

Reading Du Fu

Nine Views

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Introduction

Xiaofei Tian

The Origin

The An Lushan Rebellion that broke out in 755 set in motion forces that led to the gradual decline of the splendid Tang Empire but helped create a great poet. In 759 Du Fu 杜甫 (712–770) left the capital region and began wanderings through west and southwestern China that would occupy the rest of his life. His post-rebellion poetry chronicled the life of a man and his family in a chaotic age. Arguably the greatest Chinese poet, he was certainly the most influential of all Chinese authors in any genre because of the long-lasting and far-reaching impact of his poetry.

In October 2016, a two-day international conference was held at Harvard University on the Tang poet. The conference celebrated the inauguration of the Library of Chinese Humanities, a bilingual, facing-page translation series featuring important works in the premodern Chinese cultural tradition. The first title of the series, published at the end of 2015, is the first complete translation, with notes, of the poetry of Du Fu. This volume grows out of that conference.

Du Fu is well known and well studied in Chinese, with the reception of Du Fu having itself become a special area of focus in the popular field of reception studies. He is so well studied that, first, it draws attention away from the fact that Du Fu's poetry is *not* so well studied in English-language scholarship, and, second, the study of Du Fu in Chinese scholarship has some notable gaps that largely elude notice precisely because of the great number of books and articles produced since the 1980s. One of the gaps is a theoretically inflected close engagement with Du Fu's poems themselves.¹

In classical Chinese literature Du Fu's stature is like that of Shakespeare in English literature or Dante in Italian, and Du Fu is also widely known outside his native tradition, just as Shakespeare and Dante are. Prior to the complete English translation in

1. As the summary of the 2017 annual conference of the Association of China's Du Fu Studies points out, of more than seventy papers received, fewer than ten are dedicated to "the form, style, and art of Du Fu's poems or Du Fu himself." Poetic form, style, and art, such as the use of quatrain or long regulated poems (*pailü*), are habitual topics of traditional "remarks on poetry" and do not exactly constitute any new conceptual territory. The summary henceforth calls for "treating Du Fu himself and Du Fu's poems as the basis" and as the "core issues." Hu Kexian, "Du Fu yanjiu," 93.

2016, Du Fu has been partially translated many times by different hands. Still, when we turn to criticism and interpretation, the books and articles do not exactly constitute a considerable amount of scholarly output on a major poet, let alone a towering figure like Du Fu.²

This lack of attention to Du Fu in English-language scholarship is partially due to the changes in the field of Chinese literary studies, which on the one hand took a cultural-historical and materialist turn in recent decades and, on the other, responded to the general trend of canon revision in Western academia in the second half of the twentieth century: some of the traditional criteria were questioned; once-marginal authors were rediscovered; women writers and minority writers received their deserved attention. With the increasing popularity of the studies of modern and contemporary Chinese literature and culture, film, and media in recent decades, premodern literature, especially the literature of the Middle Period (roughly from the Eastern Han through Song, or the first through thirteenth centuries), became a road less and less traveled by the younger generation. These changes are without a doubt also happening in Chinese academia, but such changes can be obscured by a number of factors, including the sheer size of Chinese departments in terms of both faculty and students in colleges and universities. In contrast, overseas sinology is a much smaller enterprise.

To a large extent, however, the lack of attention to Du Fu can also be attributed to, ironically, his canonical status. Many scholars and students find themselves under the impression that Du Fu “has already been done.” In addition, the clichéd image of Du Fu the “poet sage” and “poet historian” has overshadowed, even eclipsed, simply “the poet” Du Fu and, even worse, Du Fu’s poetry. From the Song dynasty onward, the reception of Du Fu has veered heavily toward his “Confucian” qualities—loyalty to the ruler and concern about the state, summed up in the saying that Du Fu “did not forget his lord even for the interval of one single meal.”³ Such a grossly simplifying image does not always inspire a modern reader’s interest. The light-hearted, quirky, and funny Du Fu known for “playful topics and amusing discussions” during his lifetime has all but disappeared into the halo put around his head in the subsequent ages down to the present day.⁴ The unbearable weight of the neo-Confucian sagehood attributed to Du Fu was only intensified when, come the twentieth century, it was seamlessly welded to patriotism and Marxist-inflected “compassion for the sufferings of the laboring mass.” It is best illustrated in the contrast of two extremes: at one end, we have a popular imaginary portrait of Du Fu, widely known through its use in Chinese high school textbooks, which shows the poet exactly as how he is perceived to be: looking solemnly, concernedly, into the distance, apparently with the fate of the state and the common folk on his mind; at the other end, the doodling and spoofing versions of this portrait that went

2. William Hung’s (1893–1980) *Tu Fu: China’s Greatest Poet*, published in 1952, is a biographical account of Du Fu’s life with translations of more than 300 of Du Fu’s poems. Between then and the time of our conference, three English-language monographs on Du Fu had been published: they are respectively by David McCraw (*Du Fu’s Laments*, 1992), Eva Shan Chou (*Reconsidering Tu Fu*, 1995), and David Schneider (*Confucian Prophet*, 2012). The latest publication is Ji Hao’s study of Du Fu’s reception (*The Reception of Du Fu*, 2017). A quick search in JSTOR yields just over a dozen research articles with Du Fu featured in the title, printed in the course of a little more than half a century.

3. Su Shi, *Su Shi wenji*, 318.

4. The comment is attributed to a contemporary Fan Huang 樊晃 (fl. 770s), supposedly made in the decade after Du Fu’s death. Xiao Difei, *Du Fu quanji*, vol. 12, 6579. Translation is Owen’s, *The Poetry of Du Fu*, vol. 1, lxiv.

viral overnight on the Chinese internet in 2012, which marked the 1,300th anniversary of the poet's birth. High moral seriousness became the target of mockery, and the act of worship could find balance only in ridicule.⁵ Neither, however, does justice to Du Fu the poet. Worse, neither side—the worshippers or the ridiculers—spends time reading Du Fu's 1,400 poems, closely or widely.

The chapters in this volume represent an effort to read the poems attentively and, as we will discuss in the following section, to read the poems anew by interrogating and cross-examining the poems from different angles and in different contexts. Before Du Fu was anointed the "poet sage," he had commanded attention with nothing but his poems. It is always worthwhile to revisit the canon, for the writings themselves, for a better understanding of the subsequent works influenced and shaped by those writings, and for the reflection on literary history that must by definition include the ordinary and the extraordinary—it would be a mistake to only embrace one end of the spectrum without seeing how interdependent they really are. In the case of Du Fu, we also want to go beyond the famous pieces, whether it is the sets of "Threes," the "Stirred by Autumn" set, the quatrains on poetry, or the poems included in popular anthologies and school textbooks.

There is a parochial desire on the part of some Chinese scholars to take ownership of classical Chinese literature as "ours" (or at best East Asian) and to downplay the right and authority of "outsiders" to interpret and give meaning. Such a desire, encouraged by the state as part of its nationalistic project, would lead to this great literature being read and appreciated by no one but the Chinese themselves, to a cultural isolationism that benefits neither the culture in question nor human civilization. Yet, though written in (Tang) Chinese, Du Fu's poetry belongs not only to the Chinese but also to the world. A collection of essays on Du Fu in English is long overdue.

The Chapters

This volume is divided into three sections, each focusing on a particular set of inter-related issues that not only underscore a hitherto less explored aspect of Du Fu studies but also pertain to the studies of Chinese literary tradition in general. The first section, "Home, Locale, Empire," consists of four chapters. These chapters explore how the poet, moving from place to place, negotiates his longing for "home" with the building and tending of temporary homes and with the larger concerns of the empire. They also discuss how the poet contemplates the questions of mobility and circulation, the local and the state, in his poetry, and how poetry itself is both the object and the venue of transportation in a world filled with blockages.

Though his family held an estate near Luoyang (in modern He'nan), Du Fu's exact birthplace is unknown. In his younger days Du Fu had spent a decade in the capital, Chang'an, seeking, largely unsuccessfully, fame, recognition, and political advancement. After the rebellion broke out, he was trapped in Chang'an for a while, then escaped and joined Emperor Suzong's (r. 756–761) court, in which he served briefly

5. A reviewer of "a century of Du Fu studies" notices the link between the elevation of Du Fu, pursued by scholars and avidly assisted by the Ministry of Culture and various local governments, and the viral meme known as "Du Fu Is Busy" and opines, "The study of the 'poet sage' has too much seriousness and lacks liveliness; suppose we study and advertise Du Fu as a 'mortal,' not as a 'sage,' maybe there will be a different sort of phenomenon with Du Fu's 'busy-ness.'" Peng Yan, "Du Fu yanjiu," 124.

before he managed to offend the emperor and was demoted to a lowly position in Huazhou 華州 (in modern Shaanxi) in 758. He soon decided to quit that job and thus began a life of wandering, living off his friends' and associates' goodwill and patronage. He first went to Qinzhou 秦州 (in modern Gansu) in 759, then to Tonggu 同谷 (in Gansu), and finally on to Chengdu 成都 (in Sichuan) near the end of the same year. Du Fu settled in Chengdu for a few years, where he built his famous Thatched Cottage (*caotang* 草堂), with the support of the military commissioner Yan Wu 嚴武 (726–765). After Yan Wu died, Du Fu took his family down the Yangzi River to Kuizhou 夔州 (modern Fengjie 奉節 County, Chongqing 重慶, Sichuan), at the mouth of the famous Three Gorges. He lived at Kuizhou from 766 to 768 under the protection and employment of local supervisor-in-chief Bai Maolin 柏茂林 (also romanized as Bo Maolin). The Kuizhou period was one of his most prolific, as he composed about 400 poems there, almost one-third of his entire extant oeuvre. But in early 768 he resumed his wandering again and eventually died of illness on Lake Dongting in 770.

In the midst of this turbulent itinerant life, Du Fu writes that, on a desolate autumn river, “the life I used to have at home is the longing in my heart” 故國平居有所思。⁶ *Guguo* 故國 is used here in the sense of the former home, not that of the former country or the former dynasty; yet it is not *just* the former home he longs for but rather the kind of life he used to have in that home in a different age. *Ping* 平 is peaceful, uneventful, ordinary, perhaps a tad boring—the exact flavor of “home” after one loses it. As Jack W. Chen observes, Du Fu here is “also speaking of ‘dwelling’ or ‘inhabiting’ a space of a lost sense of the ordinary . . . in the aftermath of rebellion” (p. 19). That life is no longer possible because it was bound up with the age of peace and prosperity. Beginning with “No Return,” a poem lamenting a cousin who died in war, and ending with “Return in Spring,” a poem on returning to the Thatched Cottage after interruption caused by a local rebellion, Chen’s chapter discusses how “the idea of home” comes to occupy a place of central importance in Du Fu’s works after the rebellion. Chen argues that the longing for home is “at its heart, a wish for the return to the ordinary” (p. 16), a carving out of a non-social and non-political space where he lives his life as a private individual, even though the gesture is possible only in exile, against the backdrop of the dynastic trauma, and from the margins of the empire. While Du Fu is often seen as the poet who bears witness to the grand historical events and the tragedy of the times, Chen calls attention to the other side of the poet, who allies himself not with the body politic but with the individual body, its desires, comforts, and aches and pains.

If Chen explores the poet’s vision of home by largely focusing on Du Fu’s Chengdu poems, Stephen Owen’s chapter turns to a place where the poet tries very hard to make a home and yet can rarely feel “at home” in. This is Kuizhou, the exotic borderland of the empire, where Han and non-Han peoples live in close quarters, and the local customs seem foreign and savage to the poet from the capital. Few other locales in the Tang Empire would, Owen suggests, so readily invite thoughts about the imperial and cultural system of circulation far beyond home. Owen’s chapter shows how in Kuizhou Du Fu “think[s] through poetry” about circulation, *tong* 通, from local commerce—a local girl’s exchange of fish for coins—to that of the merchants moving around on the Yangzi for profit, and to the imperial courier system bringing tributary gifts to the emperor. The poet also thinks of men who are “blocked,” the opposite of *tong*, in

6. The fourth of the “Stirred by Autumn” set. Translation is Owen’s, in *The Poetry of Du Fu*, vol. 4, 354–55.

their political advancement, but manage to circulate themselves through their traveling poems, literary reputation, and memory. The innocent taking of sustenance from nature in the first poem of the sequence—the mountain birds feeding their young with red berries—ends with the corruption of imperial power by bringing lychee for the emperor's beloved consort through the empire's courier system; yet the lychee fruit itself becomes corrupted on the way to the capital. The immediacy of local experience can never be captured, except in memory and in poetry. Here we see another form of poetic success as pitched against the failure of empire.

Gregory Patterson's chapter contemplates the same issues of *tong*, circulation, communication, and getting through on the vehicle of poetry, from a different perspective: that of history. He likewise centers on Kuizhou, conceding, as Owen does, that "in Kuizhou thinking about communication was unavoidable" (p. 41). He sees, however, in the physical traces at Kuizhou the creation of a unique communicative form through Du Fu's poetic commemorations of two cultural heroes from the past: one is the mythical King Yu, who is credited with channeling the great flood by opening up the river gorges and saving the people from drowning; the other is Zhuge Liang, the legendary loyal minister who, like Yu, had left an indelible material mark on the local landscape. Patterson's chapter is thus a powerful reminder that Du Fu, the acclaimed chronicler of his life and his times, is every bit as much the "poet historian" as the "poet geographer," who "wrote in such unprecedented detail about the unique landscapes, culture, and histories of these temporary 'perches' that they form distinct identities within his larger corpus, like semi-independent provinces within the empire of the collected works" (p. 41).

This ingenious metaphor takes us to the chapter by Lucas Rambo Bender. Bender returns to the issue of empire, which many commentators and scholars consider to be at the heart of Du Fu's poems. In contradistinction to Chen's chapter, Bender argues that the Kuizhou poems on humble topics are in fact complex creations emerging from the incongruity between imperial and domestic concerns, and that they both speak to a commitment to imperial values and ironize those same values. Bender regards these poems as enunciations of the poet's alienation from the empire precisely in his attachment to it. With an acuity finely tuned in to the poetic texts themselves, he sheds light on a moving emotional complexity in these poems, which are self-consciously comic in their grandiosity and tinged with a dark hue of melancholy—a melancholy that is again always undercut by humor.

However, if as Bender argues these poems on humble topics—vegetables, home improvements, faithful servants carrying out domestic tasks—"fit into a narrative of the poet's evolving thoughts about the empire over the course of his life" (p. 72), then maybe one can indeed make a case that the two visions of Du Fu, one confirmed by Chen's chapter and the other presented by Bender's, "derive from different portions of his very large and diverse poetic corpus" (p. 57), because the poet was going through changes just as the world around him did. One may pause here to think of Du Fu's position in literary and cultural history. He was on the threshold of a profound cultural sea change. Before Du Fu, the court and the capital were still the center of cultural accomplishments and cultural production, and in that world poems complaining about bad vegetables, thanking one's servants for domestic labor, or instructing one's son to build a chicken coop were simply unthinkable; but, after Du Fu, that old order crumbled even as the capital Chang'an still stood. Just as the central government's authority and control were

weakened by powerful regional military governors, there was a centrifugal pull in cultural terms when the provinces—especially in the Jiangnan and Shu regions—began to assume much larger importance. The cultural world would be transformed with the emergence of the wild and quirky mid-Tang generation, many members of which were Du Fu’s admirers, who picked up something from him and carried it even further. Du Fu was a figure emerging from the watershed transition and impacted the transition with his writings.

It is thus indeed interesting to contemplate these humble topics more deeply, since their sheer novelty tends to be forgotten; Du Fu’s immense influence had turned them into normative themes for later poets. But no one else, “setting up a household, has poems begging for fruit trees and crockery. No one else writes irritated poems when promised grain does not arrive on time or the vegetable delivery is substandard. No one else celebrates a bamboo piping system that brings water from a mountain spring into his kitchen or the construction of a chicken coop.”⁷ And “like no one else in his day, we know his servants by name because he wrote poems for them and named them in his poems.”⁸ This last point may not seem much—or it may even seem uncomfortably condescending—to a modern reader, but if we judge him by the social norm of his day, Du Fu was a veritable revolutionary, as Tang slaves had very low social and legal status, and many Tang masters and mistresses, including famous writers, were known to have treated their servants ignobly. Wang Bo 王勃 (649–676), one of the “Four Outstanding Men of the Early Tang,” once killed a slave; Xiao Yingshi 蕭穎士 (735 *jinshi*) was known for beating an old servant in his frequent violent outbursts; Yu Xuanji 魚玄機 (ca. 844–ca. 868) flogged her maid to death. Many such abusive incidents are recorded in Tang narratives. It is staggering, when we look around, to see how unusual and “strange” Du Fu was in the Tang world. Unfortunately, later poets after the Tang only inherited the topics and themes but not Du Fu’s spirit of difference—which perhaps *is*, after all, a mark of individual genius, having nothing to do with empire, even though it was brought out by the decline of the empire and by his isolation in the strange backwater Kuizhou, where the old capital world of glamor and sophistication fell away.

On one level, we can attribute the newness of Du Fu’s poetry to his extraordinary originality as a poet or the fact that he was increasingly writing in isolation, away from the old world of the capital and court elite; on another level, he is both a product of the great changes afoot and a prescient usher of the new world. Seeing larger issues in domestic life is a symptom of the old world where order is immanent in everything, but it is also a perversion of that old world. Right after Du Fu, the mid-Tang was one of the most remarkable eras in Chinese cultural history, and it was this mid-Tang generation that “discovered” Du Fu.

We need a deep dive in time. Radical historicization is required to rediscover Du Fu, whose greatness is not, despite what one may think of the “immortal masters,”

7. Owen, *The Poetry of Du Fu*, vol. 1, lx.

8. Owen, *The Poetry of Du Fu*, vol. 1, lv. Only after Du Fu do we see the gesture of naming one’s servants and expressing gratitude for them in poetry, most notably in Wei Zhuang 韋莊 (ca. 836–910). *Quan Tang shi*, 700.8044, 700.8047. Wei Zhuang, perhaps not coincidentally, was the compiler of an extant Tang poetic anthology (i.e., *Youxuan ji* 又玄集) in which Du Fu’s poems made their first appearance; not only that, but Du Fu appears at the head of this anthology. As Paul W. Kroll reminds us, “This is the only extant Tang anthology to include Du Fu.” Kroll, “Anthologies in the Tang,” in Denecke, Li, and Tian, *The Oxford Handbook*, 311.

timeless in itself. With that we turn to the next section, “Poetry and Buddhism,” a topic that does not receive major attention in Du Fu studies, as another attempt to extricate Du Fu from the clichéd image of the good “Confucian” constructed of him since the eleventh century. This section includes a pair of chapters, each discussing the general question of studying “literature/poetry and religion/Buddhism” with Du Fu’s poems as specific examples. Both chapters in this section invite us to take into serious consideration Buddhism’s *social* presence and yet to also focus on the ultimate *poetic* success of the poems themselves.

Paul Rouzer outlines some of the major pitfalls in writing about Buddhism and Chinese literature. Observing that Buddhist vocabulary may simply be used for the sake of rhetorical effectiveness, Rouzer stresses the need to carefully examine the social context of a poem and the use of allusions in the poem when examining the impact of Buddhism on a poet. Rather than treating Buddhism as a system of belief influencing the aesthetics of a cultural tradition, or trying to ascertain the extent of the poet’s commitment to the faith, Rouzer emphasizes the importance of thinking of Buddhism as a form of living practice and regarding Buddhist activities as being part of the educated elite’s daily life. He calls for carefully considering the situational nature and social function of poetry, and suggests viewing Buddhist elements in a poem not as spiritual autobiography but as “part of a poet’s toolbox, used to create an effective poem” (p. 80). With perceptive readings of a series of Du Fu’s poems to the monk Zan, Rouzer shows how the level of Du Fu’s engagement with Buddhism varies widely from poem to poem and in particular demonstrates Du Fu’s “ability to adapt or ignore Buddhist materials to suit his occasional expressive needs” (p. 89).

Xiaofei Tian’s chapter opens with questioning the usefulness of the vexed category of “religious poetry,” proposing instead to draw on the more productive formulation “religion *and* poetry” to open up space for thinking about the dynamic ways in which these two distinct traditions interact with each other. While agreeing with Rouzer that it can be difficult to prove how “a Buddhist worldview is subtly influencing the aesthetics of the poem with no explicit Buddhist content” (p. 76), Tian nevertheless argues that it is important to do so when there are obvious clues in the internal properties of a text and when external historical situations invite such speculation, especially because Buddhism is such a prominent part of society and daily life. Tian’s chapter thus takes the topic of Du Fu and Buddhism in a different direction by examining a famous set of travel poems, the Qinzhou-Tonggu series, from a Buddhist perspective. Tian opts out of the fragmentary reading practice predetermined by the explicit Buddhist content of any particular poem; instead, she reads the set of twelve poems as a carefully orchestrated sequence that constitutes “a coherent Buddhist narrative of transformation and enlightenment” (p. 94), informed by the multimedia presence of Buddhism on and off the poet’s travel route.

The last section of this volume, “Reception and Re-creation,” highlights the creative aspect of the reception of Du Fu’s poetry. Christopher M. B. Nugent’s chapter provides a unique perspective by asking how contemporary Tang readers may have received Du Fu and, specifically, how difficult—or not—Du Fu’s poetry might have been for an average member of the medieval literary elite at an early stage of mastering the cultural competency required of him. For his test cases, Nugent chooses “Stirred by Autumn,” the famous poetic series that has accrued a massive amount of commentaries over the centuries, and Du Fu’s *fu*, a genre well known for lexical difficulty, examining them

against a series of what he refers to as benchmark texts for acquiring basic literacy and literary vocabulary as well as against popular anthologies. Nugent argues that poetic difficulty, on one hand, is often created more by expectations and assumptions than by the poetic works themselves and, on the other hand, can be a product of intricacies in poetic thought and expression other than vocabulary and allusions. He calls attention to conditions of material reality under which Du Fu composed poetry—the poet was not surrounded by a well-stocked library in his largely itinerant later years—and those under which his contemporary readers read them.

Indeed, Du Fu has admitted as much about his own reading practice: “When I read, I pass over the hard words” (讀書難字過).⁹ He was certainly not one who generally prized lexical difficulty as an aesthetic value, even though his long, regulated poems (*pailü* 排律) demonstrate an allusive density that in many cases was perhaps designed to impress the poems’ direct addressees and recipients. There is, to be sure, lexical and allusive intricacy in Du Fu’s poetry, yet such intricacy often lies elsewhere: for instance, in his highly unusual use of words out of their “proper” register or context, such as his application of a commonplace modal expression in the *Analects* to denounce substandard vegetables as if they were defective disciples. On another occasion, he writes to his friends about his humble life in Kuizhou:

敕廚惟一味 Edict to the kitchen: just one dish,
求飽或三鱸 to get to eat my fill, sometimes I eat three eels.¹⁰

The poet can afford only “one dish” per meal, but he conveys this as an “order,” as if he had an option; the verb, *chi*, which is specially used to refer to an imperial instruction after the Southern Dynasties, is chosen with irony. Du Fu may not have intended his poetry to be “an object of scholarly study” (p. 127), but to recover how something sounded requires a certain linguistic competency beyond mere recognition of allusions.

Ronald Egan’s chapter shows us that there were many different ways of reading Du Fu in late imperial times. Turning to the visual re-creation of Du Fu, Egan examines a series of “paintings of Du Fu’s poetic thoughts” (Du Fu *shiyi tu* 杜甫詩意圖) by Wang Shimin 王時敏 (1592–1680), Shitao 石濤 (1642–1707), and the mid-Ming painter Xie Shichen 謝時臣 (1488–1547). As Egan states at the opening of his chapter, the artists’ treatment of Du Fu’s poetic lines may be viewed as “a distinctive part of the great poet’s reception history, a part that is often overlooked” (p. 129). From their selection of couplets to their individualized visual representation of the words, the literati painters’ imaging of Du Fu’s poetry tells us much about how Du Fu could be read, and also reveals what they have deliberately, sometimes militantly, omitted. Discussing the artistic appropriations of Du Fu with sensitivity to both images and words, Egan picks up on evocative tensions between the visual and verbal realms of representation and their productive interactions.

9. From no. 2 of “Haphazard Compositions” 漫成. Owen, *The Poetry of Du Fu*, vol. 3, 2–3.

10. From “Writing My Feelings in Kui on an Autumn Day, Respectfully Sent to Director Zheng and Li, Advisor to the Heir Apparent: One Hundred Couplets” 秋日夔府詠懷奉寄鄭監李賓客一百韻. Owen, *The Poetry of Du Fu*, vol. 5, 204–5. “Three eels” is an allusion to the story about Yang Zhen, a learned scholar, into whose hall a stork once dropped three eels, taken to mean he would rise to high office, which he did. The allusion is used literally here, creating a comic effect, and despite their plurality the three eels indeed make up only “one dish” (*yiwèi*, lit. “one flavor”).

What is particularly fascinating about Egan's chapter is that he shows paintings to be a space where Du Fu can be dehistoricized in a way that would have been otherwise unthinkable in the voluminous commentaries since the Song. By dehistoricization I do not mean Xie Shichen's anachronistic rendering of Du Fu's sarcastic poems about a group of boisterous young aristocrats partying with singing girls as an all-male "elegant gathering" of literati members; rather, I am thinking of the much more radical example of Shitao's transformation of a poem about the desolation of war into a leisurely contemplation of a tranquil landscape. Equally telling is the way in which painters, as Egan notices, tend to present a lone male figure, without his wife and children, even while the original poem very much accentuates their presence, real or visualized. Speaking of Shitao's painterly vision of the poet, Egan observes that "Du Fu has become the iconic 'poetry sage' who stands apart, moving serenely through the landscape as he describes it" (p. 139).

There is something both disturbing and exhilarating about such a dehistoricized interpretation of Du Fu. At the very least, we realize that the Taiwan poet Luo Qing's 羅青 (b. 1948) ironic observation about the anachronistic portrayal of the past in "On How Du Fu Was Influenced by Luo Qing" 論杜甫如何受羅青影響 (1994) had already begun in the fifteenth century, and that the configuration of history through the lens and interests of the present day is perhaps itself timeless. Luo Qing is one of the poets discussed in David Der-wei Wang's chapter, "Six Modernist Poets in Search of Du Fu," which brings the volume to the present day. Wang's tour-de-force chapter constitutes a miniature literary history, as well as a macro poetic map, of modern China and the wider sino-phone sphere in changing historical circumstances over a century. In a sweeping spatial and temporal canvas nuanced with close readings of individual poems, Wang demonstrates how, "for all the iconoclastic impulses of modern Chinese literature, Du Fu continued to enjoy being an icon and a ground for cultural and even political contestation throughout the twentieth century, inspiring and challenging poets of various styles, generations, and ideologies" (p. 144). Specifically, through emulating and simulating Du Fu, Wang argues that these poets invoke Du Fu the "poet historian" as a yardstick for measuring poetry's social and moral obligation to record modern experiences, and that Chinese literary modernity of the twentieth century, instead of implying a radical break from the past, thus reaffirms its meaningfulness and its "ethical . . . implications in the present" (p. 163). For these poets, then, evoking the name of Du Fu is very much a political act. Not only Du Fu himself but his poetry is writ large in this newest version of his reception and re-creation.

Afterthoughts

In his chapter Ronald Egan makes a thought-provoking observation on how "feminine presence" and Du Fu's family are erased in Xie Shichen's paintings on Du Fu's poems. Xie Shichen's omission is perhaps more representative, and indicative of larger issues, than just one painter's preferences or his personal interpretation of Du Fu.

From the Song dynasty on, Du Fu has come to be exclusively identified with Confucian patriarchal values: loyalty to the ruler or dynasty, concern for the state, and compassion for the common folk. This image is perpetuated by numerous later poets, especially poets who are caught in a national crisis, of which there was no shortage

in the past centuries. In this regard, female poets from late imperial China who were inspired by Du Fu, just like their male counterparts, tended to pay particular attention to Du Fu as a poet of sorrows and cares at a time of national and personal trauma.¹¹ In modern times, Du Fu is even more avidly placed on a pedestal precisely for those very qualities perceived to be dominant in his person and his poetry. It is notable how, as David Der-wei Wang's chapter shows, so many modern poets regard Du Fu as Social Conscience personified: Feng Zhi 馮至 (1905–1993) sees a halo around Du Fu, whose “tattered robes” emit a light as if in a painting of a Christian apostle, “sage” being easily conflated with “saint” in modern Chinese (both *sheng* 聖); when “paying tribute” to Du Fu, Xiao Kaiyu 蕭開愚 (b. 1960) chose to write a poem of ten sections, each featuring a social problem or a political issue in contemporary China. In such a vision, the History of the “poet historian” has a capital *H*: it is the history of an empire, a dynasty, a nation-state, a society, or a cultural tradition; not that of one individual man or woman or that of one single family, lived out in all its mundane details—kids, bean sauce, chickens, a flood, home improvement, gardening projects, all of which preoccupied Du Fu's mind and appear frequently in his poetry.

It is perhaps not a coincidence that the community of modern poets devoted to the vision of poetry as History is as all male as the “elegant gathering” of literati portrayed in Xie Shichen's painting. We have a gender issue here, embroiled in social and cultural changes since the Tang. Gender segregation is prominent in social and representational realms, but it does not do justice to Du Fu's poetry. In fact, it never fails to strike me, a woman scholar who has worked for many years on early medieval literature and court poetry, what an incredibly domestic man and poet Du Fu is, as represented in his poetry. Such representation is in dramatic contrast with the poets before him. Whether or not he endows the quotidian with any large meaning, the poet's delight in family life and his absorption in an assortment of house-related tasks and activities are nothing short of impressive. It has been observed that Du Fu writes about his wife and his children a great deal; even more remarkably, he writes amorously about his wife, describing her sweet-smelling coiffure and alabaster arms. While a premodern male poet could write romantically and erotically about concubines, female entertainers, courtesans, and catamites, he would not and could not do that about his wife—in fact love poems to one's wife are usually only written when she is dead, in the established subgenre of “poems lamenting deceased spouse” (*daowang* 悼亡詩). But Du Fu is exactly the opposite: for a poet acclaimed for stylistic and thematic variety and inclusiveness in his oeuvre, he surprisingly does not have any “romantic poems” (*xiangyan shi* 香豔詩 or *yanqing shi* 豔情詩).¹² A quatrain he wrote in Chengdu is a rare indication of a momentary tempta-

11. For instance, the late Ming woman poet Xu Can 徐燦 (ca. 1610s–after 1677) or the late Qing poet Li Changxia 李長霞 (ca. 1830–ca. 1880).

12. When he does, he does with a self-conscious “playfulness.” Once he writes to a friend teasingly inviting him to host raucous parties and even prodding him to call a couple of local girls, naming the girls specifically. This is “Written in Sport on a Spring Day: Provoking Prefect Hao” 春日戲題惱郝使君兄. Owen, *The Poetry of Du Fu*, vol. 3, 196–97. Another time he writes two “erotic songs” (*yanqu*) but ends with advising his friend not to fool around. This is “Often Accompanying Li of Zizhou Sailing on the River with Girl Musicians in All the Boats, I Playfully Compose Two Erotic Songs to Give to Li” 數陪李梓州泛江有女樂在諸舫戲為豔曲二首贈李. The last couplet of the second poem reads: “The prefect has his own wife— / don't imitate the wild mandarin ducks” 使君自有婦，莫學野鴛鴦. Owen, *The Poetry of Du Fu*, vol. 3, 216–17.

tion, about which commentators remain largely silent.¹³ Du Fu's domesticity tends to be overlooked in comparison with his concerns about dynastic fate, ruler, and empire.

It is, of course, not the domestic activities Du Fu did or the family man he was that matters but rather the fact that he would write them into poetry, a high cultural form in the Tang. If we accept the concept of history in lowercase, then we say that Du Fu is a faithful historian of his own life. That life itself is not so striking, but the way he writes it certainly is. He notices and speaks of moments and details in life that contemporary poetic discourse and polite society do not notice or speak of, and he thinks about them, provocatively, in well-wrought poetic lines. That is why he endures. Later poets cannot do it because they all try to "do Du Fu" while Du Fu was just being himself, and he was like nobody else.

This volume is thus assembled with the modest hope that, along with the complete English translation of Du Fu's collection, these writings will bring the reader closer to Du Fu's poems.

13. This is "What Happened" 即事: "A hundred jewels adorn the sash at her waist, / pearls wrap around her leather armlets. / When she smiles, flowers near the eyes; / when the dance is done, brocade wraps her head" 百寶裝腰帶, 真珠絡臂鞞, 笑時花近眼, 舞罷錦纏頭. Owen, *The Poetry of Du Fu*, vol. 3, 98–99. A few moralistic commentators insist that it is a criticism of luxury or a disguised satire of a general whose surname is Hua 花 ("flower"). Xiao Difei, *Du Fu quanji*, vol. 5, 9.2542.

5

Refuges and Refugees

How Du Fu Writes Buddhism

Paul Rouzer

In most survey histories of Chinese Buddhism, scholars will point out that the earliest mention of the faith in belletristic literature is the following couplet from Zhang Heng's 張衡 (78–139) "Western Metropolis Rhapsody" ("Xi jing fu" 西京賦). After evoking the beauty of dancing girls for twenty lines, the author adds:

展季桑門 Even Zhan Ji or a *śramaṇa*—
誰能不營 no one—could not but be deluded.¹

This little moment is cited as a reference for a straightforward empirical history of the faith in China. But no one points out some of the more interesting features of these lines. For one thing, there is the irony: the first mention of a Buddhist ascetic (*śramaṇa*) in Chinese literature occurs in a genre often criticized for its descriptive excess and its evocation of sensual pleasures. Not only that, but it suggests that the beauty of native Chinese women could make a foreign holy man abandon the main quality that defines him: his self-control. This would not be a bad starting point for discussing the problematics of an ascetic imperative in literature and how Buddhist discourse may interact with certain Chinese *aesthetic* principles already present (in this case, the distrust of surface language and the representation of moral character in verse). These issues may create paradoxes in certain authors' works—in the poetry of Jia Dao 賈島 (779–843), for instance: an avowed Buddhist who nonetheless arouses suspicion for indulging in the superficial charm of couplet craft.

However, I would like to point out a more interesting aspect of these lines. We cannot know how much Zhang Heng knew about Buddhism; though there were Buddhist communities already present in China during his life (in Luoyang and Pengcheng, in particular), they received little attention in written records. The most likely scenario here is that Zhang Heng had heard vague legends concerning Buddhist holy men and had taken note of the foreign word *śramaṇa* (here represented by the phonetic *sangmen* 桑門—later changed to *shamen* 沙門) as a bit of exotica, a flashy rhapsody-type gesture that would attest to the breadth of his learning. It is also linked here with a Chinese

1. Xiao Tong, *Wen xuan*, 2.79. Translation from Knechtges, *Wen xuan*, vol. 1, 237.

example of self-restraint—Zhan Ji is better known as Liuxia Hui 柳下惠, a figure from the seventh century BCE. As David Knechtges describes him in his note to this line:

The Mao commentary to *Mao shi* 200 (*Mao shi zhushu* 12.3.20b) and the *Kongzi jiaoyu* (2.21b-22a), most likely based on the Mao commentary, obliquely refer to the story of Liuxia Hui's allowing a homeless woman to sit on his lap all night without any aspersions being cast on his reputation.²

By linking a paragon of Confucian self-restraint with a Buddhist one, Zhang Heng covers the field, as it were—combining a figure from antiquity with a figure from far away. The girls are so lovely they can defeat exemplars of self-control from anywhere in time and space, as if a Victorian poet were to mention that a woman's beauty could have confounded Seneca on the one hand and an Indian holy man on the other.

This also introduces us to a fundamental issue involving literary references to the Buddhist faith throughout the medieval period. As knowledge of Buddhism spread among the Chinese elites and sutras were translated in increasingly accurate ways, a new vocabulary was introduced: Buddhist technical terms were rendered either as Chinese phonetic equivalents of Sanskrit originals (as with *śramaṇa*) or as “meaning” equivalents (for example, the use of *kong* 空 to translate *śūnyatā*, “emptiness”). Both methods have their problems: the former end up sounding exotic and un-Chinese, while the latter can easily result in the superficial assimilation of complex Buddhist ideas into a native Chinese discourse—particularly an emerging Daoist one. When one talks about the impact of this vocabulary on belletristic, non-Buddhist writing, curious problems result. If a writer uses the Sanskrit vocabulary, he often creates a sense of exoticism—or if the term has been completely assimilated into ordinary usage, it triggers an explicit Buddhist meaning that may seem at odds with the native literary traditions that the genre tends to express. If an author uses native vocabulary with Buddhist associations in a genre that is not normally religious, then his meaning may be unclear (or it creates the possibility of reading Buddhist meanings into a text where it was not intended). Perhaps the most noted example of this is the frequent use of *kong* in Wang Wei's 王維 (ca. 699–ca. 761) poems: it is unclear whether we are meant to see such references as a primary or even as a secondary reference to *śūnyatā*.

This is the central problem when writing about Buddhism and Chinese literature, if by Chinese literature we mean genres outside of technical Buddhist discourse (sutras, *śāstras*, *gāthās*, etc.). The Tang elite poetic tradition is a strong example of this. If, on the one hand, one discovers examples of explicit Buddhist language in elite poetry, one must remember that this may be introduced mainly for reasons of rhetorical effectiveness and not as a straightforward representation of the poet's preoccupation with religious concerns (which usually cannot be clearly reconstituted outside of the text). If, on the other hand, we argue that a Buddhist worldview is subtly influencing the aesthetics of a poem with no explicit Buddhist content, we may have difficulty proving it (I think here of writings by both Stephen Owen and Shan Chou that suggest that “mysterious closure” in Wang Wei is the result of an early High Tang fascination with nonexplicit endings as a reaction against the explicit emotional response characteristic of Early Tang verse).³ Analyzing Buddhist effects and their impact on general writing is not an impossible task: Xiaofei Tian, for instance, has made an excellent argument for

2. Knechtges, *Wen xuan*, vol. 1, 236.

3. See Owen, *The Great Age*, 38–39, 57–58; and Chou, “Beginning with Images,” 117–37, especially 119–21.

how Buddhist phenomenology comes to influence representation of physical surfaces in sixth-century verse.⁴ But it is a difficult aspect to pin down. In modern scholarship, this difficulty is accentuated by two further factors: first, the general tendency in the Chinese reading tradition to ignore the Buddhist element in literature; and, second, the modern propensity to see Chan 禪 Buddhism as a sort of Chinese-friendly, intellectually sophisticated version of the faith that is free of “religious superstition” and thus compatible with elite aesthetic values (hence, the large number of works with titles like “Chan and Chinese literature” in academic writing). This latter tendency is particularly problematic, because it is rarely tied to any deep sensitivity to the historical factors that created the movement, factors that were still incipient and unclear through most of the Tang. Modern scholars, like the late John McRae, have spent decades pointing out how our modern view of Chan is a retroactive creation by later practitioners and that it does not start to take on familiar form until the late tenth century.⁵ Thus, we cannot assume that when Wang Wei or Du Fu uses the word *chan* in a poem or alludes to the early patriarchs that he has this sort of full-grown vision of the movement in his head. Nor can we safely claim that one of their poems feels “channish” in this sense (either in its themes or in its images). Rather, there is a shared group of images and concepts already present in medieval Buddhist writing that entered later discourse, and those same images and concepts can be present in “secular” literature. Because they are expressed in vocabulary that can also express non-Buddhist ideas, we have to consider many different aspects before we can evaluate the impact of Buddhism in each individual case—and in many situations, such an evaluation must remain tentative. The social function of the poem can help in this respect: Who is the recipient of the poem (a monk associate or friend, for instance)? What are the circumstances for the poem’s composition (most obviously, is it a “temple-visiting” poem)? Is Buddhist terminology employed more for rhetorical effect, or does it seem to have a bearing on what the poem is doing overall? And, even if we answer these questions positively, we should probably also keep in mind that the situational and social nature of Tang verse means we are seeing a performance of Buddhism in a single poem or occasion and not necessarily a representation of the author’s daily concerns.

Before we turn to Du Fu, it might be instructive to note that the social and contextual presence of Buddhism in even such an obviously Buddhist poet as Wang Wei has been somewhat neglected. For most modern readers, Wang Wei is at his most “Buddhist” when he is writing as a seemingly lonely and isolated ascetic in search of greater truths (cf. for example frequently anthologized poems like “Visiting the Temple of Incense Amassed” [“Guo Xiangji si” 過香積寺]).⁶ However, to gauge the role of Buddhism in Wang Wei’s daily life and how that gets reflected in verse, one might turn to somewhat less well-known poems:

飯覆釜山僧	Feeding the Monks of Fufu Mountain
晚知清淨理	In old age I understand the principles of purity;
日與人群疏	daily I grow apart from the crowd.
將候遠山僧	I waited for these monks from the distant hills,
先期掃敝廬	sweeping my shabby hut before their appointed coming.

4. Tian, *Beacon Fire*, 233–59.

5. See especially McRae’s *Seeing through Zen*.

6. Wang Wei, *Wang Youcheng ji*, 131–32.

Sources of Difficulty

Reading and Understanding Du Fu

Christopher M. B. Nugent

驥子好男兒 Jizi is a fine boy;
 前年學語時 last year was when he learned to speak.
 問知人客姓 He asked to know the names of our visitors,
 誦得老夫詩 and was able to recite his old man's poems.

—Du Fu, “Expressing What Stirred Me” (“Qianxing” 遣興)¹

In Old Du's poems every word has a source. If you read them carefully thirty or fifty times, searching for points where he has exercised his intent, then there is much that you will have gained.

老杜詩字字有出處，熟讀三五十遍，尋其用意處，則所得多矣。²

—Huang Tingjian 黃庭堅 (1045–1105)

In these two quotations, from Du Fu himself and from the Northern Song writer and critic Huang Tingjian, we find very different perspectives on the great poet's works. In Du Fu's poem a proud father boasts that his son, no more than three or four at the time, can already recite some of his poems. The emphasis here is on orality. Jizi, whose given name is Zongwu 宗武, can speak but is some years away from reading and writing. He has, no doubt, learned these poems from hearing his father recite them. Du Fu does not claim that his son understands his poems. To *song* (誦, “recite”) is not necessarily to *tong* (通, “fully comprehend”), as centuries of schoolchildren and their teachers can attest. We can also assume—because we want to think well of Du Fu—that Du Fu has taught his son some simple quatrains and other *shi* poems, rather than his longer and more turgid *fu* 賦 (poetic expositions). Though in another poem about his son Du Fu claims that “poetry is our family business” 詩是吾家事,³ in “Expressing What Stirred Me” it is not work—the result of painstaking effort—but an ability that comes as naturally as speaking.

1. Owen, *The Poetry of Du Fu*, vol. 1, 262–63. See also Xiao Difei, *Du Fu quanji*, vol. 2, 3.794. All quotations of Du Fu's works are from Owen and all translations follow Owen, sometimes with minor changes. Citations are also given to *Du Fu quanji*.
2. Hua Wenxuan, *Du Fu juan*, 128.
3. “Zongwu's Birthday” 宗武生日. Owen, *The Poetry of Du Fu*, vol. 4, 342–43; Xiao Difei, *Du Fu quanji*, vol. 5, 9.2647–50.

Huang Tingjian's claim instead focuses on Du Fu's works as written texts, understanding of which comes only after great effort. Instead of speech (*yu* 語) we have characters (*zi* 字). Rather than recitation (誦), we have reading (*du* 讀). This is not to say that the oral/aural aspects were not still important for Huang—most of these terms are flexible enough to include both the oral and the written—but his emphasis is different, and the assumption is that the reader experiences Du Fu's works through a written text. Effort is more explicit as well: reading must be done repeatedly and with careful attention, as Du Fu is a poet whose oeuvre is fully and intentionally infused with the literary inheritance. His writings are the result of careful and deeply informed craft; only with careful and deeply informed reading can one grasp the true intent behind specific wordings.

This is an image of Du Fu as a difficult and challenging poet. Huang Tingjian ties this difficulty to what he sees as Du Fu's almost encyclopedic grasp of the literary and historical past. He specifically contrasts Du Fu (and, in this case, Han Yu 韓愈 [768–824]) with later readers in this respect:

When Old Du composed poems and Tuizhi composed prose, there was not a single word that lacked a source. It is likely just that people in later days are less well read and thus say that Han and Du came up with these phrasings themselves.

老杜作詩，退之作文，無一字無來處。蓋後人讀書少，故謂韓杜自作此語耳。⁴

Du Fu's genius here is not due to his unprecedented use of particular words and phrases but rather the opposite: it is the precedent that matters.⁵ To truly understand Du Fu, the reader must know what Du Fu knew; that, Huang Tingjian implies, takes hard work.

Huang Tingjian's reading of Du Fu is characteristic of an approach that quickly came to dominate the reception of the poet's works in the Song and has continued to do so in many quarters down to the present day.⁶ For nearly a millennium, Du Fu, more than any other Chinese poet (and perhaps any other poet in human history, with the possible exception of Shakespeare), has been an object of study. The most recent annotated edition of his complete works, Xiao Difei's *Du Fu quanji jiaozhu*, runs to twelve volumes and well over 6,000 densely packed pages. If these annotations do not manage to trace every word to its source, it is not for lack of trying. The implication is that this apparatus is necessary to understand Du Fu in the way in which Huang Tingjian and his many successors have suggested we should: as the poet historian whose writings offer deep rewards only as the prize for arduous study.

In this chapter I approach Du Fu from a different angle. Instead of assuming that Du Fu had memorized the full literary inheritance and wrote nary a word for which he did not have every previous important usage in the front of his mind, I examine a sample set of Du Fu's works to determine, in broad terms, the extent to which they would have been comprehensible to a reader with a basic education in the period in which Du Fu wrote. This is a preliminary exploration of poetic difficulty, a notion that is itself difficult to pin down. When scholars in the modern West say that Du Fu is difficult, part of what they mean is that he is difficult to translate in a way that conveys to a new audience why he is "China's greatest poet." This is a meaningful difficulty, and

4. Hua Wenxuan, *Du Fu juan*, 120–21.

5. See a discussion of a similar point in Chen Jue, *Making China's Greatest Poet*, 214–15.

6. For a discussion of the reaction against this mode of reading Du Fu in the Ming and Qing, see Ji Hao, "Poetics of Transparency," especially Chapters 1 and 2.

it explains why it is only with the publication of Stephen Owen's monumental achievement that China's greatest poet has been fully translated into English. But Du Fu was difficult to Huang Tingjian as well, for reasons that are different but overlapping.

The notion of a text being difficult or easy is always bound by context. Answers to the question "difficult for whom" do not always map easily onto judgments of literary sophistication: a teenager's text message may well be indecipherable to an accomplished middle-aged scholar of Milton but utterly transparent to another teenager. For my analysis here I will focus on two basic aspects of linguistic and poetic difficulty: vocabulary and allusions. The context in which I will address these forms of difficulty is based on our knowledge of the kinds of texts used in the early stages of literary training in the first half of the Tang. Our imagined reader will thus not be a Song scholar with a library of printed collections close at hand, and certainly not a modern scholar with heavily annotated editions and dozens of searchable electronic resources, but an average member of the medieval literary elite at an early stage of learning the vocabulary and references that would eventually allow him to meet the basic cultural demands of his social context.

I focus on a constrained sample: Du Fu's renowned series of poems written during his time in Kuizhou, "Stirred by Autumn" ("Qiuxing bashou" 秋興八首).⁷ I do not claim that these works are somehow representative of Du Fu's larger output; they clearly are not (just as they are not the sort of works Du Fu would have recited to his three-year-old son), but they are characteristic of a certain late style. I have chosen them as a potentially revealing sample because of their widely accepted place as the height of poetic art in traditional China. As Owen has written, they "have a strong claim to be the greatest poems in the Chinese language."⁸ This is itself a strong claim but one that finds ample agreement from centuries of readers and critics.⁹ Equally important for my purposes here, the poems in this series are considered to be among Du Fu's most challenging, though it is not always made clear wherein this difficulty lies,¹⁰ and have arguably accrued more commentary since the Song than any of his other works.¹¹ My goal here is neither to add to that commentary nor to reexamine the series on aesthetic or literary-historic grounds but instead to use these works as a test case to examine the notion of poetic difficulty. I approach these poems as information that can be quantified and analyzed as such. An analysis of this sort is only one lens through which to view these works. There is much that such a lens obscures, but it also has the potential to reveal new insights. Though this poetic series will be the focus of my argument, I will also briefly discuss some of Du Fu's *fu* works for comparative purposes, as *fu* are typically considered a more lexically and allusively challenging poetic form. My tentative conclusion is that, in the case of this particular set of Du Fu's works, perceived difficulty may ultimately prove to be a function more of particular reading practices and assumptions about Du Fu than of the content of the poetic works themselves.

7. Owen, *The Poetry of Du Fu*, vol. 4, 352–60. Xiao Difei, *Du Fu quanji*, vol. 7, 13.3798–41.

8. Owen, *The Great Age*, 265.

9. For a detailed discussion of the poems' merits, see the introductory section of Ye Jiaying, *Du Fu qiuxing*, 1–62.

10. Mei Tsu-lin and Kao Yu-kung have written convincingly of the innovative and carefully crafted phonetic patterns of the series. See Mei and Kao, "Tu Fu's 'Autumn Meditations.'"

11. Most of this commentary was gathered by Ye Jiaying in *Du Fu qiuxing bashou jishuo*.

Six Modernist Poets in Search of Du Fu

David Der-wei Wang

Luigi Pirandello's (1867–1936) *Six Characters in Search of an Author* (1921) is a landmark of high modernism in European theater. The play opens with six strangers showing up to a drama company's rehearsal of a play. These strangers claim that they are the characters of a play waiting to be finished and demand that the director stage their story. Over the course of the play, they critique the actors' and the director's interpretations, and reveal and even act out the plots that purportedly form the real basis for the play within the play. As a result, the play becomes a sequence of quarrels between the characters and the actors and production crew, and among the characters themselves, culminating in an anarchy in and about the theater.

Six Characters in Search of an Author touches on many of the central concerns of modernism as a global movement, such as the boundaries of mimesis, the feasibility of form and formality, the criteria of canon, and above all the legitimacy of authorial subjectivity. At the center of Pirandello's play, as its title suggests, is the search for the missing author. The "author" is the most important "character" in the entire the play; his absence, or more paradoxically, his haunting omnipresence, brings about both the crisis and the carnivalesque potential of the production. Pirandello's inquiry into the dissipation *and* enchantment of the author—and by association, the embodiment of authoritative subjectivity, the paradigm, and the origin of a tradition of authorship—in the modern age had a lasting impact on Western literary discourse, including Harold Bloom's *The Anxiety of Influence* (1973) and Roland Barthes's *The Death of the Author* (*La mort de l'auteur*, 1967).

When one brings the concepts of the absence (or even the death) of the author to bear on the dynamics of Chinese modernism, however, one confronts a different set of questions, the most pressing of which are whether the "author" occupies a position of the same significance in the Chinese literary tradition as in its Western counterpart, and whether the invocation of this "author" necessarily gives rise to "authorial and intentional fallacies" or "the anxiety of influence" in the Chinese context. Above all, has the "author" truly been eclipsed in modern Chinese discourse? One case that throws all of these questions into relief is Chinese modernist poets' reception and appropriation of

Du Fu, the “poet sage” (*shi sheng* 詩聖) and the arch-practitioner of the canon of “poetry as history” (*shi shi* 詩史).

This chapter argues that, for all the iconoclastic impulses of modern Chinese literature, Du Fu continued to enjoy being an icon and a ground for cultural and even political contestation throughout the twentieth century, inspiring and challenging poets of various styles, generations, and ideologies. Feng Zhi 馮至 (1905–1993), whom Lu Xun 魯迅 (1881–1936) famously identified as the “best modern Chinese lyricist,”¹ modeled himself after Du Fu as early as the mid-1920s while Wen Renping 溫任平 (b. 1944), a renowned sinophone poet based in Malaysia, critiqued the politics of Penang by assuming the posture of Du Fu as recently as March 2016.² Whereas the Taiwanese American poet Yang Mu 楊牧 (b. 1940) cites Du Fu as the inspiration for the conceptual and stylistic metamorphosis of his poetry in the 1970s,³ the Singaporean poet Liang Wern Fook 梁文福 (b. 1964) reminisces in the new millennium about the days when he coped with the drudgery of military training by mentally reciting Du’s poems.⁴ Moreover, Du Fu has been cited so frequently for cultural, political, and commercial purposes in contemporary China that, to make fun of the trend, there appeared a popular internet meme titled none other than “Du Fu henmang” 杜甫很忙 (Du Fu is busy) in 2012.⁵

The fact that Du Fu is the “author” worshiped by multiple modern Chinese poets during the past century prods us to reconsider the motivations of Chinese literary modernity. Conventional wisdom has it that Chinese modernism arose as part of the May Fourth literary reform, a movement purportedly predicated on radical antitraditionalism. Moreover, modernist Chinese poetry is often considered a genre modeled on Western forms. As the conventional view would have it, modernist Chinese poetry is a far cry from classical Chinese poetry in both form and content. Therefore, the way in which Chinese modernists have continually treated Du Fu as a source of inspiration—or more, finding in him a kindred spirit, or *zhiyin* 知音—is a highly intriguing phenomenon. Their “search” for the ancient “sage of poetry” not only points to a unique dialogical relationship between the moderns and a premodern “author” but also offers an important clue to the genealogy of Chinese literary modernity.

Accordingly, inspired by Pirandello’s dramatic scenario, this chapter introduces six modernist Chinese and sinophone poets in search of Du Fu—Huang Canran 黃燦然 (b. 1963), Xi Chuan 西川 (b. 1963), Wai-lim Yip 葉維廉 (b. 1937), Xiao Kaiyu 蕭開愚

1. Lu Xun, preface to *Xiandai Zhongguo wenxue daxi*, 4.
2. Lim Guan Eng, then the chief minister of Penang in Malaysia, was criticized by the media for purchasing a luxury condo for half its market price in March 2016, a scandal that compelled Wen Renping to compose “Untitled” 無題, which reads, “Lim Guan Eng walked toward Du Fu’s thatched cottage / On stone steps soaked wet by the spring rain after a humid summer / His escorts hurried to cover the path with wood planks / The Master’s feet must not get wet / Otherwise his clean reputation of incorruptibility would be stained” 林冠英向杜甫草堂走去 / 石階被溽暑後的春雨打濕 / 隨扈慌不迭忙, 用木板鋪路 / 主子的雙足不能濕 / 濕了有損廉潔清譽. The poem is published on Wen Renping’s Facebook page at https://zh-cn.facebook.com/permalink.php?story_fbid=972052262832686&id=972044979500081.
3. Yang Mu, “Paying Tribute to Du Fu in Autumn” 秋祭杜甫 (1974). See Zhang Songjian’s discussion in “One Poet, Four Faces,” 179–203. I thank Professor Zhang for helping with the collection of poetry related to Du Fu in sinophone Malaysia and Singapore and for the insights of his essay.
4. Liang Wern Fook, “Taking the 2.4 k Run with Du Fu” 與杜甫共跑 2.4. Published in *Lianhe zaobao* 聯合早報, July 13, 2003.
5. See <http://knowyourmeme.com/photos/278875-du-fu-is-busy>. On March 26, 2012, the Chinese news blog *Ministry of Tofu* published an article titled “‘Du Fu Is Busy’—Netizens Have Fun with Photo-Shopping Portrait of Ancient Chinese Poet,” which quickly drew national attention and gave rise to a trend of “redrawing” the poet’s sanctioned portraits in multiple contemporary media.

(b. 1960), Luo Fu 洛夫 (1928–2018), and Luo Qing 羅青 (b. 1948)—along with their aspirations and conjurations, appropriations and revisions. For the sake of comparison, I will also discuss Feng Zhi, whose poems on Du Fu have received ample attention.⁶ In the name of Du Fu, these poets form an imagined community within the republic of poetry. Subsequently in this chapter, I will divide these poets according to two interrelated themes. While the first group—Huang Canran, Xi Chuan, and Wai-lim Yip—composes poems to emulate Du Fu, the second—Xiao Kaiyu, Luo Fu, and Luo Qing—writes in such a way as to “simulate” the master. In both cases I examine how these modern poets stage imaginary dialogues with the “sage of poetry” and probe issues such as canonicity and its subversion, iconography and the “anxiety of influence.” Above all, the chapter seeks to understand their engagement with Du Fu’s legacy in light of various historical circumstances, thus reviving the concept of “poetry as history.”

Emulating Du Fu: Huang Canran, Xi Chuan, Wai-lim Yip

Modern Chinese poets’ engagement with Du Fu is best represented by Feng Zhi’s lifelong “search” for the “sage of poetry.” In December 1938, Feng Zhi and his family arrived in Kunming, Yunnan, after a long journey fleeing the Japanese invasion. Before the outbreak of the Second Sino-Japanese War the year before, Feng had already enjoyed a reputation as both “the best lyricist of modern China” and a first-rate scholar of Goethe, Rilke, and German literature in general. Feng Zhi had long found his kindred spirit in Du Fu. In the epigraph of his collection *Bei you* 北游 (*Northern Journey*, 1929), Feng Zhi quotes Du Fu’s line “I stand alone in a vast expanse chanting a poem to myself” 獨立蒼茫自詠詩.⁷ But it was the hardship of the journey he took westward to the hinterland that made him truly understand the pathos Du Fu harbored during the An Lushan Rebellion. In 1941, Feng wrote the following quatrain:

攜妻抱女流離日	Now as a refugee, taking my wife along and carrying my daughter,
始信少陵字字真	I begin to believe the truth of Du Fu’s every word;
未解詩中盡血淚	Unable to understand the blood and tears filling every poem,
十年佯作太平人	for ten years I pretended to be a person living in a peaceful world. ⁸

Written in the form of a seven-character-line quatrain, the poem is a far cry from the modern form for which Feng Zhi was known. It testifies to his determination to emulate the Tang poet’s engagement with poetry *as* history.

Notwithstanding its antitraditional claims, modern Chinese literature did not do away with the *shi shi* discourse but rather intensified it, as evinced by Feng Zhi’s poetry and poetics. The devastation and hardship of wartime life compelled Feng Zhi to contemplate a series of questions: the cycle of life and death, the necessity of change, and the burden of making choices and commitments in life. Rilke and Goethe loom around his works, but it is Du Fu who inspired Feng Zhi when he was pondering the role that a poet plays during a historical catastrophe. The result is a collection of twenty-seven

6. See Zhang Songjian’s essay, “One Poet, Four Faces.”

7. From Du Fu’s “Song of Leyou Park” 樂遊園歌. Translation is Stephen Owen’s. Owen, *The Poetry of Du Fu*, vol. 1, 68–69.

8. Feng Zhi, “For the Inauguration of *Caotang*” 祝《草堂》創刊, in *Feng Zhi quanji*, vol. 4, 226. I thank Dylan Suher for helping translate this and other poems in the chapter.

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