China* (2007), David Hinton notes that *gate* (or, as here, *door*) often stands as a metaphor for *awareness*, and that *closing the gate* means that the speaker's "house was very secluded, and they were content in that seclusion, rather than longing for company".

## *The Poet & His Work (& His Translator)*

Along with Li Bai and Du Fu, **Wang Wei** (701–762) is one of the three great poets of the earlier Tang Dynasty. He was born in Shensi in central China, his father a local official and his mother a member of a distinguished literary family. After passing the *chin-shih* examination in 721, which guaranteed entry into literary and official circles, he married and developed an estate in the hills south of the capital, Chang-an (today's Xian), where he lived whenever possible. His wife died when he was 30. Wang had a generally successful official career, with posts in the capital Chang-an, and in the provinces; he was known as a distinguished painter and calligrapher as well as a poet. During the tumultuous An Lushan rebellion, he was forced to serve the rebels; after its suppression in 757 he was briefly imprisoned, but pardoned and later restored to office.

Born in 1952 in Calcutta, India, **Vikram Seth** studied in England, the USA and China. A well-known poet and novelist, his books include *The Golden Gate: A Novel in Verse* (1986), which is set in California; *A Suitable Boy* (1993), a novel examining religious tensions in post-independence India; and *An Equal Music* (1999), a novel centered on musicians living in London and Vienna. He has also published several collections of poetry, including *The Humble Administrator's Garden* (1985), and well as travel books, stories for children and the memoir *Two Lives* (2005), about the marriage of his great-uncle and aunt.

“Wang Wei’s typical mood is that of aloneness, quiet, a retreat into nature and Buddhism. What one associates with him are running water, evening and dawn, bamboo, the absence of men’s voices. The word ‘empty’ is almost his signature.”

from Seth's Introduction to *Three Chinese Poets*

## Reading the Poem

- The poem is structured as four couplets. Compare and contrast each couplet: how is the imagery similar, how does it vary?
- What do we learn about the speaker – the ‘I’ – of the poem? How would you describe the speaker’s mood? How do you think the speaker feels, seeing “the water-chestnut pickers wander[ing] home”?
- What do we learn about the place the poem is set, in terms of, for example, visual appearance, sound, cultivation and settlement?
- *Measure* the translated poem, that is, describe it in numbers – count its verses, lines, beats, syllables, sentences – and look at its rhyme scheme.
- Are its measures and rhymes regular or irregular? How does this affect the way you consider the images which the poem presents?
- The poem – like much classical Chinese poetry – uses concrete images to express abstract emotions and ideas. Consider how this poem treats ‘big ideas’ such as life and death, the individual and society, and humanity’s relationship to the natural world.

## Discussion

- Do you live in the country or the city? If you live in a town, which do you feel closer to?
- When you leave school, do you plan or hope to live in the country or the city? Why?
- What are the advantages and disadvantages of each?
- To what extent do people in the city rely on people in the country? And vice versa?

## Research Activity

Compare Seth's translation of the poem with versions by Pauline Yu and Eileen Chong:

- <http://firstknownwhenlost.blogspot.co.uk/2011/06/three-versions-of-wang-wei-i-close-my.html>
- <http://www.softblow.org/eileenchong.html>

Seth's version uses rhyme, and a standard metre (iambic pentameter); Yu's is unrhymed and metrically irregular; Chong calls her poem "a loose and associative translation".

Which version

- sounds best when read aloud?
- evokes the clearest images in your mind?
- suggests most strongly the poem's age and 'foreign-ness'?
- makes you feel the scene described is one you could encounter today?

Compare the final two lines in each version. What is unique about each of them, in terms of the aspects of the scene which they choose to highlight?

# Creative Activity

Below are two 'imitations' activities,, the first drawing on the imagery of 'Living in the Hills', and the second on its form.

Write your own version of the poem, *expanding* its imagery, like Eileen Chong's "Returning to Wang Wei" (see above). For example, drawing on your own experiences of such places and / or your imagination you could describe

- the structure the 'brushwood door' belongs to
- the garden or enclosure the "wicker gate" opens on to
- the colours of the sky
- what the poet hears
- the ground underfoot
- the river, and how and where it flows
- how the scene changes as the sun goes down

Write a poem featuring your own choice of imagery, which draws on the formal patterns of 'Living in the Hills', especially its structure of four couplets:

- the first couplets places you – where and when
- the second couplet features what Seth calls "grammatical parallelism", that is, both lines have the same structure (in Seth's version, a noun followed by a colon, then a related second noun, plus verb and adverb)
- the third couplet draws a contrast between two similar things (here plants), and is in close-up
- the fourth couplet opens out to the wider landscape

Your couplets could

- rhyme as the original, aabbccdd
- rhyme as Seth's version ab(a)bcd@d
- be unrhymed

## Further Reading & Weblinks

The poem 'Living in the Hills: Impromptu Verses', representing China, is part of The Written World – a collaboration between the Scottish Poetry Library and BBC radio to broadcast a poem from every single nation competing in London 2012.

[www.scottishpoetrylibrary.org.uk/about/projects-partners/written-world](http://www.scottishpoetrylibrary.org.uk/about/projects-partners/written-world)

All the poems selected for The Written World – to find that for China, click on China on the map, or on the 'Asia' icon below the map

[www.chinese-poems.com/wang.html](http://www.chinese-poems.com/wang.html)

A selection of Wang Wei's poems "in characters, pinyin, and literal and literary English translation"

<http://literature.britishcouncil.org/vikram-seth>

Information on Vikram Seth

[www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-asia-pacific-13017877](http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-asia-pacific-13017877)

China country profile

[www.guardian.co.uk/world/china](http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/china)

Recent news articles about China

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*This is one of twelve resources, written by Ken Cockburn for the Scottish Poetry Library's project The Written World, May 2012.*

[www.kencockburn.co.uk](http://www.kencockburn.co.uk)

[www.spl.org.uk](http://www.spl.org.uk)