

**“ FIGHTING SOUTH OF THE RAMPARTS ”**  
**By Li Bo**

**Introduction**

The Tang Dynasty engaged in a number of wars of aggressive territorial expansion, particularly into Central Asia and on the Korean peninsula. These wars enabled the Tang to greatly expand the territory of the Tang Empire. They also involved extensive mobilization of men and resources. War also touched the Tang heartland directly in the form of the An Lushan Rebellion, which lasted from 755 to 763 and brought devastation to the central areas of the empire, including the capital cities of Chang’an and Luoyang.

Tang poets — who were generally also high-ranking officials — had ample opportunity to observe war (often as participants and eyewitnesses) and to reflect on it in poetry. Li Bo (701-762), along with his younger contemporary Du Fu (712-770), is one of the two most renowned poets of the Tang dynasty. Li Bo did not serve as an official, though he did spend two years as a scholar at the Hanlin Academy (a kind of “think tank” for the emperors). His family background may have had something to do with his failure to become an official: Li Bo’s birthplace is unknown, but he was certainly not from an elite aristocratic family. Some scholars speculate that he was born in modern-day Kyrgyzstan. With no hope for an official career, Li Bo spent much of his life traveling around the empire. The poem below may have been written in 751, when Li Bo would have been aware of two major defeats inflicted on the Tang armies: a disastrous campaign against the independent kingdom of Dali in present-day Yunnan Province (in southwestern China) and a defeat at the hands of the Abbasid Caliphate at the Talas River in modern Kyrgyzstan.

**Selected Document with Questions**

From *Sources of Chinese Tradition*, compiled by Wm. Theodore de Bary and Irene Bloom, 2nd ed., vol. 1 (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999), 565-566. © 1999 Columbia University Press. Reproduced with the permission of the publisher. All rights reserved.

**“Fighting South of the Ramparts”**  
**By Li Bo**

Last year we were fighting at the source of the Sanggan;<sup>1</sup>  
This year we are fighting on the Onion River road.<sup>2</sup>  
We have washed our swords in the surf of Parthian seas;  
We have pastured our horses among the snows of the Tian Shan.<sup>3</sup>  
The King’s armies have grown gray and old  
Fighting ten thousand leagues away from home.

---

<sup>1</sup> The river that runs west to east through northern Shanxi and Hebei, north of the Great Wall.

<sup>2</sup> The Kashgar-darya in Turkestan.

<sup>3</sup> The “Heavenly Mountains” in China’s northwest.

The Huns have no trade but battle and carnage;  
They have no fields or ploughlands,  
But only wastes where white bones lie among yellow sands.  
Where the House of Qin built the great wall that was to keep away the Tartars,  
There, in its turn, the House of Han lit beacons of war.  
The beacons are always alight, fighting and marching never stop.  
Men die in the field, slashing sword to sword;  
The horses of the conquered neigh piteously to Heaven.  
Crows and hawks peck for human guts,  
Carry them in their beaks and hang them on the branches of withered trees.  
Captains and soldiers are smeared on the bushes and grass;  
The General schemed in vain.  
Know therefore that the sword is a cursed thing  
Which the wise man uses only if he must.<sup>4</sup>

**Questions:**

1. What is Li Bo's view on war?
2. What images does he use to convey his criticism of war? Are they successful and persuasive? Why or why not?
3. Do you agree with Li Bo's sentiments?
4. If you were to disagree with Li Bo, what arguments would you mount against his poetic indictment of war?

---

<sup>4</sup> Alluding to *Daedejing* 31.