Introduction

Du Fu 杜甫 (712–770) came to be referred to as the “poet-historian,” shishi 詩史, primarily because he bore testimony to the momentous events surrounding the great An Lushan Rebellion of 755–763, which humbled the Tang dynasty (618–907) and from which the dynasty never entirely recovered. Such a version of the “historian,” whose attention was always on the center of the polity and on the whole only through the political center, has been supplemented in recent times by a more capacious sense of “history,” which includes the local details of contemporary life that were previously considered marginal. In this larger sense of history Du Fu remains the “poet-historian.”

In the eleventh century Du Fu was canonized, not simply as the preeminent figure in Tang poetry, but also as the very embodiment of Confucian values, as they were coming to be understood in the Song.¹ He was the epitome of loyalty, unrecognized and unrewarded by the dynasty. Though unheeded, he spoke to and for the polity, praising the worthy, criticizing the unworthy, pointing out the social consequences of policy, and sympathizing with the sufferings of the common people. The selection of his poetry gathered around these values.

All these values are true and amply attested in his poetry (even if we might now be inclined to note his gross political misjudgments). It is, however, time for a broader understanding of his work. No poet in the Tang passed through so many social positions and roles in his poetry—the grown man of good family going about with the fashionable elite of Chang’an, the husband and father trying to get his family out of harm’s way, the court officer in close attendance on the emperor, the minor local official complaining about too much paperwork, the itinerant with his family looking for food and lodging, the sycophantic dependent of local power-holders, the neighbor of peasants, all within the crumbling structure of the Tang empire. He often lamented that he was thwarted from gaining office in Xuanzong’s 玄宗 (r. 712–756) reign, but during the An Lushan Rebellion that failure perhaps spared him the danger of

¹ For an extended discussion, see Eva Shan Chou, Reconsidering Du Fu: Literary Greatness and Cultural Context (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1995).
an enforced office in the rebel regime and the treason trials that followed the reconquest of the capitals by loyalist forces. Just before the Rebellion he declined a post that he considered unworthy of his capabilities, but he received a good post after escaping through rebel lines and making his way to loyalist headquarters. Following the recovery of Chang’an, he lost favor through maintaining political loyalties that were as wrong-headed in political actuality as they were admirable in principle; he was assigned a provincial post that involved too much dreary, bureaucratic work, and resigned. When he finally was named to a purely honorary post in the Board of Works, he proudly carried his insignia of office for the rest of his life.

He had a strong sense of right, and his sense of right was matched by his interest in food. After his youthful years, food became a central concern in his poetry. Upon taking the family to the countryside just before the Rebellion, one of his children died of hunger. He begged for food, celebrated it, foraged, and complained when a promised allotment of vegetables was not up to his standard. He celebrated sashimi, pestered a relative for good Chinese chives, thanked a friend profusely for a pot of bean sauce, and in hard times was grateful for what is called “famine food.” He writes about medicines almost as much as he talks about food. Throughout most of his life as a poet he was sick—he never lets us forget it. He suffered from diabetes, lung inflammation, asthma, fevers, aches, and pains. We ourselves are “at pains” to diagnose his illnesses—though we may suspect that he was a bit of a hypochondriac. We first see him in his late thirties and he already claims to be old or “getting old.” He remained “old” for most of his poetic career.

We are never sure how to read his complaints. He complained of poverty; and indeed, in parts of his life he seems to have been truly destitute. Poverty is, however, relative. When he was leaving Kuizhou, we learn that his orchard was forty *mu* in extent (almost six acres), which did not include his gardens and share in the rice fields. When the rice harvest was coming in, he set up house by the fields to supervise. We know the size of his fruit acreage because, unlike any of his contemporaries or almost any later poet, he tells us in his poetry. We want to tease him for his incessant complaints; but we see him telling a relative, who is temporarily moving into his main domicile in Kuizhou, not to build any fence so that the widow next door will not feel unwelcome or too intimidated to take the fruit from his date tree, which he has always permitted. This
could, of course, have been communicated orally. If Du Fu does this in poetry, it is not, I believe, simply to demonstrate to contemporaries and posterity that he is a good person; rather, he seems to write in poetry absolutely everything he thinks is important. He is not like any other Tang poet—and, indeed, he often seems to have entirely forgotten what normally lay outside poetry’s sphere of discourse. Later writers wanted to recapture Du Fu’s weird engagement with lived experience, but even at their best they could not quite attain that.

Du Fu was, without a doubt, the most imitated poet in the later Chinese tradition, but it was the Du Fu as he was seen in the Song dynasty (960–1279) who was imitated, rather than the full range of our Tang Du Fu. At different times he had three or four servants; but, 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. What is usually socially invisible in Tang poetic discourse often becomes visible in Du Fu’s poetry—and perhaps for this, more than anything else, he deserves to be called “poet-historian.”

In his poetry we see, in passing, those moments we know must have occurred, but which are not to be found in the poems or even the prose of his contemporaries. After the emperor Xuanzong fled Chang’an, leaving the members of the extensive imperial family to fend for themselves in the city soon occupied by An Lushan’s forces, we meet a prince of the blood hiding from An Lushan’s occupation force. We see divisions of the grand army of Central Asia, which had fought their way as far as Afghanistan, then withdrawn from the frontier and sent to the east to attack the rebel generals; later, under inept generals and a divided command, those soldiers were wasted in the fiasco of the siege of Ye. We see empty villages and hear Du Fu urging his peasant neighbors, driven to desperation by continuous tax-gouging, not to flee their land. We see the dark synecdoche of a riderless horse with arrows in its saddle. In his last years we see Du Fu fleeing Changsha with his family by night, as the local garrison killed its commander and ran amok. Nevertheless, in the midst of the fearful contingency of his life and his poetry, he has moments of consummate vision of the order of the world, the nature of the people that inhabit it, and the way we apprehend it.

Many of his best poems connect the mundane with larger ethical values and a vision of how the world works. He never begins as a moralist; he discovers moral issues in the world he encounters; sometimes
the issues he finds are far too grand for the experience, and he laughs at himself. His pervasive irony and humor—in conjunction with his very human crankiness—make him a better model for the “Confucian” than the generations of sanctimonious readers who idolized him. One of his most famous poems is on a storm that blew the thatch from his roof, which was carried off by local children, then a rainstorm that soaked him and his family by night, concluding with his wish to shelter all the poor gentlemen of the world. The noble wish is inseparable from the self-representation as a ridiculous, helpless older man yelling at children behaving badly. If there is a justification for translating all of the poems, it may be deepening our sense of his engagement with the mundane and not allowing it to resolve into simply a way to talk about “big things.” It is the persistence of his vision of large significance in the everyday—sometimes ironically—that makes a whole Du Fu more satisfying than a selected Du Fu.

After the An Lushan Rebellion Du Fu took his family on a large loop, from the region around the capitals to the bleak northwest, then down through the mountains in a harrowing journey to Chengdu, and, later, on down the Yangzi to Kuizhou, Jiangling, and across Lake Dongting down to Changsha in Hu’nan. In some of these places the family stayed for years. During all that time, Du Fu was transporting the scrolls of his growing poetry collection, surviving as more than fourteen hundred extant poems. It is worth thinking of this in the context of the family’s escape from the uprising in Changsha (Tanzhou), 23.37:

销魂避飞鏑，My soul melted, escaping the flying arrows,
累足穿豺狼。I crept fearfully through those wolves and jackals.
隐忍枳棘刺，I made myself endure the prick of thornbushes,
迁延胝趼瘡。I kept on going with wounds from blisters.
远归儿侍侧，My son, coming from afar, attended us closely,
犹乳女在傍。a girl, still nursing, was next to us.

In this dramatic scene of flight we have to imagine someone bringing along at least fourteen hundred poems, not in the compact codex form, but as early tradition tells us, in sixty scrolls, each with a wrapper. Leizu 累足, translated as “crept fearfully,” is literally “one foot standing on another,” a sign of intense fear. Even allowing for poetic license, a space must be made somewhere in the scene for those sixty scrolls, along with
some of Du Fu’s favorite household goods, such as his black leather arm-rest and, no doubt, the rest of his library.

If we credit his claim made in the early 750s that he had been writing poetry since age seven and had composed more than a thousand poems, most of his early work has been lost, which is hardly surprising in the desperate situation surrounding the fall of Chang’an to rebel forces. What we have of his earlier poetry was probably put down later, from memory. Those sixty cumbersome scrolls come from a poet who was already fully mature.

When those poems first appear to us in the Song dynasty, they are divided into two parts, “regulated poems” and “non-regulated poems.” Within each of those two divisions the poems are arranged chronologically. In all but a few cases we do not know the original form of Tang poetry collections; we have evidence to guess about others. However, from circumstantial evidence this may have been one of the earliest poetry collections that was originally arranged chronologically, though perhaps with the elementary generic division between “old style” and “recent style.” This is another way of saying that Du Fu chronicled his life in poetry. This fact and the unprecedented volume of his poetry became itself an essential part of the image of Du Fu and the way he has been read. While Du Fu’s poetry often seems to respond to the contingency of the moment, we also know that he frequently revised his poems—and we never can be sure, in a given poem, how much is immediate response, how much is response from recent memory, and how much is added in retrospect. We find ourselves in between diary and autobiography, the historical person responding to the contingency of the moment and the artist constructing his life, saying the things he should have said. He wrote until he died.

The autobiographical form of the collection, more than anything else, made Du Fu’s biography the essential ground from which to consider his poems. While this has become the standard way to approach a poet in China, it was not so in the Tang. The biographies of some poets are

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2 “Regulation” refers to a strict pattern of balancing the tones of Middle Chinese within a couplet and in the sequence of couplets of a poem. Song dynasty standards regarding what did and did not constitute a regulated poem were anachronistically imposed on Tang poetry collections.
Du Fu’s biography, however, has a level of detail that is approached only by the poet who sought to write even more poetry than Du Fu—Bai Juyi 白居易 (772–846). Even in Bai Juyi, there is a specific year—at a time when he was closely engaged with Du Fu’s poetry of social protest—when his poems begin to be organized chronologically. We do know that the scholarly chronology of “life and writings,” the nianpu 年譜, had its origins in the second half of the eleventh century, in chronologies of Du Fu and his other devoted admirer, Han Yu 韓愈 (768–824).

Du Fu’s biography can be done in a few paragraphs, in a chapter, or in the three volumes of Chen Yixin’s 陳贻焮 Du Fu pingzhuan 杜甫評傳 (Critical Biography of Du Fu). When we reach that final stage, in Chen Yixin’s three volumes, we realize how deeply Du Fu’s poems are embedded in history, which we know from substantiating bits and pieces from other sources. It is important, however, to recognize that Du Fu’s canonical status in the Chinese poetic tradition is based on an intuition of how his poems are embedded in history rather than the substantiation we find in Chen Yixin’s great work. An “intuition” is different from certain knowledge, but it makes readers yearn for certain knowledge, even when it is as impossible to have as it is necessary for the nuance of the poem.

The lesson we learn from this is not that we can ever fully know the context of certain poems—anyone who has read the scholarship knows how often we have two or more competing and equally plausible interpretations for the same lines. The lesson is rather that the poetry called for and engendered a passion for philology grounded in empirical history, the larger meaning appearing only through what those lines meant in that particular historical context. Du Fu has many universal lines—and those are often quoted—but there are other beguiling lines that made readers want to know what the words meant in that context at that time. Perhaps only Du Fu will ever know; perhaps even Du Fu did not know—they just seemed the right words at the moment.

The long tradition of biographical contextualization of Du Fu’s poetry is perhaps why William Hung presented his prose translations of Du Fu’s poetry in a biographical narrative. The purposes of a complete

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translation and a critical biography are very different, but in the case of Du Fu some supplementary information is often useful in understanding a poem. Many poems contain “original notes,” often assumed to be by Du Fu’s own hand. Indeed some such notes—such as one that identifies a person referred to in a poem as a “drinking buddy”—involve either personal knowledge or historical knowledge that is not in extant sources and unlikely to ever have been included in any historical sources. This presumes that in preparing his poetry collection Du Fu already anticipated readers who would not know what he himself realized was necessary context. That means, in turn, that Du Fu was thinking seriously about future readership, which was not the norm in Tang poetry.

The readers of the current translation are farther from the context of Du Fu’s poems than the poet himself could have ever anticipated or imagined; his own inclusion of notes invites the current translator to briefly supplement the translations so that the contemporary reader will be able to make sense of a poem. Sometimes such supplementary context will be given in a few lines after the poem; sometimes, when involving particular lines, it will be provided in footnotes. The general principle for footnotes in the text is to provide necessary information for understanding the text and the current translation. When there are problems of interpretation that might invite other translations, these are addressed in “Additional Notes” in the Supplement.

The Business of Poetry

我之曾老姑，
My great-grandfather’s sister
爾之高祖母。
was your great-grandfather’s mother.
爾祖未顯時，
Before your ancestor became eminent
歸為尚書婦。
she [my great-grandfather’s sister] became the
wife of the [future] minister [your great-great-grandfather]. (23.22)

No other Du Fu poem begins with a banality as memorable as this, yet this is part of the social “business” of poetry, establishing a relationship with the recipient—in this case, a family relationship going back to the founding of the Tang—through which the poem happens.
In reading Du Fu’s complete collection we see much of the business of poetry in the Tang. The reader who retains that lofty sense of “Poetry” from the Romantic tradition may be horrified. But there is much to enjoy here. When a friend is appointed to an official position, he is congratulated; when a friend is demoted or exiled, Du Fu commiserates. He writes obsequiously to men in power asking for help—but like no other Tang poet he also writes: “I force myself to be amusing when serving my patrons” 強將笑語供主人 and tells of the client’s life in the dust of the patron’s carriage and dining on “dregs of goblets and cold roasts.” He says goodbye to departing friends. This is the usual business of Tang poetry, but there is more everyday “business” than has survived in other contemporary poetry collections; and we do not know if Du Fu simply preserved verses that others discarded or if he had an expanded sense of poetry in the everyday. 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 usual 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. Chinese critics wax ecstatic about Du Fu’s “realism,” but they do not mention these poems that are just too realistic, the persuasively “realistic” voice of a very cranky old man making his complaint about bad vegetables into poetry.

The presence of a significant number of such poems in Du Fu’s collected works makes us wonder what Du Fu was doing. A poetry collection—whether edited by a friend, a family member, or the poet himself—was a way of presenting oneself to society and to posterity. Some later Tang poetry collections seem to try to foreground all the famous people the poet knew and with whom he exchanged poems. Du Fu was on very good terms with several Tang princes and prominent political and cultural figures, and we have those poems. But then we have “Meng of the Granaries Section Comes on Foot to Give This Old Man Full Pots of New Ale and Bean Sauce” 孟倉曹步趾領新酒醬二物滿器見遺老夫. Meng was a minor functionary in the local bureaucratic establishment of Kuizhou and a friend. Du Fu’s role in Kuizhou was the resident cultural figure, writing documents for the court-sanctioned loyalist warlord in charge of the local army and attending parties for passing dignitaries. Perhaps Meng thought that he might get a poem for a gift of a pot of bean sauce and a pot of ale—and he did. It is not surprising that
Du Fu wrote such a poem; what is surprising is that he kept it among his poems so that it miraculously survived to the present day, with nine centuries of erudite commentary. Perhaps Du Fu had come to think of his poetry differently from other poets.

This is in no way a critical commitment to “literary realism,” either in the nineteenth century mode or in the socialist variety. European “realism” invents the “real” through representation and idealization. Du Fu is much closer to diary and attention to what happens. When that enters the reflective regime of poetry, it is sometimes versified diary, sometimes merely “doing social business,” and sometimes the greatest poetry in the Chinese tradition—allowing that all three can occur simultaneously.

If, returning to his cottage near Chengdu after an extended period, Du Fu finds that his boat had sunk under the water and rotted, it leads to thoughts about what the boat had meant to him, whether the enabling means of future travel down the Yangzi to the idyllic Southland or simply the means by which to sail around nearby Chengdu and poetically speculate on such a journey. This is diary, which, through Du Fu’s singularly ironic self-reflection, becomes great poetry.

Du Fu praises patrons in the common way: their ancestry, their superior nature, the certainty that a high court appointment is inevitable and soon to appear. Perhaps the most remarkable thing is that he finds new ways to praise. Du Fu’s praise of his patron Yan Wu 嚴武 in Chengdu is displaced into a peasant neighbor expressing his gratitude that his son, in military service, has been released to help with seasonal farm work.

8 回頭指大男, Turning his head, he pointed to his oldest boy:
渠是弓弩手。 “He is a master with the crossbow.
名在飛騎籍, His name is on the light cavalry registers,
長番歲時久。 his term is long in permanent service.
前日放營農, A few days ago they released him for farm work,
辛苦救衰朽。 saving my decrepit body from bitter hardship.
差科死則已, I’ll do corvee labor and pay my tax until I die,
誓不舉家走。 and I swear that I won’t run away with the family.” (11.2)

This is praise in a very different key from the usual themes, and praise that a devoted senior servant of the empire would surely appreciate.
Du Fu touches on perhaps the most pressing issue for the dynasty that other poets rarely mention. Under constant pressures of taxation to support the bloated military, peasant families were fleeing their land and diminishing the tax base, which put an increasingly unbearable burden on the peasants who remained. Du Fu knows that there is no greater praise for the regional military commissioner than an old peasant’s promise not to flee his land in return for the grace of temporarily releasing his son to help him bring in the harvest.

It is the quotidian that makes the sublime possible in Du Fu’s poetry. Later poets sought the sublime or the quotidian without understanding how much they need each other.

从老朋友寄信断绝，
恒饥稚子色凄凉。 (9.28)

These lines are from one of Du Fu’s Chengdu poems before Yan Wu arrived to take military and political control of the province, providing Du Fu with a stable income by putting him on his military staff. The Chinese poetic couplet always asks us to see the relation between lines. There is little subtlety here: the letters from friends represent potential patronage, which will feed him and his family. Characterizing those “old friends” as having “fat salaries” deserves some consideration. Sentiment is clearly subordinated to utility here; friendship is not simply a natural feeling—though it is always represented as such—but also utility. Du Fu had many friends who were no use at all, and he sustained those friendships. He saw friends who could support him differently.

Du Fu was not much use for anything but writing poetry—but since he was, arguably, China’s greatest poet, that is enough. On other levels his sympathy for the suffering of common folk redeems him to some degree, but his political judgments were often misguided, naïve, and biased in favor of his friends. The times needed men with political acumen or the capacity to take action. Du Fu had neither. He had no comprehension of the political balances necessary to preserve the tottering empire. The secretarial post he briefly held in Huazhou seems to have been the appropriate level for his bureaucratic abilities, and he resented the work deeply.
He expected to be supported by others, “old friends with fat salaries.” He frequently admitted that he was lazy and not good at managing his affairs—which was true. He seems to have risen to the status of a competent small “gentleman farmer” in Kuizhou, but he gave that up to go chasing friendship and the illusory prospects of better patronage farther down the Yangzi in Jingzhou.

Like other poets, Du Fu used poetry to maintain his social network, and to keep in touch with friends found in Chang’an and later in his life scattered throughout the empire. He received great practical benefit from some of these connections, most notably Yan Wu, whose military position permitted him to appoint his own staff. In Chengdu Du Fu was appointed to that staff, and returning to Chang’an for court business, Yan Wu acquired for Du Fu his honorary appointment in the Board of Works that served him well for the rest of his life. Du Fu writes to each of his social contacts in kind, drawing on his impressive repertoire of voices: a light-hearted quatrain to ask for pottery, fulsome congratulations to friends for promotions (reminding them that he supported them when he was in court and they were not), answering poems to Wang Wei’s 王維 (701–761) close friend Pei Di 裴迪 in the then dated style that Pei Di shared with Wang Wei, praising military men for their bravado. There was a range of registers from which to address different individuals in different situations. But nowhere does Du Fu present more problems for the reader of translation than in his long regulated poems (pailü) 排律 in the “high style.” Most of these—with some famous exceptions—are addressed to people in his network. They can often be recognized by the number of footnotes required to make sense of them and by the designation in the title of how many couplets they contain. In some cases he sends these to two recipients, “A” and “B,” filled with couplets whose lines implicitly refer to “A” then “B,” or “B” then “A.” Even the minimalist annotator has to explain to whom Du Fu was referring.

As with any discourse in social relationship, style adapts to the particular relationship. An easy intimacy is sometimes appropriate, even for those who hold great power over your fortunes. Du Fu often wrote with (deferential) intimacy to his patron Yan Wu, when he was alive. When he died, Yan Wu was treated in the “high style.” Though hard to read now, the “high style” was much loved in the Tang, with a dignity that cultural change largely erased in Chinese poetry in the Song dynasty; the appeal
of that style is even harder to recover in the present. It is good, at least, to remember what it meant: it was public honor.

**Du Fu’s Fate**

Not only was Du Fu not considered a major poet in his lifetime, he was not a major poet by the standards of his own time. During the last dozen years of his life, when the vast majority of his poems were written, he was out of the social network within which the poetry then most admired was being written. Even if his poetry had been widely known, such neglect would be no surprise: he was writing poems of a kind that no one could then quite knew what to make of. He could sometimes play the game of social poetry with supreme confidence, but his was a talent that also often spilled over and transgressed the decorum of the occasion or the group. One of his most famous poems is “Climbing the Pagoda of Ci’en Temple with Various Gentlemen” (2.9); three other poems from the same occasion have been preserved. Those three other poems are finely polished and, despite some fine flourishes in Cen Shen’s poem, utterly predictable. Du Fu’s poem is brilliant, but totally out of tune with others.

Through the period of his service in the court of Suzong (r. 756–762), he was part of a court community, and much of his work was stabilized and contained by the community; that community diminished later, and he was often writing largely in isolation. He was in the provinces, but not among the literary circles of Jiangnan, where so many poets had taken refuge. The young poets of three or four decades later were weary of polish; they wanted someone who stood out with genius, and they found that in Du Fu. Eventually his poetry became a standard in relation to which other poets were judged; and when that same standard was turned on Du Fu’s own poetry, it was self-evident that he was the greatest of all poets.

The earliest testimony to his posthumous reception is the preface to Fan Huang’s “Anthology,” written in the decade after Du Fu’s death. Here Fan Huang tells us that Du Fu’s collection was circulating in the Hubei and Hu’nan region, but the full collection was not yet known by “Easterners,” i.e., the literary communities in eastern Jiangnan, primarily modern Jiangsu and Zhejiang. According to Fan Huang, the “Easterners” know only Du Fu’s “playful topics and amusing discussions”
(戲題劇論), but “do not know that he had compositions in the manner of the ‘Great Odes’ [of the Shijing], which made him unique in contemporary times” (曾不知君有大雅之作, 當今一人而已).⁴ We have no evidence of Du Fu being read in the capital until 794, when young Yuan Zhen 元稹 (779–831) got hold of a collection of “several hundred poems” and read them with great admiration.⁵ In the two following decades Du Fu was elevated to preeminent status by the major Mid-Tang writers Bai Juyi, Yuan Zhen, and Han Yu.

Esteem is one thing, and popularity is another. While Du Fu was referred to with admiration and sometimes imitated throughout the ninth century, he was far from the most popular contemporary or earlier poet. The esteem in which he was held is confirmed by his first appearance in an extant Tang anthology, at the head of Wei Zhuang’s 韋莊 (836?–910) Youxuan ji 又玄集 from around 900. A small selection of his poems is followed by a selection from his older contemporary Li Bai 李白 (701–762?), with whom his name had been paired since the early in the ninth century. Wang Wei, whose work had headed an earlier anthology, was relegated to the third position.

In the first part of the Song dynasty, from 960 through the first half of the eleventh century, the dominant literary period of the Tang was not the “High Tang,” but the Mid- and Late Tang. Bai Juyi retained a lasting popularity among some groups and was, arguably, the foundation of the emergent Song poetic style. Han Yu’s prestige as a master of prose and a culture hero was steadily on the rise. The admiration of Du Fu by these two great Mid-Tang masters was the foundation of Song interest in Du Fu, combined with the new literary scholarship that was trying to piece together the Tang literary legacy from surviving manuscripts.

The subsequent canonization of Du Fu in the eleventh century went far beyond anything that happened earlier. In the context of emergent ethical concerns, associated with but not limited to the rise of

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⁴ Although this preface is generally accepted as genuine, the text does not appear until the mid-seventeenth century; the fact that it does not appear in any of the Song editions casts some doubt on its authenticity. It is as surprising to find such a judgment in the 770s as it is unsurprising that Du Fu would be rediscovered in the cultural foment of the 790s.

⁵ “A Letter on Poetry to Letian” 敘詩寄樂天書, Yuan Zhen ji 元稹集 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1982), 30.352.
Neo-Confucianism, Du Fu became the great “Confucian poet,” the “sage of poetry,” the “poet historian,” and the very embodiment of loyalty to the dynasty and moral engagement. He was also the learned poet, for whom “every word has a source,” and became the model for writing regulated verse. By the end of the eleventh century he began to attract imitators, who modeled their own poetry on his example, and at least by the twelfth century he began to attract commentaries on an unprecedented scale. In the vastly expanded print culture of the twelfth and thirteenth century, there were a large number of editions, of which only a few survive. There were certainly more editions of Du Fu in the Song than there were anthologies of Tang poetry.

Du Fu’s canonical status has remained largely unchallenged to the present day. In part this was inertia; in part this was due to the variety of his collected poems, which could be selected to serve very different interests. Poetry manuals of the late thirteenth and fourteenth century used Du Fu poems as the model by which to teach regulated verse, a tradition continuing in later critical editions that selected only his regulated verse. His poems were the model for socially engaged poems; in dynastic crisis his poems were the model of how to bear poetic witness. By the eighteenth century we begin to see some critics growing weary of Du Fu’s iconic status, but Du Fu has retained his preeminence in the tradition to this day. At least one famous mid-twentieth intellectual championed Li Bai; but however much Li Bai was always loved, Du Fu always remained Du Fu. His iconic modern image on an anthology cover has provided recent Chinese adolescents the possibility of a vast repertoire of visual parody.

It wasn’t Du Fu’s fault that he was turned into this. As Yuan Zhen observed already in the early ninth century, Du Fu’s genius was his inclusiveness, his variety. The advantage of having the complete works is discovering how many, very different images of Du Fu there are.

The Tang

It is not possible here to give a full account of the political and social institutions of the world in which Du Fu lived, but these can confuse, even bewilder the most devoted non-specialist reader. Even the reader who has a good understanding of modern and late imperial China will find certain aspects of the Tang strange.
The watershed is the great An Lushan Rebellion that began in late 755, though changes in the huge Tang military establishment laid the groundwork for the rebellion, and the consequences continued to unfold even after the rebellion was nominally put down. The earlier and basic political order of the civil bureaucracy had worked with a pool of qualified candidates to make civil appointments throughout the empire. This pool of candidates came from various sources, including the “literary” civil service examination (jinshi 進士) and hereditary qualification, given to the eldest children of high-level civil servants, the “Yin” or “shade” privilege. After qualification, appointments were made by the complicated and highly politicized “Selection” (xuan 選) process. These were appointments either in the central government bureaucracy, or on the prefectural (zhou 州) or county (xian 縣) level in the provinces. The imperial center was constantly promoting, demoting, and “exiling” (i.e. appointments to unpleasant prefectures and counties), with the result that officials had to be continually moved around.

From its beginning of the dynasty the Tang had military threats from the Turkic confederations to the northwest. The rise of Tibet and the Nanzhao kingdom to the south, combined with border wars with the peoples of the northeast required a strong military. By the time of Du Fu’s earliest extant poems, the Tang had already expanded deep into Central Asia.

Whether the armies in Central Asia and fighting in the northeast were the product of mad military adventurism or a legitimate need to protect the empire’s borders against continuing foreign threat is a matter of debate. The consequence, however, was a hard military shell to the north of a largely demilitarized center. In the decades preceding the rebellion, these armies had become increasingly professionalized, often with the appointment of non-Han generals and large contingents of non-Han, “permanent service” troops. The regular reassignment of generals was replaced by more or less permanent appointments. The result was almost inevitable: when the long-term, non-Han general in command of all the northeastern armies revolted, the center fell with shocking ease.

Tang authority, badly damaged, was eventually reasserted. In the process, however, much of the core of the empire was militarized, which resulted in a two-tier administration. Each of the regional armies
constituted a “Circuit” (\textit{dao} 道), which included many prefectures. The circuit was roughly the equivalent of later provinces in size. The army was commanded by a military commissioner (\textit{jiedushi} 節度使), formally appointed by the emperor. The military commissioner had the power to make appointments to his “staff,” bypassing the usual recruitment procedures of the civil administration. After the An Lushan Rebellion the degree of loyalty to the emperor varied, as did the ability to win the allegiance of the regional armies. In the most uncontrollable regions the armies themselves might insist on appointing their general, sometimes hereditary. In the more “loyal” provinces the emperor appointed the military commissioner, the commanding general. Far more important than the commander, the armies themselves became local; even when officers and troops came originally from the outside, their interests were identified with the region. These armies were often restive.

Take the case of Du Fu’s patron Yan Wu, who commanded the two circuits into which modern Sichuan was divided. In early autumn of 762 he was recalled to court for the installation of the new emperor Dai-zong 代宗 (r. 762–779). Summoning military commissioners to court was one way the imperial government tested the loyalty of its military commissioners—and many did not go. Yan Wu, however, was a loyal servant of the empire and followed orders. No sooner did Yan Wu go to Chang’an than one of his generals rebelled in Chengdu, the capital of western Sichuan. Although the rebellious general was soon killed, the troops continued to wreak havoc. At this point we find Du Fu departing Chengdu for an extended tour of then peaceful eastern Sichuan. Since troops had blocked the difficult passes over the mountains to Chang’an, it took a long time for Yan Wu to return to Chengdu and restore order. Only then did Du Fu decide to return to Chengdu.

Although the center was supposed to be in charge of appointing prefects, in this new world of instability and local armies overseeing many prefectures, the old system of central control was complicated and compromised. A military commissioner could have a large say in who was to be the prefect of one of the prefectures under his command. A loyal local strongman with a small army could be confirmed as prefect by the central government.

The fiscal consequences for the empire should be obvious. There was now a very expensive military layer in between the central govern-
ment and its tax base in the prefectures. The central government had to essentially give up hope of ever getting taxes from the northeast, once its richest source of income. Funds were constantly needed for military operations and for the bloated bureaucracy; largesse was needed to keep the regional armies loyal; the tax base was in many places squeezed to the point of breaking; peasants would leave their land in search of greener pastures, placing an even greater burden on those that stayed. And we should not forget that Du Fu was, from his Chengdu years on, was feeding off that system, largely idle except for writing poetry.

Text and Editions
The scholar of Tang literature ignores the textual sources at his or her peril. With perhaps the unique exception of a part of Xu Hun’s 许渾 (c.788–c.854) collection initially preserved in autograph in the Southern Song for the poet’s calligraphy, none of our current literary texts can be traced to an authorial “original.” Bai Juyi’s extraordinary efforts to leave depository copies of his works is the case next closest to authorial “intention,” and our current version of his collected works seems to basically follow the one he made, even if variants were introduced in the transmission process. Quite apart from the textual variants that inevitably arise in serial recopying, very many Tang poetry collections seem to have been copied selectively in the Tang, Five Dynasties, and early Northern Song. Song editors, seeking “complete” editions, were commonly faced with different versions of a Tang poetry collection, with varying degrees of overlap, but with many poems that were unique to each particular version. The “complete” collections that were recompiled in the Song drew from one or more of such partial collections and pieces included in anthologies. Du Fu’s collected poetry, as it took shape in the Song, was based on various partial collections in circulation.

The text of Du Fu’s poetry is a unique variation on the usual issues that arise in the transmission of Tang literature through manuscripts into the Song, to scholarly editing and appearance in print, and on how those editions have been transmitted into the versions we now possess. Du Fu differs from less famous Tang poets in the remarkable degree of editorial attention he received beginning in the
Such attention led to the recovery of more manuscripts, more editions, and more editorial work. All in all the works of Du Fu probably have benefitted more from such attention than they have suffered from it; however, Song and many later editors uncritically preferred the “easier reading”; and deeply held convictions about Du Fu both as a person and as a craftsman seem to have deeply influenced textual decisions and spurred emendation. Behind those decisions among variants, the Song practice of speculatively correcting the text to reflect what Du Fu “must have written” was common, as some Song editors knew and deplored. Once Du Fu entered the hands of the booksellers in the Southern Song, there was an immense marketing advantage of numerous “new and improved” editions. Moreover, Song printers were not always careful proofreaders. What remains is a handful of those Song editions, some complete and some partial, some Song imprints and some recut or recopied, some scholarly and some popular.

In contrast to Bai Juyi’s literary collection, the original version of Du Fu’s collected works had been lost by the Song. The oldest edition still in circulation in the Song was Fan Huang’s Du Fu xiaoji 杜甫小集 (Anthology of Du Fu) in six scrolls, with 290 poems, completed in the decade after Du Fu’s death. In the Song a very brief encomium (zan 贊) by Di Zundu 狄遵度 is attested as having been attached to Fan Huang’s anthology. Fan’s preface is, however, attested for the first time only in the 17th century, in Qian Qianyi’s 錢謙益 (1582–1664) Jianzhu Du gongbu ji 箴注杜工部集, presumably through the Wu Ruo 吳若 edition. A number of variants represented by readings in the Fan Huang “Anthology” are mentioned in the earliest Song editions. While these should be taken seriously as indications of what was included in the “Anthology,” we should always keep in mind that this collection was no less vulnerable to manuscript variation than other editions of Du Fu.


7 This preface is not included in any of the extant Song editions, which usually included a generous selection of supplementary materials on Du Fu. When a Tang text makes its first appearance in the seventeenth century, it must be regarded with some suspicion.
many variants from the Fan Huang anthology given in the older sections of the “Songben” 宋本 (Song edition) and the Guo Zhida 郭知達 edition (more on these two editions later). Because of the uncertainties in the transmission of the Fan Huang anthology itself, these have only the authority of early variants; these variants, do, however allow us to know which poems were included in the anthology.

Apart from the handful of poems in Wei Zhuang’s Youxuan ji and those mentioned as having been included in Tangshi leixuan 唐詩類選 (probably mid-ninth century), the earliest extant corpus of Du Fu’s poems of considerable size is in the poems included in Wenyan yinghua 文苑英華 (987), and to a much smaller degree, in Tangwen cui 唐文粹 (completed 1101). The texts of Du Fu’s poems in Wenyan yinghua, a huge, imperially sponsored “anthology” of the literary collections in the imperial library, often differ from the texts in the various Song editions of Du Fu’s poems; and while that massive manuscript also suffered the vagaries of copying, its readings are earlier, sometimes clearly superior, and must always be taken seriously.

The state of the manuscript legacy of Du Fu’s poetry in the early eleventh century is best represented by a bibliographical note by Su Shunqin 蘇舜欽 from 1036. Su saw three manuscripts, let us call them “A,” “B,” and “C”: B had three hundred poems that were not in A, which was probably a larger manuscript; C had eighty poems contained in neither A nor B. It is not surprising that two large manuscripts would have so many poems in one that were not in the other (and Su does not tell us how many poems in A were not in B). What is surprising is that C, a smaller manuscript, had eighty poems in neither A nor B. We can only conjecture the situation if Su Shunqin had found ten manuscripts.

For all the Song scholarly dissatisfaction with printed editions, imprints had a level of relatively consistent dissemination that left even the

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8 The Wenyan yinghua selections of Du Fu were collated against one of the Southern Song editions by Zhou Bida 周必大 (1126–1204) when he prepared Wenyan yinghua for printing at the beginning of the thirteenth century. Judging from his collation notes (“the collection reads …” 集作), he did not use one of the better editions of Du Fu’s poetry; the Wenyan yinghua reading is often the standard one in other editions. Zhou Bida should, however, be commended for preserving the Wenyan yinghua reading.
best old manuscripts in oblivion. All Song editions are ultimately traced to the manuscript edition made by Wang Zhu 王洙 (997–1057), with a postface (houji 後記) dated to 1039. This contained 1405 poems in eighteen fascicles (juan), with two fascicles of other writing. A note in the postface to his edition lists Wang’s sources:

古本二卷, 蜀本二十卷, 集略十五卷, 樊晃序小集六卷, 孫光憲序二十卷, 鄭文寶序少陵集二十卷, 別題小集二卷, 孫僅一卷, 雜篇三卷。

An old edition in two fascicles; the Shu edition in twenty fascicles; an “abbreviated collection” in fifteen fascicles; the “Anthology” with Fan Huang’s preface in six fascicles; twenty fascicles with Sun Guangxian’s preface; the “Shaoling Collection” with Zheng Wenbao’s preface in twenty fascicles; another “Anthology” in two fascicles; Sun Jin’s single fascicle; three fascicles of various pieces.

The first two printings of the Wang Zhu edition were by his son Wang Qi 王琪 in 1059, reportedly in a print run of ten thousand (impossible with a single set of blocks). Here we must mention the Wu Ruo edition of 1133. This was the edition that Qian Qianyi claimed to have owned (in some version) and used as the basis of his commentary on Du Fu. It unfortunately was burned up with the rest of Qian Qianyi’s library. In the preface to his Dushi yinde 杜詩引得, William Hung argued strenuously that this edition was a fraud. Most modern scholars, on better evidence, credit both Wu Ruo and Qian Qianyi’s edition—Zhou

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10 The commentary attributed to Wang Zhu is now generally considered an early forgery.
13 William Hung (Hong Ye 洪業), Du shi yinde 杜詩引得 (Beijing: Hafó Yanjing xueshe, 1940), pp. lvi ff.
Caiquan suggests that Qian may have had a later reprint of the Wu Ruo edition. Qian Qianyi’s edition held great prestige in the Qing, and many of the editorial choices reflect Qian’s choices—which may or may not represent the Wu Ruo edition.

This comes to what does survive and its relation to Wang Zhu’s edition. We have a composite edition from the early Qing, now known as the “Song edition.” This is a seventeenth-century Jiguge 汲古閣 construction, primarily based on two related early Southern Song editions, with some lost pages filled in from other editions. The small number of supplementary pages have been stripped of commentary, but the two predominant sources are without commentary, which is unique among extant Song editions, suggesting scholarly interest in the text per se and gesturing back to the Wang Zhu edition. One of these two editions cites variants from the manuscripts Wang Zhu used in preparing his edition; since it cites other, later sources for variants as well, it is clearly a later version. The other primary component does not cite the sources for its variants. There is scholarly debate regarding what these editions are—perhaps Wang Zhu with additional variants, perhaps Wu Ruo—but they are both probably among the earliest editions and closest to Wang Zhu.

Next we must consider Guo Zhida’s Jiujia jizhu Dushi 九家集注杜詩. The original 1181 edition has been lost, but the 1225 edition (perhaps changed) survived into the Qing. We currently have it most commonly through the manuscript copy in Siku quanshu (which is not always reliable). This was based on a now-lost Song edition in the palace collection; another Song edition, missing some juan and pages, was preserved in the library of the great bibliographer Huang Pilie 黃丕烈 and was reprinted in 1981. This also sometimes indicates the sources of variants, though less comprehensively than the few fascicles of the “Song

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14 周才泉 pp. 46 ff.; 张钟向 pp. 80 ff.
15 见蔡锦芳, “宋郭知達《新刊校訂集注杜詩》校論: 兼談《四庫全書》文淵閣本《九家集注杜詩》所用底本, in 蔡锦芳, 杜詩版本及作品研究 (Shanghai: Shanghai daxue chubanshe, 2007), pp. 3–13. The Zhao edition, with his commentary from other editions included, has been reissued as 林继中 ed., Dushi Zhao Cigong xianhou jie jijiao 杜詩趙次公先後解輯校 (Shanghai: Shanghai guji chubanshe, 1994).
edition” that give the manuscript variants. Guo’s preface, moreover, addresses the issue of enthusiasts altering Du Fu’s text without evidence; and while Guo himself says he fixes “errors,” he is clearly interested in preserving what he considers the best text. Collating the poems shows that, while there are differences, the Guo Zhida readings generally are in accord with the two texts that comprise the “Song edition,” while there are some striking differences from later Song commercial editions. The relative textual agreement between the two components of the “Song edition” and the Guo Zhida edition suggests that they all come from the same textual lineage.

Some mention should be made of the best Song commentary, the *Xinding Du gongbu gushi jintishi xianhou bingjie* 新定杜工部古詩近體詩先後並解 by Zhao Cigong 趙次公, completed sometime between 1134 and 1151.¹⁶ Twenty-six of the original fifty-nine fascicles survive. As important as the commentary is, Zhao Cigong’s edition was based on an earlier edition with frequent Song conjectural readings, to which Zhao added his own conjectural readings. The differences can be seen not only in the surviving fascicles, but also in the readings implicit in Zhao’s commentary, which was extensively quoted by Guo and other, later Song commentaries.

I have based my text primarily on “Song edition” and the Guo Zhida edition, with consideration of earlier texts such as *Wenyuan yinghua* and *Tang wencui*. I note variants in these texts in my final notes, sometimes adding interesting variants from other early editions and Qiu Zhao’ao’s 仇兆鰲 *Du shi xiangzhu* 杜詩詳注 (1703). Here we need to stress the obvious: the fact that *Wenyuan yinghua*, the Guo Zhida edition, and the two components of the “Song edition” may agree on a reading is no guarantee whatsoever that this is what Du Fu wrote. It is simply as close as we can come to the manuscript tradition and to a time before scholars were willfully changing Du Fu’s texts. We have enough occasions when they are obviously correct—using a term otherwise appearing only in Tang texts rather than a term used in both Tang and Song texts—that we can have confidence that they are sometimes right.

Sometimes the variants give us an insight into a Du Fu rather different from the conventional image. In 8.18 Du Fu has been brought a gift of

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¹⁶ Zhang Zhongwang p. 63.
bunches for fresh Chinese chives (*jiucai*). Du Fu praises the chives and at the end concludes:

衰年閏鬲冷，
味暖併無憂。

In my waning years, my viscera are cold,
they taste warm, and I have no more worries at all.

(8.18)

This seems bland enough, but the variants are interesting: the “Song edition” offers a variant *fu* 腹, “stomach” or more vulgarly “belly” for *bing* 併; Guo gives the variant *fu* 復, “also”. The reading *bing* 併 (“all together,” translated as “at all”) is odd. Taken together, the two variants, however, give us a clue to what possibly happened.

First we note a technical term of Chinese medicine, *guanli* 關鬲, “viscera.” Tang poets very rarely use the technical vocabulary of Chinese medicine, and the term *guanli* is used nowhere else in extant Tang poetry. This tells us that the term would have stood out as an oddity to Tang readers. This goes in conjunction with the “cold” and “warm,” then as now, standard terms in Chinese medicine. In this context let me suggest that the “Song edition” variant reading of *fu* 腹 (MC *biuk*) is correct. This is a play on registers, moving from the technically medical to the everyday:

In my waning years my viscera are cold,
they taste warm, my belly has no more worries.

It is easy to conjecture what happened. Radicals of characters were often omitted or exchanged, so a text might read 復 or 復. A copyist could easily miss the joke and take the more common reading *fu* 復. *Fu* 復 has two readings: *bhiuk* meaning “return,” and *bhiòu* meaning “also.” By the period of copying (10th–11th century) the initials of *bhiuk* 復 and *biuk* 腹 were collapsing, so it may have been a misunderstanding of sounds. The problem is that *fu* 復 in the sense of “return” would be very awkward (“return to no worries”), and anyone reading the text would naturally take it as: “and again (*bhiòu*) I have no worries.” The problem then is that in Middle Chinese this would be the painfully cacophonous *bhiòu mio qiou*. If it were *biuk mio qiou* (“belly without worries”), it would be perfect, since an entering tone in the third position of the eighth line of a five-syllable regulated verse was very common.
Such cacophony begged repair, and a rough synonym for *fu* (MC *bhiòu*), “also,” was *bing* 併 (MC *biĕng*).

This may not be what happened, but the conjecture brings to the fore many of the issues at work in the production of variants: texts that either do not use radicals or the proper radicals for characters, homophones and near homophones in the period of copying, the avoidance of cacophony, and semantic variation. In the process a witty line becomes a bland line. I do not know if this was the case in the lines cited—we can never know for certain—but it vividly illustrates what “could have happened.”