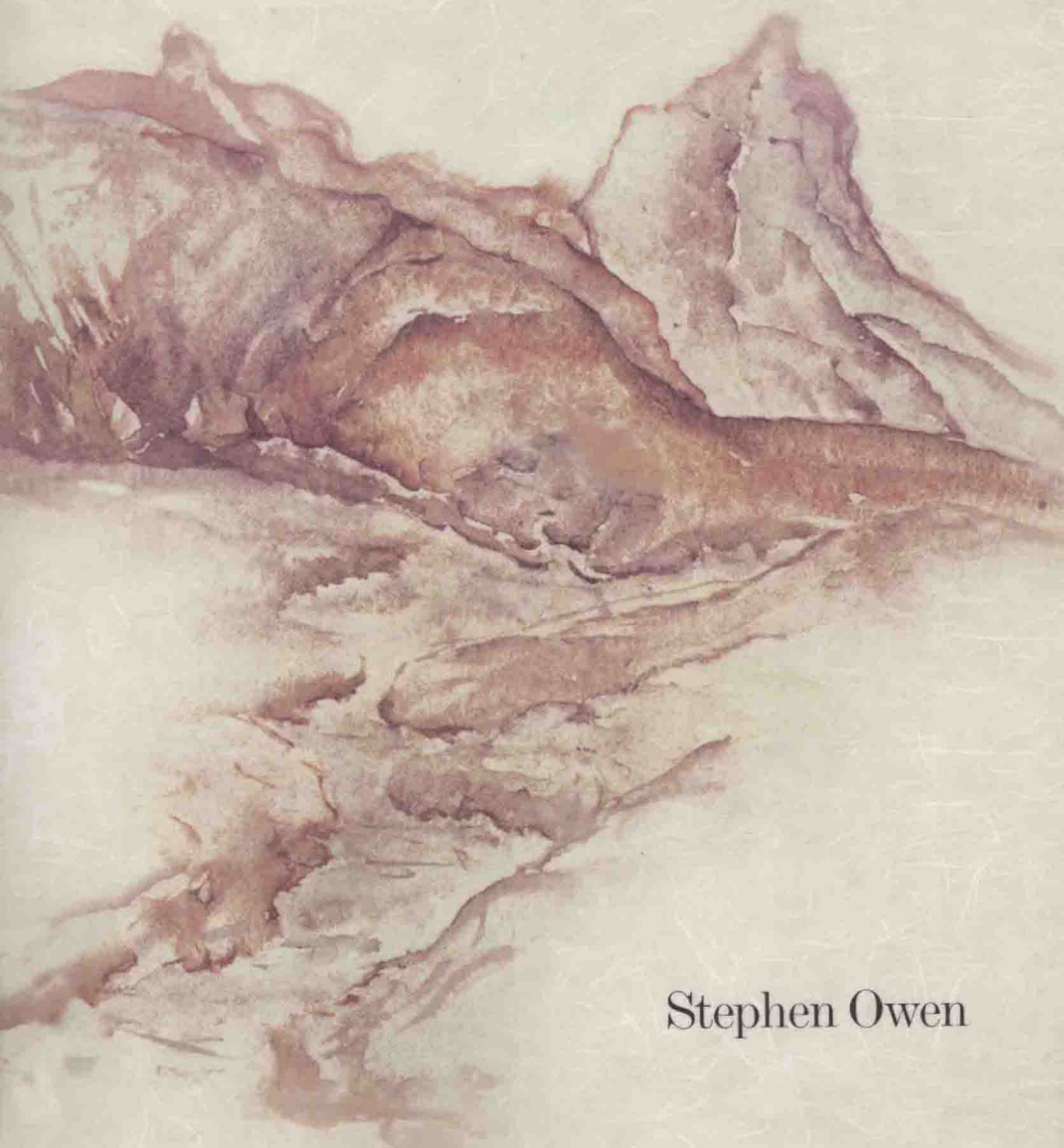


The
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of the Mid-Ninth
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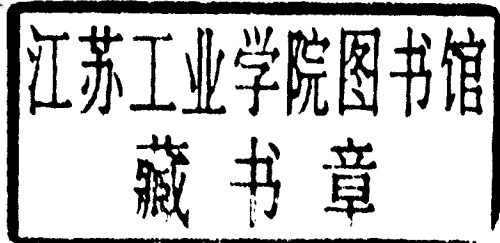


The Late Tang

Chinese Poetry of the Mid-Ninth Century

(827–860)

Stephen Owen



Published by the Harvard University Asia Center

Distributed by Harvard University Press

Cambridge (Massachusetts) and London 2006

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Printed in the United States of America

The Harvard University Asia Center publishes a monograph series and, in coordination with the Fairbank Center for East Asian Research, the Korea Institute, the Reischauer Institute of Japanese Studies, and other faculties and institutes, administers research projects designed to further scholarly understanding of China, Japan, Vietnam, Korea, and other Asian countries. The Center also sponsors projects addressing multidisciplinary and regional issues in Asia.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Owen, Stephen, 1946–

The late Tang : Chinese poetry of the mid-ninth century (827-860) /
Stephen Owen.

p. cm. -- (Harvard East Asian monographs ; 264)

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 0-674-02137-1 (cl : alk. paper)

ISBN 978-0-674-03328-3 (pbk : alk. paper)

1. Chinese poetry--Tang dynasty, 618-907--History and criticism.

I. Title. II. Title: Chinese poetry of the mid-ninth century (827-860)

PL232L.O94I35 2006

895.1'148--dc22

2006024793

Index by Christopher J. Dankin

Ⓢ Printed on acid-free paper

First paperback edition, 2009

Last figure below indicates year of this printing

16 15 14 13 12 11 10 09



Acknowledgments

No matter how solitary one is in working, “acknowledgements” are a way of remembering the degree to which academic books, like the poems discussed in this book, grow out of a social fabric. Some chapters of this book made their first appearance at talks and conferences, at “New Perspectives on the Tang” held at Princeton in spring of 2002 and in a Hsiang Lecture at McGill in the fall of the same year. Other chapters took shape through a seminar on Li Shangyin. To all those who offered comments I owe a dept of thanks. I want to thank my student Wangling Jinghua for proofreading the Chinese texts and Chris Dakin of the University of Washington for making the index, both with meticulous care. Finally I would like to thank my wife, Tian Xiaofei, whose learning and sense of poetry has been a constant joy throughout the process of writing, in scholarship as in life.

S.O.



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Introduction

Latecomers

杜牧, 齊安郡晚秋

Du Mu, Late Autumn in the District Offices at Qi'an¹

柳岸風來影漸疏	Winds come to willow-lined shores,
使君家似野人居	the reflections grow gradually sparser,
雲容水態還堪賞	the governor's home is like
嘯志歌懷亦自如	where someone lives in the wilds.
雨暗殘燈棋欲散	I can still enjoy the look of the clouds
酒醒孤枕雁來初	and charm of the waters,
可憐赤壁爭雄渡	I whistle my aims, sing my cares,
唯有簑翁坐釣魚	and do as I please.
	Rains darken the dying lamp,
	soon the chess pieces will be removed,
	I sober up on my pillow alone,
	the geese begin to come.
	I am moved how at Red Cliff,
	the crossing where heroes contended,
	there is only an old man in a raincoat,
	sitting and fishing.

In the spring of 842 the forty-year-old Du Mu went to take up his new post as governor of Huangzhou, sometimes known as Qi'an, on the northern bank of the Yangzi River in modern Hubei. The prefecture was believed to include the famous site of the Battle of Red Cliff. The story of that battle was well known. It was recounted in the *Account of the Three Kingdoms* 三國志, the standard history of the period, and was

1. 28153; Feng 208.

probably already part of popular storytelling traditions. It was to Red Cliff that Cao Cao brought his great northern army, preparing to cross the Yangzi and invade the southern kingdom of Wu. He had an invasion fleet readied there, secured with iron chains against the winds and currents.

Young Zhou Yu, the admiral of Wu's Yangzi River fleet, was charged with stopping the invasion. Knowing that Cao Cao was awaiting a grain shipment, Zhou Yu gathered fire boats and disguised them as grain transport vessels, screening his own war fleet. The whole plan depended on an east wind, and the wind did indeed blow from the east that day. When the "grain ships" came in close, they were set ablaze and the fire quickly spread through Cao Cao's chained fleet. With his fleet gone, Cao Cao had no choice but to retreat north again, leaving Wu sovereign in the Southland.

In the mid-ninth century Huangzhou was a small, poor prefecture—certainly not the worst of prefectural assignments, but far from the best. Du Mu once described it with ironic affection as "the place where I got enough sleep," and that captures the spirit of the first part of the poem, with the wind blowing the leaves off the willow trees along the shore, gradually opening vistas but creating a mess in the governor's residence. With a characteristic mellowness, the poet can enjoy both the scenery and his life here.

What Du Mu gives us in the penultimate line is by no means new in Late Tang poetry, but it is a poetic trope that appears so often in this period that it seems to have had a special resonance for the age. This is a scene of absence invoked in saying it is no longer there. In this case the scene of absence is one of battle and burning war galleys, which becomes a ghostly backdrop on which the present figure of an old fisherman is superimposed. Absorbed in his fishing, the old fisherman clearly shares the mood of the world with the governor, our poet. The difference is, of course, that only the poet sees in his mind's eye the ancient fleet in flames at the same time as he sees the old fisherman.

Such juxtapositions create relationships that are significant: in the old fisherman we see diminution, a tiny figure in a large landscape, in comparison to the great battle involving fleets and flames; we see aging, an old man in late autumn; we see vanished glory and in its place a quiet tranquility. This figure of the old fisherman is not just anyone: he has his own cultural and poetic history. Although he is anonymous, he made his appearance many times before Du Mu's poem: he was Tai-

gong the fisherman, recognized by King Wen of the Zhou and made his minister and architect of the Zhou conquest of the Shang; he was the fisherman whom Qu Yuan later encountered and who advised Qu Yuan not to worry about his misunderstood virtue but rather to go with the times. He had signified too many things to refer to only one thing here: he may be poetically ambiguous, but he is definitely “poetic.” A few decades earlier he made a winter appearance in Liu Zongyuan’s 柳宗元 most famous poem, entitled “River Snow” 江雪:²

千山鳥飛絕
萬徑人蹤滅
孤舟蓑笠翁
獨釣寒江雪

A thousand mountains, flights of birds are gone,
ten thousand paths, the tracks of people vanished.
In a lone boat an old man in rain hat and raincoat
fishes alone in the snow of the cold river.

The old fisherman was a quintessentially poetic figure, evocative and overdetermined. He is the figure here defined by a distance of perspective, a figure replacing a scene of violence in Du Mu’s poem. The perspective he lends to the past battle is anticipated in the image of the chess pieces removed from the board, literally “scattered.” In this we have both an aftermath of conflict and its formal displacement into a game. The figurative “storm” of an age of warfare becomes a literal rainstorm whose shadowy clouds darken the chessboard. This is the “work” of poetry: taking turbulence and transforming it into beautiful patterns and images, reconfiguring it.

Du Mu’s contemporary Wen Tingyun used exactly the same trope of superimposition in a song about Han emperor Wu’s naval maneuvers on Kunming Lake, near Chang’an, where through symbolic intimidation and sympathetic magic Emperor Wu overwhelms the enemy kingdom of Tianchi (in the far southwest). The Han emperor is the descendent of the Crimson Dragon, first appearing as a rippling reddish reflection, followed by his galleys and warriors.

溫庭筠, 昆明治水戰詞

Wen Tingyun, Lyrics for the Naval Maneuvers on Lake Kunming³

汪汪積水光連空

A vast flood of massed waters,
light stretching off to the sky,

2. 18520; Wang Guo’an 268.

3. 31900; Zeng 32.

重疊細紋交激紅

赤帝龍孫鱗甲怒

臨流一眇生陰風

鼉鼓三聲報天子

雕旗獸艦凌波起

雷吼濤驚白若山

石鯨眼裂蟠蛟死

滇池海浦俱喧飀

青翰畫鷁相次來

箭羽槍纓三百萬

踏翻西海生塵埃

fine patterns in endless folds,
crisscrossing ripples red.

The Crimson Emperor's dragon-spawn,
scaled armor in rage,
glares out on flowing waters,
giving off shadowy wind.

Three sounds from the lizard-skin drum
announce the Son of Heaven,
eagle banners and beast-headed galleys
rise up over the waves.

Thunder roars out, breakers surge,
white as mountains,
the eyes of the Stone Leviathan split,
coiling krakens die.

On Tianchi's seashore
all is howling and shrieking,
green-winged painted cormorant prow
come in succession.

Fletched arrows and spear tassels,
three million strong,
trample over the Western Sea
until dust rises from it.

Then, in the last stanza, Wen Tingyun turns back to the present:

茂陵僊去菱花老

啞啞游魚近煙島

渺莽殘陽釣艇歸

綠頭江鴨眠沙草

The immortal of Maoling has gone away,
water-chestnut blooms grow old,
swimming fish make bubbles in water
near to misty isles.

In a vast expanse of fading sunlight
a fishing skiff turns home,
and green-headed river ducks
sleep among sandy grasses.

Maoling was Emperor Wu's tomb, and no one would miss the irony of calling him the "immortal of Maoling," especially considering Emperor Wu's passionate quest for immortality. The past invoked in the first stanzas of the poem does not involve actual violence but rather a theatrical display of martial prowess. It has its own poetic beauty, invoked only to be replaced by a different kind of poetic beauty found in the present. That expanse of water is again still; the bird-headed prow of ancient war galleys are replaced by green-headed ducks asleep; and

there, in the fading sunlight, is the fishing boat with the poetic old fisherman.

The poetry of the Late Tang often looked backward, and many poets of the period distinguished themselves by the intensity of their retrospective gaze. Beguiling moments of the past, both historical and poetic, caught their attention and haunted their present. Chinese poets, like their premodern European counterparts, had always looked backward to some degree, but for many Late Tang poets the echoes and traces of the past had a singular aura. In this sense the “Late Tang” deserves to be called “late.” Our study ends around 860, so one cannot say that these poets felt the approaching end of the dynasty—though they were certainly aware that the polity was in serious trouble. Their “lateness” was primarily a sense of cultural belatedness, standing in the shadow of past masters of poetry and past glory.

The reign of Xuanzong 玄宗 (beginning in the second decade of the eighth century and lasting until the An Lushan Rebellion of 755) was already a legendary period of splendor by the mid-ninth century. Poets active after the An Lushan Rebellion, who were later associated with the Dali 大曆 Reign (766–779), were the model of classical grace and formal restraint for the craftsmen of regulated verse. Next came the Mid-Tang poets, who were associated with the Yuanhe 元和 Reign (806–820); these poets left a rich heritage of invention, mapping out new directions for poetry, a heritage against which many younger poets reacted but which loomed large in the recent past. By the time our study begins in the mid-820s, there was already a century of memorable poetry in the immediate past.

Accounts of Late Tang poetry inevitably must address the question of how the period term is being used. Originally the term “Late Tang” was applied to the entire century and a half following the An Lushan Rebellion of 755; in other words, it encompassed the entire second half of the dynasty. This was obviously useless in defining a period, not only in the context of literature but in all areas of historical study. Gao Bing’s 高標 (1350–1423) *Tangshi pinhui* 唐詩品彙 of 1393 helped to institutionalize the idea of a “Mid-Tang,” which ended with the Yuanhe generation. Roughly the last seventy-five years of the dynasty thus became the “Late Tang.” The invention of a “Mid-Tang” helped to account for the very striking differences between the famous poets of the Yuanhe generation and those that followed, differences about which poets active in

the second quarter of the century were intensely conscious. Many centuries of critical discourse on the history of Tang poetry have made these makeshift periods seem true and self-evident. The actual record, however, complicates the easy periodization.

Literary historians like to characterize periods in general terms. In part because of the amount of Late Tang poetry that has survived and also because of the social and geographical dispersal of poetic production, we find that poetry was going in various directions during this period, developing a diversity that defies simple characterization. We can see groups of poets that share common interests, new fashions emerging, particular locales as centers of poetic production, and specific individuals following their own singular paths irrespective of contemporary poetic fashions. In other words, when we look closely, there is no coherent “Late Tang” except as a span of years.

Even considered as a mere span of years the idea of the Late Tang presents problems when we look for its boundaries in literary culture. Considering the “Tang” part of the term, the Late Tang should conclude with the formal end of the dynasty in 907—even though the dynasty had been no more than a shadow court for several decades, with many poets working in the provinces and regional courts that would become the Five Dynasties. If, however, we look for a major change in literary culture and the world of poetry, we do not find it until the emergence of the group of poets around Ouyang Xiu 歐陽修 in the second quarter of the eleventh century. If we do not worry too much about the “Tang” part of our period term, we could easily see Late Tang poetry as lasting two centuries, not unlike the span of the late Southern Dynasties poetic style, which also crossed a period of transition and the establishment of a new, stable regime.

When poetry finally underwent a major change in the second quarter of the eleventh century, Ouyang Xiu quite consciously modeled his literary group on that of Han Yu, returning to the Yuanhe generation at the beginning of the ninth century. The deaths of the major figures of the Yuanhe generation and the marked rejection of their poetic styles should give us a clear beginning for the Late Tang (though, as we will see, Bai Juyi and Liu Yuxi lived on for decades). That moment of reaction and redirection of poetic interests does indeed mark a period change.

We will begin our study in that period of change in the mid-820s and carry it through to roughly 860. This latter date is one of convenience

rather than the mark of a moment of change. During this interval spanning roughly thirty-five years, a group of old men—holdovers of the Yuanhe generation—were still writing prolifically; Jia Dao perfected a craft of regulated verse that brought him a century and a half of devoted followers; and the three poets who have come to define Late Tang poetry—Du Mu, Li Shangyin, and Wen Tingyun—composed almost all their poems. Of those three Li Shangyin and Wen Tingyun went largely unrecognized as poets in their own lifetimes; and Du Mu, though prominent, shared the stage with many other poets whose names have largely been forgotten.

During this period the Tang did not seem in danger of imminent collapse, though toward the end of the period local rebellions had begun to break out. The process of dynastic disintegration had started and would accelerate in succeeding decades. After Huang Chao occupied Chang'an early in 881, the Tang was only a regional power, though it retained a nostalgic aura that still brought young men from far places seeking the prestige of the empty bureaucratic titles that the dynasty still had the power to confer. There is much poetry after 860 that is worthy of consideration. It is easy to read the poetry of this later period with an eye to the momentous events that were occurring, but the vast majority of poems composed during this period simply carry on the kinds of poetry created in the period encompassed by our study. It was a poetry that may have been traumatically ossified. If we wish to uncover the relation between the history of poetry and the larger sense of "history," we may find it not in changes in poetry but in poetry's refusal to change, in its fine couplets, its absorption in pleasures both poetic and sensual.

Chang'an, the great city, was doomed. We know virtually nothing about the monk called Zilan 子蘭 except that he was writing at the end. The first couplet of the following poem could have been written at any time, whereas the second evokes a moment like no other in Chang'an.

子蘭, 長安早秋

Zilan, Early Autumn in Chang'an⁴

風舞槐花落御溝

The wind sets the ash flowers dancing,
they fall in the royal moat,

終南山色入城秋

the colors of Zhongnan Mountain
enter the city autumnal.

4. 44998.

門門走馬徵兵急

Horses gallop past every gate

urgently calling up troops,

公子笙歌醉玉樓

while the songs and pipes of young nobles
make marble mansions drunk.

The last line echoes a famous line by Li Bai, composed in happier times but now containing a dark irony. We cannot date with any certainty the following poem in relation to the preceding one, but it is hard not to read it in seasonal sequence. We know that when Huang Chao's army entered Chang'an in 881, he was at first welcomed. During the sack of the city and the subsequent battles over possession of the city between loyalist forces and Huang Chao's army, the citizens of Chang'an were as terrible as any army.

子蘭，長安傷春

Zilan, Pain at Spring in Chang'an⁵

霜隕中春花半無

Frost descends in mid-spring,

half the flowers are gone

狂遊恣飲盡兇徒

running amok, drinking wildly,

the mob rages everywhere.

年年賞玩公卿輩

Lords and grandees who year after year

enjoyed this season

今委溝塍骨漸枯

are now left to lie in ditches and fields,

bones gradually stripped bare.

We see here vividly depicted the death of Chang'an. Yet the poems written at those parties before the fall—while the horses were galloping outside conscripting men for the defense of the city—were probably very much like the ones we will read here. This same poetry may have continued mimetically in the provinces during the Five Dynasties; but the society in which the poetry was first created was dead, bodies left rotting in the ditches and fields.

Although the diversity of the poetry between the mid-820s and 860 permits no single overall characterization, we do see new values and interests emerging. In most cases we can trace the roots of these new phenomena to an earlier period, and all continue through the ninth century into the tenth. We have already commented on the backward gaze

5. 45002.

of Late Tang poets and their fascination with the poetic and cultural past. Poets had a particular fascination with the later Southern Dynasties; it is tempting to see in this a sense of doom hanging over the dynasty, but this was probably true only indirectly. They were fascinated with absorption in various modes, and the image of heedless absorption in poetry and pleasure presented by the Southern Dynasties provoked an ambivalence that both attracted them and demanded censure.

Absorption was a way of excluding the larger world, of looking inward and isolating a particular object or domain. Figures of absorption play an important role in the representations of poets and poetry during this period. We witness a growing sense of poetry as a separate sphere of activity, demanding absolute commitment, with the “poet” as a distinct type. Poetry continued to flourish as a shared practice among a wide cross-section of the Tang elite, but we find groups who celebrated their devotion to poetry as a vocation, matched by a growing contempt for “poets” by some in court circles.⁶ As poetry became a separate sphere of commitment, like the vocation of a Buddhist monk, poets began to think of their poetry in terms of an accumulation, a “legacy,” based on the model of amassing land and goods or the “merit” accumulated over a lifetime of official service or Buddhist practice. Few poets are as different as Bai Juyi and Jia Dao, but in both we find scenes involving contemplation of their own accumulated poetic production in the form of physical manuscripts. Already in the 810s Yuan Zhen was working on preparing versions of his literary collection, followed by Bai Juyi, who produced multiple manuscript copies with ongoing updated editions and supplements. By mid-century editing one’s own poetry had become widespread, along with the production of subcollections of poems on special topics that might not be included in an author’s main collection.

One form of absorption in poetry was devotion to the craft of the perfect parallel couplet and a celebration of the effort and concentration it demanded. As we will see, such carefully crafted couplets are usually framed by more discursive, straightforward couplets, sometimes

6. The Southern Song critic Yan Yu strongly disapproved of Late Tang poetry, but by his age the changes that had occurred in the period had been so deeply assimilated that they were taken for granted. Thus, Yan Yu insists that poetry should be *danghang* 當行, probably as close as classical Chinese comes to “professional.”

showing an influence from the vernacular (the latter element was often even more salient in the last part of the ninth century). We see a growing divergence and tension between registers, along with disapproving comments on the low register that was championed by Bai Juyi. In this opposition of registers we first glimpse a sense of the “poetic” or “classical,” which would have profound consequences in later literary culture, whether the “classical” was held up as a standard to be followed or condemned as artificial. Earlier there had simply been “poetry” with a wide range of registers, one of which was usually used consistently in a poem; mixed-register poetry heightened the contrast between “high” and “low.”

We begin by “Setting the Stage” (Chapter 1), supplying the political historical background, introducing the poets, and addressing how the literary record of the period was shaped by the preservation of texts. We then turn to “The Old Men” (Chapter 2), the elderly members of the Yuanhe generation, of whom Bai Juyi was the most prominent, who continued to write prolifically into the 840s. Bai Juyi’s militant casualness was a transformation of Yuanhe poetic values that helped articulate opposing values among the craftsmen of “Regulated Verse in the Short Line” (Chapter 3). In this chapter we first address some of the larger issues in this conservative tradition and then discuss individual poets in the circle around Yao He and Jia Dao in “The Craftsmen of Poetry” (Chapter 4).

In “The Legacy of Li He” (Chapter 5) we look at the impact of the recovery and dissemination of Li He’s poetry in the early 830s. In “Regulated Verse in the Long Line” (Chapter 6) we examine the way in which the “personality” and history of a poetic genre shaped poetic production, using the Late Tang “meditation on the past,” *buaigu* 懷古, as an illustrative example. Here we can clearly see how later poets borrowed from and transformed the work of their predecessors. In “Poets of the Long Line” (Chapter 7) we look at some poets who were known for their work in regulated verse in the long line, which enjoyed renewed popularity after the middle of the 830s. During the late 830s and 840s these poets all exchanged poems with Du Mu, whose work is the subject of the following chapter (Chapter 8).

In “Daoism: The Case of Cao Tang” (Chapter 9) we examine some of the works of this Daoist poet, presenting an eroticized and romanticized poetry on the immortals, which sets the stage for the succeeding

chapters on the poetry of Li Shangyin (Chapters 10–14). After an introductory section on the problems of interpretation in Li Shangyin's poetry, we discuss his hermetic poetry, "poems on history," "poems on things," and those occasional poems that can be dated. In these chapters we try to situate his poetry in the discursive context of his age. Our final chapter takes up the poetry of Wen Tingyun (Chapter 15) and the division of poetry into specialized "types," which may have had significant consequences for what was preserved in the literary record for other poets.

Rather than making generalizations about the period as a whole, I have tried to be as historically specific as possible, always paying attention to the way the Tang poetic legacy was textually preserved.

This book is deeply indebted to Chinese scholarship of the past quarter century, and most of all to the work of Fu Xuancong, whose extensive work on biography and dating of Tang poets and poetry is the groundwork that made a study like this one possible. We know far more now than we did thirty years ago when I was working on the Early Tang and High Tang.

At the same time, this book is essentially different from the kind of work that has been done by Chinese scholars. Although these differences will no doubt be attributed to a "Western" viewpoint, part of my intention is to reconcile a division within Chinese scholarship itself, between the precise work on the lives and dates of poets and poems, on the one hand, and, on the other, the kinds of generalizations that are made about this very long period, which has, through a complex historical accident, been labeled as a single entity, namely, the "Late Tang." The richness of the record and the efforts of scholars (of whom there are many) like Fu Xuancong now make it possible to look at a delimited period in greater detail. Thanks to this process, we can see clearly the shortcomings of the received categories according to which the literary history of the period has been written.

To take just one example, instead of using a general term like "schools," *pai* 派, to describe associations of poets, we see a variety of quite distinct cultural phenomena: groups of friends of roughly the same age (such as the circle around Bai Juyi); younger poets seeking and finding the approbation of established older poets (such as the circle around Yao He and Jia Dao); a dead poet's works entering circulation and exerting an influence (Li He); and the reevaluation and resurgent

influence of a poet largely rejected by the previous generation (as in Pi Rixiu's admiration for Bai Juyi). These are all distinct literary historical phenomena and not simply "schools." We see poets who write essentially one kind of poetry, and those who write in all the styles then available. Instead of "schools" we can now see more clearly the dynamics of literary historical interaction among poets.

This study also addresses issues that do not follow directly from recent Chinese scholarship. Although excellent in tracing the lineage of printed editions, Chinese scholarship has been less interested in issues of manuscript culture and, in particular, the question of how the manuscript legacy emerged in the Northern Song and the way in which particular sources mediate our image of what survives. If our study often turns to these issues of early manuscript transmission, it is because this is an essential part of literary history that has too often been ignored. If a poet like Li Kuo 李廓 was known to be an associate of Jia Dao and Yao He yet his extant poems are all *fengliu* 風流 (an untranslatable term that combines sensuality, melancholy, and swashbuckling panache), the reason may simply be the focus of the particular anthology where those poems were preserved. If we have a poet whose extant works are primarily quatrains, it may have nothing to do with a predilection for quatrains but rather simply be the consequence of Hong Mai having had a more comprehensive edition than that which now survives and having copied all the quatrains into his large anthology of Tang quatrains. We also have many tantalizing surviving texts that remind us—by their very limitations—of a larger and more diverse world of poetic production in the Late Tang, material that has largely been lost.

Perhaps the most difficult problem in engaging Chinese scholarship on Late Tang poetry is the case of Li Shangyin, where there is more scholarship and a longer history than all the other poets combined. "Li Shangyin studies" is a field unto itself and deals with questions that have arisen through centuries of research. I have tried to learn the field well enough to engage it when it is relevant to my purposes, while at the same time maintaining enough of a distance that I do not find myself attempting to answer questions that cannot be answered or recapitulating the arguments of others in such attempts. Rather than seeking answers to old questions, I want to focus attention on how the poems themselves generate such questions and, at the same time, refuse the possibility of an answer. I would also like to situate Li Shangyin's poetry in the context of contemporary poetry and the problems of