

The Reception of Du Fu (712-770) and His Poetry in Imperial China



Ji Hao

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For centuries, Chinese critics have acclaimed Du Fu (712–770) as “China’s greatest poet.” He has exerted tremendous influence both as a model poet and as a cultural icon. In *The Reception of Du Fu (712–770) and His Poetry in Imperial China*, Ji Hao provides modern readers with a general picture of the reception of Du Fu and his work from the Song to the Qing. He also explores major shifts in interpretive approaches to Du Fu’s poetry and their poetic and cultural implications. Through the case of reading Du Fu, the book also offers an in-depth examination of subtleties of the mode of life reading and the concept of transparency. This exploration seeks to provide a new orientation to the significance of the overarching principles of reading poetry in traditional China.

Ji Hao, PhD (2012), University of Minnesota (Twin Cities), is Assistant Professor of Chinese at the College of the Holy Cross. He has published several articles on Du Fu and on the sixteenth-century Chinese novel *Xiyou ji*.

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By

Ji Hao



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Cover illustration: Leaf E, Bird Watching from Shi Tao's (1642–1707) album "Wilderness Colors," ink and color on paper. The image is based on Du Fu's couplet "I raise my face, avid to watch the birds, / I turn my head, mistakenly to answer someone" (translated by Stephen Owen), which appears on the upper left side of this leaf. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, The Sackler Fund, 1972 (1972.122a-l), image © The Metropolitan Museum of Art.

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To my parents
Hao Tianyong and Jing Wenyu



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J.H.

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Introduction

During the thirteenth century when the Mongols invaded China, the Song (960–1279) loyalist Wen Tianxiang 文天祥 (1236–1283) was captured and subsequently imprisoned in Dadu (modern Beijing). Wen refused to surrender to the Mongols. During his imprisonment, he occupied himself with Du Fu's 杜甫 (712–770) poems. Before he was executed, Wen produced two hundred poems to record his personal experience during the chaotic last years of the Southern Song dynasty. Interestingly, Wen drew directly on the repertoire of Du Fu's poetry in every line of each of his poems. Over six hundred years later, Beijing witnessed another story that connects Du Fu with a scholar in duress due to national chaos caused by foreign invasion. During the Second Sino-Japanese War (1937–1945), William Hung (1893–1980) was imprisoned by the Japanese army in Beijing. While in captivity, Hung requested a copy of Du Fu's poems in order to carry out the same poetic practice taken by Wen in the thirteenth century. Both stories draw our attention to an interesting cultural phenomenon in the history of China since the Song dynasty: for centuries, Chinese intellectuals have demonstrated a strong fascination with Du Fu and his poetry—especially during periods of social chaos and national crisis.

A quick explanation for this fascination can be found in the word for “poet” in modern Chinese, which is composed of two characters: poetry (shi 詩) and man (ren 人). The composition of the word “poet” in Chinese points to an interesting confluence between images of Du Fu as a poet and as a man. This confluence is reflected in one of the most salient aspects of the greatness of Du Fu and his poetry, and numerous readers in imperial China and even in modern era have also recognized and embraced it. William Hung's monograph on Du Fu delineates a typical image of Du Fu as a man, which strongly resonates with what most traditional Chinese readers had in mind: “a filial son, an affectionate father, a generous brother, a faithful husband, a loyal friend, a dutiful official, and a patriotic subject.”¹ A close examination of Hung's portrait of Du Fu reveals the role of Confucian values in the representation of Du Fu as a man. Hung situates Du Fu within the frame of five important relationships traditionally valued by Confucianism—father and son, brother and brother, husband and wife, friend and friend, and ruler and subject. This image of Du Fu as a man with paradigmatic Confucian morality has decisively influenced the construction of Du Fu as a canonical poet in imperial China.

1 William Hung, *Tu Fu: China's Greatest Poet* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1952), 282.

Paradoxically, such an image at the same time largely derives from Du Fu's poetry, which has been considered by many readers in imperial China as both a faithful account of Du Fu's inner world as well as an accurate picture of external historical realities at his time. Indeed, many have regarded Du Fu's poetic images as even more reliable than accounts in some major historical records. As Eva Shan Chou indicates, images of Du Fu as a poet and Du Fu as a man have reinforced each other in the millennium-long reception of his work.² Nevertheless, the images of Du Fu as a master of poetry and Du Fu as a man of exemplary Confucian morality did not merge with each other without bidding. The fusion of these two aspects began to take place in the process of the millennium-long reception of his work. Since the eleventh century, under different historical and cultural realities in the imperial China, images of Du Fu as a poet and Du Fu as a man constantly interacted with each other.

Du Fu lived in the Tang (618–907) dynasty and spent most of his life under the reign of Emperor Xuanzong 玄宗 (r. 712–756). In the early years of Xuanzong's reign, the Tang society achieved significant accomplishments in many areas such as cultural innovation, economic prosperity, and political expansion, which culminated in what later historians often called the "prosperous age of Kaiyuan 開元 (713–741)" (Kaiyuan is one of the reign titles adopted by Xuanzong). In 764, almost two decades after the end of Kaiyuan era, Du Fu composed a poem that begins with a fond remembrance of this prosperity:

Recalling the Past

I recall long ago when the Kaiyuan reign was in its glory days,
even small towns contained within homes of ten thousand families.
The rice flowed with oil, the millet was white,
granaries public and private both were filled with bounty.
On the roads of the nine regions, there were no jackals or tigers,
traveling far one did not trouble to find a lucky day to set out.
Qi satins and Lu chiffons in continuous wagons,
the men at plowing, the women at mulberries didn't fail their times.
For the Sage in the palace they performed "Gates of Cloud,"
and friends all over the world stuck together like glue.
In the course of more than a hundred years,
no disasters or upheavals,

憶昔
憶昔開元全盛日
小邑猶藏萬家室
稻米流脂粟米白
公私倉廩俱豐實
九州道路無豺虎
遠行不勞吉日出
齊紈魯綺車班班
男耕女桑不相失
宮中聖人奏雲門
天下朋友皆膠漆
百餘年間未災變

2 Eva Shan Chou, *Reconsidering Tu Fu: Literary Greatness and Cultural Context* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), especially 1–42.

there were Shusun Tong's music and rites,
there were Xiao He's laws.

叔孫禮樂蕭何律³

Based on some of his poems traditionally dated to the Kaiyuan reign, it seems that Du Fu himself lived a relatively carefree lifestyle in his youth. In his twenties, Du Fu made two major trips: On the first trip, he wandered in the southern part of China for a few years and later travelled in the north. During the second trip, Du Fu went to visit his father Du Xian (682–741). His father held an official post in the local government and probably provided financial support for Du Fu's travels. Between these two trips, Du Fu also took the civil service exam in the capital Chang'an. Unfortunately, however, Du Fu, venerated widely by later critics as one of China's greatest poets, failed the exam that involved poetic composition.

The year 741 signaled a change in Du Fu's life: his father passed away and the period of Kaiyuan came to an end. Du Fu returned to Luoyang and stayed there for a few years. There he met another famous poet, Li Bai 李白 (701–762), and the two became friends. In 746 Du Fu went back to Chang'an and took another civil service exam in the following year. It was a special exam given by Emperor Xuanzong. The original purpose of this exam was to discover people with special talent who had not been recognized through the regular exams. Du Fu failed again, but this time the failure had nothing to do with his own performance. Fearing a possible threat to his power, Chief Minister Li Linfu 李林甫 (683–753) failed all the candidates. He reported to Xuanzong that anyone with talent was already at court and, as none of the candidates could pass the exam, not a single qualified person remained outside the court. Confronted with this situation, Du Fu chose to stay in the capital and turned to another way to advance his political career. He attempted to forge associations with officials and other influential people in Chang'an, but his efforts did not seem to have

3 Qiu Zhaoao, *Dushi xiangzhu* 杜詩詳註 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1979, reprint 2013), 3:1163. Stephen Owen, *The Poetry of Du Fu* (De Gruyter, 2015), Volume 3, 13-73, 408–411. This is the second poem under the title of "Recalling the Past." In this book, I will use *Dushi xiangzhu* as the standard version of Du Fu's poetry. Stephen Owen's *The Poetry of Du Fu* (De Gruyter, 2015) is the first complete translation of Du Fu's poetry in English. As Owen correctly observes in his book, "no one who has engaged the millennium of scholarship on Du Fu can fail to face the fact that there are disputes of interpretation everywhere." *The Poetry of Du Fu*, "Du Fu Lore and Translation Conventions," lxxxi–lxxxii. While this book largely follows Owen's translation, in many places I use Owen's translation as a baseline and make some modifications in order to further highlight certain nuances in the original poems and to facilitate relevant discussion.

been very productive. After presenting three rhapsodies to the court in 751, Emperor Xuanzong recognized his literary talents. In spite of this, Du Fu did not secure a minor official post in the palace of the Crown Prince until 755. This happened one month before the outbreak of the An Lushan Rebellion, which dealt a severe blow to the Tang regime and threw the society into great turbulence.

The second half of the aforementioned poem, "Recalling the Past" (憶昔), portrays a desolate scene of what happened after the rebellion: scarcity of supplies, farming lands now filled with the blood, burned palaces, abandoned ancestral shrines, and the dominance of trauma in people's mind. As a witness to the changing fortune of the Tang from prosperity to decline, Du Fu's life also suffered from chaos caused by the rebellion. In 755, the An Lushan Rebellion broke out and rebel forces occupied the capital Chang'an in the next year. Emperor Xuanzong fled to the southwest of China and the crown prince ascended to the throne as Emperor Suzong. Du Fu attempted to join the exiled court, but was caught by the rebels and taken to Chang'an. Later he managed to escape from Chang'an and was appointed as a Reminder (*zuo shiyi* 左拾遺) when he arrived at the court's temporary site in Fengxiang.⁴ Du Fu took his advisory duties very seriously and offended Emperor Suzong by speaking against the emperor's decision to dismiss Fang Guan 房琯 (696–763) from the position of Grand Councilor. In 758, Du Fu was transferred to a minor post in Huazhou, and had to leave the capital. In the next year, the Huazhou area suffered famine. Du Fu resigned from the post and set out to the west with his family to make a living. They stayed in Qinzhou for some time and then moved to Tonggu. Eventually they travelled to Chengdu where they settled with the help of friends. Except for a short interruption caused by a local rebellion, they lived a relatively peaceful life for a few years. In 765, Du Fu and his family left Chengdu and travelled down the Yangzi River. During the last few years of his life, Du Fu lived in Kuizhou for more than a year. While there, he produced almost one-third of his extant poems. In 768, Du Fu left Kuizhou and kept travelling around modern Hunan province, until his death two years later.

The reconstruction of a chronology of Du Fu's life (which is necessary for a better understanding of Du Fu as a man) is closely associated with readings of Du Fu's poems. Such an effort began to rise in the eleventh century. As William Hung has pointed out:

Three centuries after his death, scholars began in earnest to collect his works, to edit them, and to provide them with commentaries. They began

4 More about Du Fu's service in the position of Reminder (*zuo shiyi* 左拾遺) is discussed in chapter five.