

**“ON BEING HAPPY THOUGH POOR”**  
By Li Yü (Li Liweng)

**Introduction**

In addition to formal essays and bureaucratic documents, educated men also wrote “random jottings” — a few sentences here, a short essay there — reflecting their thoughts on a myriad of subjects in an informal way. Substantial collections of such “random jottings” exist from the Ming and Qing dynasty. They supply another perspective on the thoughts, concerns, and feelings of literary men on a variety of topics. The example below is taken from a collection of random jottings, entitled “Random Relaxations,” by the playwright Li Yü (Li Liweng, 1611-ca. 1680).

**Selected Document Excerpt with Questions** (Longer selection follows this section)

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*Excerpt from “On Being Happy Though Poor”*  
By Li Yü (Li Liweng)

The recipe for being happy when one is poor contains nothing more arcane than the simple prescription, “one step back.” I may consider myself poor; but there will be other men poorer than I. I may count myself lowly; but there will be other men lowlier than I. I may regard my wife as an encumbrance; but there are widows and widowers, orphans and childless folk who strive in vain to acquire just such an encumbrance. I may deplore the calluses on my hands; but there are men in the jails and in the wild lands who long without prospect for a livelihood with plough or shovel.

*[Translated by Cyril Birch]*

**Questions:**

1. Do you think that this “recipe for being happy” can be put into practice in an ordinary person’s (say your own) daily life?
2. Would there be drawbacks to seeking to be happy though poor by putting Li’s advice into practice?
3. Would Li’s status as a famous playwright affect your evaluation of his advice?

**Longer Selection**

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Rest in such thoughts as these, and the sea of sorrows gives place to a land of joy; but if all your reckoning is in a forward direction, weighing yourself against your betters, then you will know not a moment’s peace but live fettered forever in a prison cell.

A man of substance once spent the night in a courier station. The humid summer was at its height and his bed-curtains admitted swarms of mosquitoes which would not be driven off. He fell prey to reminiscences of home, of a lofty hall arching like the sky itself over him, of bamboo matting cool as ice, and a whole bevy of fan-wielding concubines. There he would hardly be aware of summer’s presence; how had he ever managed to get himself into his present predicament? Thoughts of bliss increased his frustrations, and the upshot was a night of total sleeplessness.

The station sergeant had lain down on the steps outside where clouds of mosquitoes gnawed at him until it seemed his bones must be exposed. In desperation at last he began running up and down the yard, his arms and legs ceaselessly flailing so as to afford no foothold to his attackers. His movements back and forth were those of a man bothered and annoyed, yet the sighs he gave were sighs of relief and satisfaction, as though he had found a source of pleasure in the midst of his misery.

The rich man was puzzled, and called him over to question him. “Your sufferings,” he said, “are a dozen or a hundred times more severe than mine, yet I am miserable and you seem to be enjoying yourself. Can you explain this?”

“I was just remembering,” said the sergeant, “the time some years ago when an enemy of mine brought charges against me and had me thrown into jail. That was summer too, and the jailor to prevent my running away bound my wrists and ankles every night so that I could not move. There were more mosquitoes then than tonight, and they bit me at will, for however I

**Primary Source Document with Questions (DBQs) on**

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longed to dodge and hide I could make no effort to do so. But see how tonight I can run up and down, moving my arms and legs just as I wish — it's like I'm comparing a living man with a devil in hell. Thinking of the past I realize how pleasant things are now, and I can ignore whatever sufferings there might be."

His words roused the rich man to the understanding of his own error; for what he had heard was the secret of being happy though poor.

*[Translated by Cyril Birch]*