

# Zhejiang **INTOUCH** 漫步浙江

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## P14 Travel **Liuheng Island**

A shipping  
district in  
the midst  
of nature

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Guilt-free luxury in the mountains

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# East vs West

## Enter the literary boxing ring

Text by Chuck Wheeler

"When men's education gets the better of their natural qualities, they become *literati*."

Kong Zi (Confucius)

The curtain is about to rise on the grand spectacle of the Beijing Olympics, and millions of visitors are winding their way to China. It is not just the Olympic Games that draws visitors to China, but a fascination with the Chinese culture and a desire to understand this extraordinary nation and the Chinese people. Literature is an essential means to understanding a culture. Experts in comparative literature spend their careers conducting meticulous research into the intricacies of the lives and works of various artists, and comparing Chinese writers and American writers seems apropos at this time when American athletes are arriving in Beijing and the unblinking eye of the American media is focusing on China. As a fellow artist with meager talents in comparison to those great artists I am about to compare, I have to say the act of creation is the lure that pulls artists into the shadows of their souls searching ever searching for insight into the grand illusion of our perceptions.

In "Alone Drinking under the Moon" Li Bai writes "I am alone...for the moon cannot drink...and my shadow goes empty along with me...never saying a word."

Li Bai is one of the greatest Chinese poets. He lived during the early Tang Dynasty, which was a golden age of art in China. Influenced by Taoist metaphysics, Li Bai focused on the great natural beauty and mystery of the Chinese countryside. Appreciation for the splendor of nature occupied the center of his artistic universe. Li Bai was a remarkable poet who was the equal of any of the greatest poets of the West. Li Bai is often compared to British romantic poets, like Byron, Keats and Coleridge. Many comparative literature experts will point to the direct influence that Li Bai had on the modernist poets T.S. Elliot and Ezra Pound. First, allow me to say that Ezra Pounds mistranslations of Li Bai's poetry are, to say the least, scandalous. Pound did not speak or read Chinese proficiently but instead he used the notes of an American professor, who also was not fluent in Chinese, to create free verse versions of his own work and not that of Li Bai. So with that said, literary critics and essayists often take the hindsight view and say this artist or that artist was influenced by another artist, but to me, the poet who is more of kindred independent spirit to Li Bai is the great American poet Walt Whitman.

Walt Whitman was one of the finest poets of the 19th Century. Although my American pride would like to say Whitman was the



Walt Whitman



Li Bai

greatest literary figure of the 19th Century, I know that is not so, and I do not believe in such absolute statements when comparing artists. Whitman, like Li Bai, was a champion for human freedom. Perhaps that is why both poets used the symbolism of the moon to represent freedom and being accompanied by a dear friend when "waxing poetically" in the moonlight.

In Whitman's poem "When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloomed" from his classic *Leaves of Grass*, he wrote:

*I cease from my song for thee,  
From my gaze on thee in the west, fronting the west,  
communing with thee,  
O comrade lustrous with silver face in the night*



When I re-read those lines, I immediately thought of Walt Whitman and Li Bai meeting beside some celestial river. Even though they come from such different countries and times, I think their poets' souls would resonate one with the other, and they would quickly become friends. Each of these great souls knew both the pinnacle of success and the bottomless sorrow of lost inspiration. As they walked along they could enlighten one another about the spirit of their native lands. Li Bai could tell Walt Whitman of the Chinese concepts of achieving the middle path – the way in which balance is maintained by avoiding the shadowy edges of the

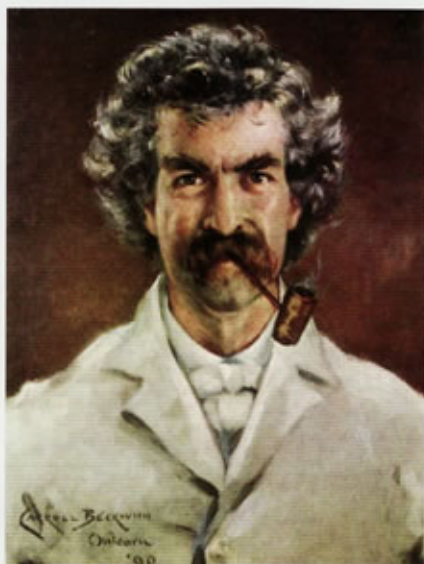
extremes of life. Whitman could regale Li Bai with his boisterous American bigger than life attitude, where we feel the edge is there for us to shove against and perhaps expand the boundaries. Instead of seeking balance we strive to upset the balance in order to change the focal point.

Walt Whitman wrote "The genius of the United States is not best or most in its executives or legislatures, nor in its ambassadors or authors or colleges, or churches, or parlors, nor even in its newspapers or inventors, but always most in the common people."

I think it is also true that the average Chinese person is the great treasure of China. Millions upon millions of average people go to work each day, sacrifice for their families and now look towards Beijing's Olympics with great enthusiasm as an affirmation of their country's progress. The greatest literary figures are those who write of the common every day person and connect their lives to the grand panoply of existence that whirls around us each day. Lu Xun and Mark Twain were both masters of creating glory within the context of the common.

In Lu Xun's most famous work *The True Story of Ah Q*, the title character deludes himself all his life. He is a man with little status who must always convince himself that he is victorious even though he suffers a lifetime of defeat, and even in the end as Ah Q is about to be executed he is lost in his delusions. Lu Xun was a keen observer of his times and wrote a great deal of social commentary into his fiction. Lu Xun was undoubtedly one of the greatest modern Chinese writers. His stories and essays serve as a guide to Chinese society. Lu Xun's observations were eagle-eyed sharp, and he summed up his suspicion of the true motives of others by saying, "To be suspicious is not a fault. To be suspicious all the time without coming to a conclusion is the defect."

Lu Xun's natural suspicious nature would have been greatly appreciated by my favorite novelist Mark Twain. Mark Twain's *Huckleberry Finn* is described by many as the greatest novel in American literature. I do not think we can label any book as the absolute greatest in any culture, but Twain did capture



Mark Twain



Lu Xun

the American spirit for the rest of the world to enjoy. Twain's indomitable sense of humor has brought me through many a dark night. Mark Twain is known in China as a satirist, a relentless critic of people who obsess about money and as a sympathizer with the Chinese people. Twain's story *The Million Pound Bank Note* is included in many textbooks here in China. The story centers on Henry Adams who is given a Million Pound Note by two wealthy bankers. Twain's character immediately raises his social status simply by having money and therein lies the dilemma of all artists: On the one hand, artists need cashflow. They must work and eat, pay bills and amuse themselves. On the other hand, their artistic talents elevate them beyond the commercial concerns of elites and social climbers, whom they mock or look with a jaundiced eye.

Each of these four writers: Li Bai, Lu Xun, Walt Whitman and Mark Twain wrote about the people and events of their times. They deftly wove social commentary into the fabric of their brilliant creations. Here now, on the cusp of modern China's debut to the world, I am reading the works of the great writers of our two countries. Trying as well as I can to be "in the moment". We foreigners here in China, are privileged to pay witness to China taking center stage in the world arena for a few days. After which, the rest of the world can better understand the relationship we have with China and China's relationship with the world. Lu Xun and Li Bai are two of the myriad of China's shining literary lights. Go to the bookstore this week and pick up a book of one of the great Chinese writers, or read one of the great classic Chinese

novels: *Journey to the West*; *Romance of the Three Kingdoms*; *Water Margin* (or *Tales from the Marsh*). The list of great individual literary figures is too lengthy to print here.

I have been here a year or so now, and although at first I felt like a square peg in a round hole, I am settling in. To quote Mark Twain, "A round man cannot be expected to fit in a square hole right away. He must have time to modify his shape." I have modified my shape; and after a short trip to Beijing a few weeks ago, and seeing the incredible Bird's Nest and the great city's preparation for its global debut, I will be watching China's premiere event, and I am sure the spirits of Lu Xun, Li Bai and a myriad of artistic notables will be joining in the celebration of the wonders created by China.