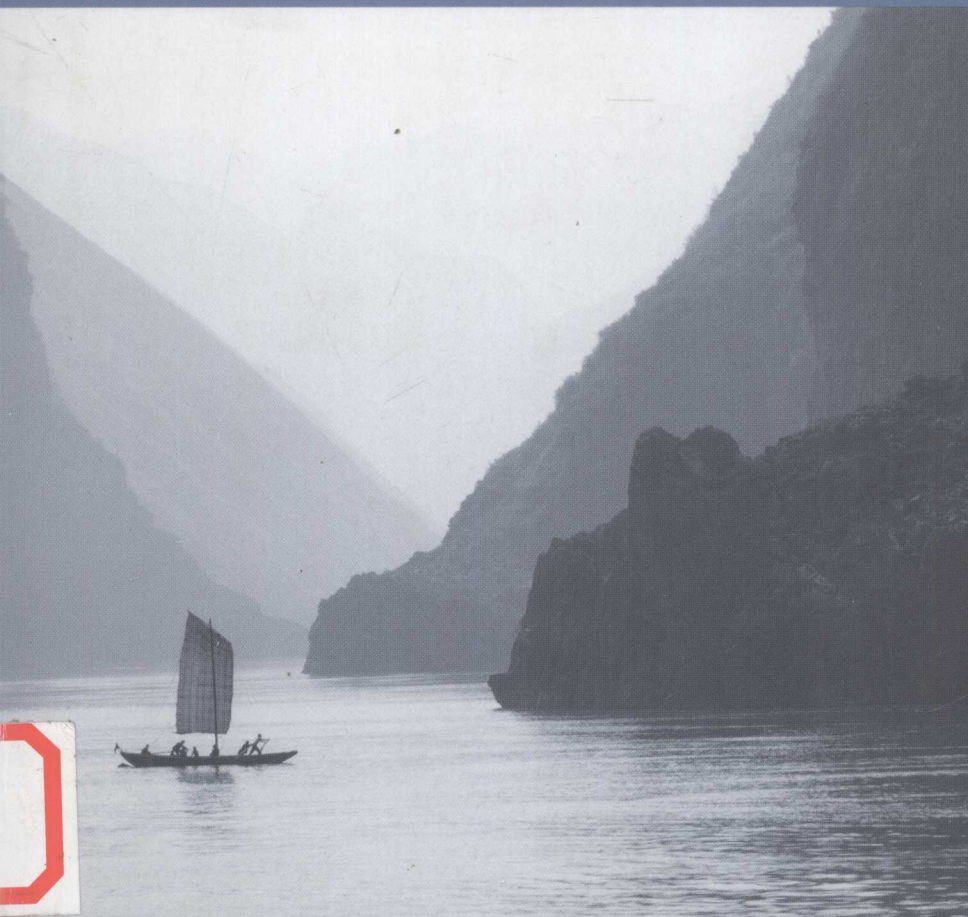


the selected poems of DU FU

TRANSLATED BY burton watson



burton watson

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introduction

Du Fu, the eliciter of superlatives! The Chinese scholar William Hung, who wrote the definitive book in English on Du Fu's life and poetry, gave it the unequivocal title *Tu Fu: China's Greatest Poet*. Professor Stephen Owen of Harvard, the leading American authority on Chinese poetry of the Tang period, enthusiastically seconds Hung's estimation of Du Fu. And the American poet and translator Kenneth Rexroth, who rendered some of Du Fu's poems in English, goes a step further to declare him "the greatest non-epic, non-dramatic poet who has survived in any language."¹

My aim in the present volume is neither to question nor to confirm these judgments, but simply to present a selection of Du Fu's works in translation, though later in this introduction I would like to examine some of the reasons that could be cited to support these claims to greatness. Some fourteen hundred poems attributed to Du Fu have come down to us, but his fame rests mainly on one hundred or so poems that have been widely admired, commented on, and anthologized over the centuries by the Chinese and other peoples within the Chinese cultural sphere. My own selection of 135 poems includes translations of most of the poems for which he is best remembered along with a few less famous works that I believe deserve notice.

Du Fu's poetry was profoundly influenced by the troubled times in which he lived; before considering the poems themselves, it may therefore be helpful to give a brief summary of his life. Little biographical information regarding him has survived, and almost all of what we know of him comes from his own poems and other writings. A chronological outline of his life will be found on pp. vii–viii, but even some of the data listed there is conjectural in nature, as is much of the dating of the poems in my selection.

Du Fu came from a distinguished family of literati. His most illustrious ancestor was Du Yu (222–284), a literary leader and Confucian scholar who compiled an authoritative commentary on the *Zuozhuan*, one of the most important historical texts of the Confucian canon. Also of prominence was his paternal grandfather, Du Shenyan (d. 708), an official in the Tang bureaucracy and one of the outstanding poets of his time. Du Fu's father, Du Xian, also held an official post, though a minor one, and little is known of him. Du Fu's mother, whose surname was Cui, apparently died shortly after he was born; the younger brothers and sister he mentions in his poetry are almost certainly children by a second wife.

Du Fu, whose courtesy name was Zimei, was born in 712, one year before Emperor Xuanzong came to the throne. His place of birth is uncertain, but it is usually listed as Gong District in the Luoyang area of Henan. Almost nothing is known of his early years, though being the son of a family that for successive generations had held official posts, he no doubt worked diligently to prepare for the civil service examinations that opened the way to such offices. This involved intensive study and memorization of the classics of Confucianism, the standard histories, and literary works such as the voluminous *Wenxuan*, or *Literary Anthology*. He was well versed in Daoist literature as well and, as he himself mentions, at some point studied the doctrines of the Chan, or Zen, school of Buddhism and acquired a considerable knowledge of Buddhist writings.²

In his poems he refers to two periods of youthful wandering, the first, probably in the years around 731–735, to Jiangsu and the seacoast area of Zhejiang, and the second some years later to the northeast region of Shandong and Hebei. At some point, probably in 735, he went to the capital, Chang'an, to take the examination for *jinshi*, or Presented Scholar. Much to the bafflement of scholars and admirers of later generations, he failed to make a passing grade.

During his youthful years in the Luoyang area, when he was already very active as a poet, he became acquainted with a number of well-known literary figures, among them the famous poet Li Bo or Li Bai (701–762), whom he greatly admired. In several poems in my selection, Du Fu recalls their period of friendship and expresses concern over the older poet's welfare.

In 746 Du Fu left the Luoyang area and moved to Chang'an, living in a suburb of the city called Duling, where a number of families with the Du surname were located. Apparently he hoped to advance his chances for an official appointment by showing his writings to influential people in the capital and appealing to them for help, a common practice at the time among young men with literary and political ambitions. In a poem presented to one such patron, he describes himself wryly as "mornings rapping at some rich fellow's gate, / evenings trailing in the dust of his fat horses." (See poem 5.)

The period of Du Fu's youth, which corresponds to the early years of Emperor Xuanzong's reign, was one of widespread peace and prosperity, a golden age in the annals of Chinese culture. But by the time he moved to Chang'an, there were clear signs of impending disaster. The Chinese armies garrisoning the borders were, in many areas, pushing to extend the territory under Tang control and meeting with strong resistance from non-Chinese peoples such as the Turks, Tibetans, and Uighurs. The government resorted to harsh impressment measures to keep the armies fully manned, taking peasants from their homes and families for long periods of military duty.

Emperor Xuanzong, earlier so zealous in his attention to state affairs, had become concerned largely with two things: a Daoist-inspired pursuit of immortal life and his infatuation with a concubine named Yang Guifei. He showered wealth and honor on her and her relatives, the Yang family. Increasingly, he left political matters to his chief minister Li Linfu and, after Li's death in 753, to his successor Yang Guozhong, a cousin of Yang Guifei. Many of Du Fu's best-known works from this period deal with these problems—depictions, often in ballad form, of the sufferings caused by the impressment of men into military service or satires on the favors enjoyed by members of the Yang family.

In 747, shortly after his move to Chang'an, Du Fu had a second opportunity to try his luck at the civil service examinations when Emperor Xuanzong held a special exam for the purpose of discovering unrecognized talent. However, the chief minister Li Linfu, sensing a possible threat to his power, saw to it that all the candidates were given failing grades. It was not until late in 755 that Du Fu was at last assigned to a post in the government, a minor one in the palace of the Heir Apparent. The time was not auspicious for anyone joining the ranks of the Tang bureaucracy.

Toward the close of 755, An Lushan, a trusted military leader whose base of power was in the northeast in the area of present-day Beijing, initiated a revolt, ostensibly for the purpose of punishing the evil chief minister Yang Guozhong. His forces, sweeping west, captured Luoyang, the Eastern Capital, and before long they were pressing toward Chang'an. In the sixth month of 756, Emperor Xuanzong and his court fled the city by a western gate. When they reached Mawei, a little west of the capital, the soldiers escorting them killed Yang Guozhong and refused to go farther until the emperor agreed to have Yang Guifei put to death as well. The emperor reluctantly gave his consent, and she was taken to a nearby Buddhist chapel and strangled. Before retreating to safety in Sichuan, the emperor

relinquished the throne to the Heir Apparent, who became Emperor Suzong and set up a temporary government in a remote area northwest of Chang'an.

Du Fu, by now married and the father of a family, fled the capital around the same time, journeying north, as he describes in the poem "Ballad of Pengya," and eventually he settled his wife and children at a place called Qiang Village in Fuzhou. He then attempted to make his way to the new emperor's headquarters, but was captured by the rebels and returned to Chang'an, where he was held under surveillance. In the fourth month of 757, he managed to escape from Chang'an and reach Fengxiang, west of the capital, where Emperor Suzong had established his court. As a reward for his loyalty, he was assigned the office of Reminder, an advisory post. In this post he quickly incurred the ruler's displeasure by speaking out in defense of Fang Guan, a high official and old friend who had fallen out of favor. He was relieved of his duties and ordered to join his family in Fuzhou. He later returned to Chang'an, once more in government hands, and was restored to the post of Reminder.

Du Fu apparently continued to do too much "reminding" for the emperor's taste, and, in the sixth month of 758, he was transferred to a lesser post in Huazhou east of the capital. Late in the year he made what was to be his last trip back to the Luoyang area that he called home.

By this time, An Lushan, the instigator of the rebellion, had been murdered by his son, but the rebel forces continued to pose a threat and contributed to the highly unstable condition of the empire. In the seventh month of 759, because of famine in the immediate area, Du Fu resigned his post in Huazhou and traveled west with his family in search of food, stopping for a time in Qinzhou, an outpost on the western frontier of the empire in present-day Gansu, then moving to Tonggu, and finally to Chengdu, a large city in the region of Shu, or Sichuan.

During much of his life, Du Fu seems to have been torn between two conflicting ideals: a high-minded and admirably Confucian desire to serve his sovereign and country as a member of the bureaucracy and a more Daoist-oriented wish to retire to the countryside to a life of rustic seclusion. He alludes frequently to both ideals in his poetry. During his stay in the Chengdu area, he was, to some extent, able to realize the second of these ideals, and the years he spent there were, relatively speaking, among the most peaceful and happy of his adult life.

Through friends, some highly placed in the local government, he and his family were able in 760 to settle in a small "thatched hall" on Wash-Flower Stream west of Chengdu, a site that has now become a veritable national shrine to the poet's memory. Because of a local rebellion, he was obliged to leave his house in 762 and take refuge in nearby Zizhou, but he returned to Chengdu in 764. For a brief time thereafter, he held a post in the local government but soon retired because of poor health.

The following year, 765, he left Chengdu and began traveling east down the Yangzi River, stopping at various points along the way. The many poems preserved from this period of his life allow a more accurate reconstruction of his movements, as is evident from the headings of poems in my selection. By 769 he had journeyed down the Yangzi as far as Lake Dongting in Hunan.

His health, never robust, was failing badly—he suffered from a lung ailment, probably asthma, was deaf in one ear, unsteady on his feet, and troubled by weakening eyesight. Plagued by constant worries over how to provide for his family, his declining health, and the uncertain fate of the nation, he often sinks into a mood of unrelieved melancholy in the poetry of these last years, constantly returning to themes of remoteness, of being far from "home." Late 770 found him in Tanzhou, the modern city of Changsha, southeast of Lake Dongting, still hoping to journey on to his homeland in the east, when death brought an end to his trials.

William Hung, in the work mentioned earlier, writes of Du Fu that he “appeared to be a filial son, an affectionate father, a generous brother, a faithful husband, a loyal friend, a dutiful official, and a patriotic subject.”³ Given all these sterling qualities, and the close links that traditional Chinese thought posits between art and morality, the implication is that he could hardly be anything but a great poet as well. The picture we have of him derives almost entirely from his own poems. Yet so convincing is that picture in its air of profound moral sincerity that, at least from Song times on, admiration for the poet’s character has constantly complemented, and at times has even outshone, the literary evaluation of his writings. It is this admiration that is largely responsible for a twelfth-century critic’s crowning him with the title *shisheng*, or “Sage of Poetry,” making him the artistic counterpart of Confucius himself.

A second epithet frequently bestowed on him, that of “poet-historian,” is similarly based less on literary considerations than on the large amount of historical information contained in his works. From the poems we acquire invaluable insights into the unsettled times in which he lived and vivid, detailed data regarding the lives of the common people, information of a kind seldom found in the officially compiled histories of the era.

Regarding the purely literary qualities that have won Du Fu’s work its place of unrivaled eminence, we may note first the great variety of poetic forms in which he excelled. As one recent critic states, Du Fu “employed every prosodic form available to the Tang poet and, depending upon the state in which he found a particular prosodic form, either made outstanding advances or contributed outstanding examples.”⁴

My selection is limited to translations of his works in *shi* form, both the “old style” *shi* forms and the “new style,” or tonally regulated forms. The latter include the four-line *jueju*, the eight-line *lǚshi*, or regulated verse, and the *pailǚ*, which is unrestricted in length. (The form and line length of the origi-

nal are noted in the headings to my translations.) Du Fu also wrote works in the *fu*, or rhyme-prose form, though his efforts in this form are seldom read today.

In addition to its prosodic breadth and variety, Du Fu's work is distinguished by a similarly impressive breadth of subject matter. Something of this vast thematic variety is reflected in my selection, and further selections could be added to provide even more striking evidence of the multitude of themes he treated.

A corresponding richness is observable in Du Fu's language, which ranges from the elegant, highly polished diction of earlier court poetry to colloquialisms of the poet's own day, from language that is studied and heavily allusive to that which is startlingly direct and "unpoetic." He demonstrated that virtually all levels of language could be accommodated in the poem.

The thematic and stylistic comprehensiveness of Du Fu's work was one of the first qualities to be noted by critics. In 813, Du Fu's grandson, Du Siye, requested that Yuan Zhen, a distinguished poet and official, write an epitaph for his grandfather's grave. In Yuan's brief account of Du Fu, the earliest outside source we have on the poet, he singled out this quality in Du Fu's work for particular praise, noting that "he commanded all the traits displayed by poets of old, and could do all the things that present day poets do only singly."

Another salient feature of Du Fu's work is the inventiveness with which he wielded this masterful command of varied themes and styles. Thus, in a certain poetic form he treated subjects that had previously been thought suitable only for other forms, or he combined within a single form a variety of subjects that would earlier have been regarded as incompatible. His style and diction likewise show a chameleon-like tendency, contributing to what Stephen Owen has characterized as Du Fu's "shifting style."⁵ So great was Du Fu's command of the language and literary tradition that he could elect to write on any theme or in any manner he chose, combining themes

or styles in ways that were wholly without precedent. Even in the difficult closing years of his life, his work is tirelessly innovative and experimental. His expressed aim was to do what had never been done. As he states in a poem written in Chengdu in 761 (not included in my selection), “Perverse by nature, I’m addicted to fine lines; / if my words don’t startle people, I won’t give up till I die.”⁶

One other characteristic of Du Fu’s poetry merits particular notice, since it helps to explain the perennial appeal of his work—his realism. I will illustrate this by quoting a famous passage from a long poem entitled “Northern Journey,” not included in my selection. The poem was written in the fall of 757, when Du Fu, having incurred Emperor Suzong’s displeasure, was ordered to leave the court and travel north to Fuzhou, where his wife and children were living. The poem, 140 lines long, shifts back and forth between the political concerns of the entire nation and Du Fu’s private family affairs. The following section, lines 59 to 88, shows us the scene that confronted the poet when, after a long and difficult journey, he finally reached the country house where his family was lodging:

A year gone by, arriving at my thatched hut,
 wife and children, clothes a hundred patches;
 our cries mingle with the voice of the pines;
 the sad fountain joins our muffled sobbings.
 The little boy we’ve spoiled all his life,
 face paler, whiter than snow,
 sees his Papa, turns away in tears,
 dirty, grimy, feet with no socks.
 By the bed my two young girls,
 mended skirts scarcely covering their knees,
 a sea scene, the waves chopped up,
 bits of old embroidery sewn all askew,
 marine monster, purple phoenix

topsy-turvy on their coarse cloth jackets.
 Old husband, feeling somewhat poorly,
 vomiting, runny bowels, several days laid up in bed.
 But don't think I've no fabrics in my bag
 to save you from the shakes and shivers of the cold!
 Here's powder and mascara—I'll unwrap them—
 quilts, coverlets—I'll lay them all out.
 The face of my thin wife regains its brightness;
 my silly girls start in combing their own hair.
 They copy all the things they've seen their mother do,
 step by step applying morning makeup,
 taking their time, smearing on rouge and powder—
 how ridiculous—drawing eyebrows this wide!
 But I'm home alive, facing my young ones,
 and it's as though I've forgotten about hunger and thirst.
 They keep asking questions, outdoing each other in pulling
 my beard,
 but who'd have the heart to scold them?

It would appear that at this time Du Fu had four children, two girls and two boys. The "little boy" in line 5 of my excerpt is probably his younger son, Pony Boy. It seems odd that he should turn away from his father in tears, though perhaps through some misunderstanding he thinks he has done something for which he will be scolded. The "old husband" in line 15 is, of course, Du Fu himself.

The whole passage, replete with closely observed details, has two sections of particular note. The first is Du Fu's description of the clothes worn by the girls, garments that Du Fu's wife has mended with patches cut from an old and probably expensive piece of embroidery. The embroidery originally depicted a seascape complete with the mythical sea monster called Tian Hu and a purple phoenix or purple phoenixes. But the pattern has now been cut to bits and sewn so that the fig-

ures are askew or upside down. The crazy quilt effect that results perfectly reflects the disruption and chaos that have descended on the Du family, and by extension on the whole of Tang China. The second notable section occurs in the latter part, when the little girls, seizing on the powder and mascara that the poet has brought for his wife, proceed to plaster their faces with it. The mood here is all gaiety and madcap humor, a brief moment of brightness before the poem quits the domestic scene and turns to solemn concerns of national policy.

Earlier poets allowed brief glimpses of their family life or their everyday activities in their poems, but they wrote nothing to compare to the concreteness and intimacy of such passages as this by Du Fu. They are among the most memorable and widely quoted in all his works and exercised an inestimable influence on the Chinese poetic tradition of later times.

A perceptive person reading Du Fu in the original would presumably be able to respond to the excellent qualities outlined above and appreciate the true literary worth of his work. But what of a person reading Du Fu in translation? Regrettably, Du Fu has long been known as the despair of translators; as David Hawkes observes dryly, "his poems do not as a rule come through very well in translation."⁷ Part of the difficulty stems from the "shifting style" mentioned earlier. A poem may capture one mood for a time and then quite abruptly veer into another, may open with a vision of all-encompassing grandeur but close on a relatively narrow and solipsistic note. Du Fu's acute sensitivity seems to keep his attention darting from one aspect of a scene to another, and his emotional response shifts accordingly.

He was especially skillful in his use of the eight-line *lǔshi*, or regulated verse form, and many examples will be found in my selection. The form demands strict verbal parallelism in the second and third couplets, and the deft and highly original manner in which Du Fu shapes these parallelisms is one of the

wonders of his art. But such parallelisms—and they are used extensively in his poems in other prosodic forms as well—often tend to sound forced or mechanical in translation, particularly as modern poetry so seldom employs rhetorical devices of this sort. Moreover, poems in regulated verse form are frequently so compressed in language and so devoid of syntax that in translation they seem almost clogged with images, static and unflowing. Some translators attempt to lessen the studied effect of parallelisms by deliberately blurring their symmetry, or they try to relieve the monotony of end-stopped lines by converting some into run-on lines. Though I can understand the impulse behind such procedures, in my own translations I have endeavored in most cases to stick as closely as possible to the wording and lineation of the original.

There are many different ways to approach the problems involved in translating Du Fu, which is why we need as many different translations as possible. Any attempt to achieve a translation of his poetry that is wholly satisfactory is an exercise in the impossible, yet even a translation that is only partially successful seems eminently worth striving for. Such is the power and appeal of Du Fu's work and the importance of its place in world literature that translators, myself among them, will always keep trying.

Some of these translations appeared earlier in my *Columbia Book of Chinese Poetry* (1984) and *Renditions: A Chinese-English Translation Magazine*, no. 55 (spring 2001) and are reproduced here in slightly revised form.

NOTES

1. William Hung, *Tu Fu: China's Greatest Poet* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1952). Stephen Owen, *The Great Age of Chinese Poetry: The High T'ang* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1981), p. 183. Kenneth Rexroth, *One Hundred Poems from*

the Chinese (New York: New Directions, 1956), p. 135. In my earlier works on Chinese literature I have used the Wade-Giles system of romanization, which renders the great poet's name as Tu Fu. In this volume I switch to the pinyin system now used in China, which renders his name as Du Fu.

2. In an early poem entitled "Night: Hearing Xu Eleven Recite Poems; in Admiration I Wrote This," Du Fu says, "I too made Can and Ke my teachers." Can and Ke are Huike and Sengcan, second and third patriarchs of the Chinese Chan or Zen school of Buddhism. These men lived in the sixth century, so Du Fu must mean either that he studied the writings attributed to them or that he studied with men who were successors to their teaching line.
3. William Hung, *Tu Fu*, p. 282.
4. Eva Shan Chou, *Reconsidering Tu Fu: Literary Greatness and Cultural Context* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), p. 56.
5. Stephen Owen, *Chinese Poetry*, p. 192.
6. In a poem entitled "Along the River, Finding Its Waters as Powerful as an Ocean, Which Led to These Brief Remarks."
7. David Hawkes, *A Little Primer of Tu Fu* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1967), p. ix.