Du Fu Lore and Translation Conventions

Every literature builds on a vast amount of assumed knowledge. What is taken for granted by readers situated in one time and place requires a note in another time and place. As the distance increases, so do the number of notes. There is no way to cover all the knowledge assumed in Du Fu’s poetry, but we can note a few things.

Nomenclature

The surname comes first, followed by the given name or courtesy name. Occasionally Du Fu refers to himself as Fu, which is not common; it is either informal or, in a petition to the emperor, deferential. He refers to Li Bai once as Bai, but that is an unusual intimacy in poetry. We rarely find the proper name. When addressing someone in the bureaucratic system, that person is most commonly referred to by his surname and his current office or by an office previously held. A person may also be referred to by his surname and a toponym, which might be the place of his family registration or the place where he was serving. Du Fu thus commonly appears as Du gongbu 杜工部, “Du of the Board of Works,” or Du Shaoling 杜少陵, “Du of Shaoling.” Particularly in the Tang people were often identified by their surname and their hangdi 行第, their position among the males of a particular generation in a family. “Zhang Three,” Zhang san 張三, means the third in seniority in a particular generation of [a certain branch of] the Zhang family. In poem titles this will appear as “Zhang (3).” A member of the gentry who was not serving in the government or had not served, whether by necessity or choice, would often be called a “recluse,” because there was simply no other respectable way to identify someone who was not serving.

Large books are devoted to the titles of offices, which in effect was the structure of government, with each office occupying a position in a hierarchy of nine grades, each of which was subdivided into “upper” and “lower.” Since we know roughly how many incumbents there were supposed to be for each office, it would seem to be simple to understand. But honorary appointments to offices became increasingly common in Du Fu’s lifetime, particularly when the impoverished court turned to its one inexhaustible resource, the power to bestow titles and honors, the
currency of prestige. Du Fu had complained about this before the Rebellion, but it was the world he lived in. At one point Du Fu is referring to the military operations against rebel troops in the northeast and praises the discernment of the Minister of Education. Any reader might reasonably wonder what the Minister of Education was doing among the fierce generals of the empire—but this was Li Guangbi 李光弼, one of the Tang’s best generals, decorated with a nominal civil post. Du Fu himself was the beneficiary of this. When the loyal Yan Wu was recalled to the capital, he might ask for a “little favor,” such as securing a post for his old friend Du Fu. The government cheerfully appointed Du Fu to the position of a subordinate director in the Board of Works—though it was well understood that he should never report for work. He did, however, get to carry his badge of office around with him, and it sometimes mattered. In the complex network of friends and associates, whose positions were frequently shifting, one had to keep straight who held which position when.

Who’s Hu? Non-Han

By and large people doing Tang studies have fortunately abandoned the blanket term “barbarian” for the non-Han peoples with whom the Tang was engaged. I restrict “barbarian” to the word lu 虜, a contemptuous, pejorative term for non-Han without ethnic distinction. There are archaic terms, there are vague regional terms, and precise designations of peoples and polities. After long brooding I have decided to use the Romanization for Hu 胡. Hu refers primarily to the Indo-European inhabitants of Central Asia, such as the Sogdians, but it was applied more loosely to all non-Han peoples of the north and northwest. In Du Fu it is also used for northeasterners and on rare occasions, for the Tibetans. Du Fu often describes the rebels as Hu, so when he refers to the Uighurs, who were Tang allies, he often does so with ethnic precision, Huìhu 回鶻. The northeastern peoples were most commonly referred to as Yi 畲, though sometimes Du Fu uses the more precise ethnic designations “Blond-heads,” huàngtòu 黃首, and Xi 奚. Toward the west were the Qiang 羌, between the Tibetans, the Uighurs, and the Chinese.

The Tibetans were China’s major adversary in the eighth century. They are often referred to anachronistically as the Rong 戎 or the Dog Rong, Quánrónɡ 犬戎, the ancient adversaries of the Zhou dynasty. The equally anachronistic term for northern peoples was Di 戰. This is similar to the
Magyars becoming Hun-garians, or the Germans in World War I being referred to as “Huns.”

South China was inhabited by a patchwork of different peoples speaking a variety of languages. They were commonly raided by the Chinese for slaves, and they sometimes responded in kind. In Chinese they were referred to as Man 蠻, which is a problematic Romanization to use in English translation, especially when distinguished as the “Hundred Man” or the “Black Man.” As a term of convenience I have adopted “Mon,” making no etymological claim linking “Man” to the early polities of the Mon people, who would have been called “Man” in Chinese.

Although there was significant ethnic tension in the Tang (as will be evident from reading Du Fu), it is important to understand the degree to which large areas of the Tang were ethnically mixed, as were its customs outside the Han elite. This was especially true of the military. In 13.39 Du Fu describes his flight from Chengdu after Yan Wu’s return to court and the rebellion of the local general:

請陳初亂時, Let me recount when the revolt first occurred:  
反復乃須臾. things turned upside down in an instant.  
大將赴朝廷, The great general had gone off to court,  
群小起異圖. and a group of underlings raised rebellious plots.  
中宵斬白馬, In the middle of the night they cut open a white horse,  
盟歃氣已麤. they made a blood-pact, their temper already harsh.

Anyone who knows Indo-European ritual will be startled here because the sacrifice of a white horse was clearly linked to declaring kingship or chieftaincy. Why this is occurring in a Chengdu rebellion in the middle of the eighth century is anyone’s guess, but it is clearly an act undertaken by the troops and for the troops. My guess would be that it had become a military ritual, clearly of non-Han origin, circulating among the armies whatever their predominant ethnic make-up. But here, as elsewhere in Du Fu, we have a glimpse over the edge of Han elite culture, which we habitually take as if it represented China.

We cannot here give a full account of all that will be unfamiliar in representing the ethnically Han world of Tang China: the festivals, the musical instruments, the clothing, and much more. Hopefully it will become clear in the aggregate.
Allusion

Among the various Song phrases that have become enduring commonplaces attached to the poet is that “every word has a source.” This impression probably derived from reading Du Fu’s poetry with source-hunting commentary, either in manuscript or in print. If one looked at a printed page of commentary with its copious citations of precedent usages, it surely must have seemed that way. The model for such commentary was the monumental Li Shan commentary (mid-seventh century) to the early sixth-century anthology *Wen xuan* 文選. Appearing together with the new canonization of Du Fu in the late eleventh century, such commentary lent a visual authority and aura of “seriousness” to the poet.

There is, however, a great distance between the lexicographical citation of the earliest usage of a phrase and an allusion, which presumes that the reader will not only recognize the source as such, but must do so to fully understand the poem. Du Fu is often a very allusive poet. In many cases his allusions were “ready-made.” To write to the “consort” (*fuma* 駙馬) of an imperial princess virtually obligated a poet of Du Fu’s time to make reference to Xiaoshi 蕭史, the husband of Nongyu 弄玉, the daughter of the Duke of Qin from pre-imperial times. At another extreme, Du Fu sometimes used allusions that few or none of his readers would have recognized or known how the reference applied to the case at hand. Sometimes Du Fu becomes caught up in his allusions in a way that was truly private.

To fully document all the allusions and possible allusions in Du Fu’s would probably more than double the size of this work and make it unreadable. I have followed a principle of minimalism in the notes to the text, telling the reader what he or she needs to know to make rough sense of the poem. In many cases a richer sense of the poem depends on grasping not just the rough sense, but the full weight of allusions. For allusions that recur, I have included an appendix of common allusions, with more extensive discussion. These are marked in the notes within the text by an asterisk followed by the name or key phrase, given in alphabetical order in the appendix. Sometimes I have explained an allusion at greater length in the notes at the end.

In 6.48 Du Fu praises a horse (and, by extension) its rider, saying: “in years past, fleeing the Hu, it passed Golden Ox” 前年避胡過金牛. The reader needs to know that Golden Ox County lies in between Chang’an
and Chengdu, thus that the horse and its master followed Xuanzong to
his exile court in Chengdu during the rebellion. The reader does not
need to know that Qin, wanting to invade Shu, put out word that there
was an ox that excreted gold, leaving it to Shu’s greed to open the road
through the mountains into Qin, thus enabling the Qin invasion of Shu
and lending its name to the county in question.

It is important to keep in mind that Du Fu had a much more varied
manuscript tradition available to him than survives, and the sources he
knew may differ from those cited. At the same time it is unlikely that he
ever had access to many of the texts that we now have. We can feel some
confidence that basic texts like the Classics, the standard histories, and
the Wen xuan were familiar to him. In some cases, however, we see him
giving versions of stories and conflating stories in ways that suggest he
knew different versions. Often we see the commentary giving the earliest
source of an allusion, but find, on further investigation, that Du Fu was
clearly referring to a later use of that allusion.

Translation

Translation is a craft that is contingent upon its purpose, and the purpose
is usually determined by the readers for whom it is intended. Although
these translations can be used by general readers and specialized scholars,
the primary audience are those who have some level of Chinese, but
whose Chinese is not up to reading Du Fu. As one might say of any great
poet, I’m not sure anyone’s Chinese is up to reading Du Fu.

I try to be as fluent as I can when Du Fu permits me to be—but Du
Fu sometimes does not grant permission, especially in his pailü, the long
regulated poems that were so much esteemed in the Tang. Addressing
two recipients (A and B), Du Fu may go on for a dozen couplets speak-
ing of A and/or B in one line of each couplet, with only the most indi-
rect reference to the person he is talking about. The translator wearies
of inserting “the one … / the other …” However much they were once
loved, this is the kind of poem for which even a moderately skilled reader
of poetic Chinese needs help, even at the expense of graceless English. I
have tried to have the translations make sense—though in Du Fu’s pailü,
this can be a challenge. Paraphrase might be clearer.

No one who has engaged the millennium of scholarship on Du Fu
can fail to face the fact that that there are disputes of interpretation
everywhere, and there are many modern scholars who rehearse those disputes and offer a judgment. But those modern scholars themselves often make different judgments. Du Fu often uses words in strange ways; and while the figurative or extended usage might have been clear in the middle of the eighth century, it is no longer always clear. Du Fu uses colloquialisms; scholars from the Song through the present day speak with assurance about what those colloquial usages mean—but I am not so sure. We often do not know whether Du Fu is referring to himself in a couplet or to the recipient of the poem; and when the poem is a “companion piece” (modeled on someone else’s poem), we often do not know whether Du Fu is referring to himself, the author of the original poem (often lost), or to the recipient of the original poem. Back in the mid-eighth century when the poem was written, everything was probably clear from context. But we do not have that context; and a great deal of Chinese scholarship has been devoted to speculatively reconstructing it.

There is a complete translation of Du Fu’s poetry into German prose by Erwin von Zach, published in 1935–36, and reprinted by the Harvard-Yenching Institute in 1952. Having used that work to great profit in my earliest readings of Du Fu as a graduate student, I have tried to stay away from it in this present venture—lest the recollection of once familiar interpretations makes me forget to reconsider troublesome passages. Any translation of Du Fu into a European language will result in padding the translation. Von Zach’s prose pads a great deal. His text was Zhang Jin’s 張溍 (1621–1678) Dushu tang Du gongbu shiji zhujie 謼書堂杜工部詩集注解 (first printed 1698), based on a Southern Song commercial edition. This was a popular edition in the Qing, and Zhang Jin is very interesting for his critical comments; but he was silent on many of the basic philological and lexical problems, leaving von Zach considerable interpretative latitude.

Although there is no earlier complete translation in English, there are many partial translations. Some noteworthy books in this category are William Hung’s Tu Fu: China’s Greatest Poet (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1952), David Hawkes’s A Little Primer of Tu Fu

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(Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1967), and David McCraw’s *Du Fu’s Laments from the South* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1992). William Hung’s work is a biography with extensive prose translations from Du Fu’s poems. David Hawkes give a smaller selection, those works by Du Fu included in the now canonical *Three Hundred Tang Poems* 唐詩三百首, with the Chinese text and copious explanation. The title is appropriate: after almost half a century, this remains the best introduction to reading Chinese poetry. David McCraw translates extensively from Du Fu’s most prolific period in a unique translation style that attempts to reproduce in English Du Fu’s peculiar density.

**Conventions of Presentation**

The translations are numbered according to their sequence in Qiu Zhao’ao’s *Dushi xiangzhu* (1703), the first number being the fascicle (*juan*). Qiu remains the most widely available edition, frequently reissued; although the pagination in different editions is not the same, the sequence within a fascicle is consistent. Qiu’s is a chronological arrangement of the poems (as it was understood in 1703), mixing “old style” and regulated genres. Some modern editions place some poems in different years, and scholars make passionate arguments for redating one poem or another. By and large, poems that can be dated by obvious criteria are accurately dated in Qiu; poems where the dating criteria are open to argument remain open to argument; and poems that really cannot be dated might as well remain in the places where people have always looked for them. Xiao Difei’s *新* edition, *Du Fu quanji jiaozhu* 杜甫全集校注 (Beijing: Renmin wenxue chubanshe, 2014), is likely to supersede Qiu as the standard edition. I can only regret that, after waiting for this edition for thirty-five years, it appeared too late for the current translation. I have included the page references in Xiao for each poem. This edition, whose basic structure was conceived in 1979 and duly executed by a very large committee, remains a work of modern scholarship as could have been conceived in China in 1979. It has very little original scholarship and just as little engagement with more recent scholarship on Du Fu. With a few exceptions, it is a large compendium of premodern scholarship, with sources given accurately rather than from imperfect memory. In this sense it is a useful replacement for Qiu Zhao’ao.
Footnotes are restricted to information necessary to understand the translation on a basic level. I have also included the many “original notes,” presumably by Du Fu himself. Given the variety of backgrounds that readers bring, for some readers the footnotes will be too many and for others, not enough. To avoid the cross-referencing that drives readers crazy, I have repeated information given elsewhere, often reformulated for the use of that information in the poem at hand. For Du Fu’s favorite references, I have given a section on allusions, with a fuller discussion. Such references are marked in the footnotes with a name or key word marked with an asterisk.

Standard scholarly practice follows traditional Chinese practice in quoting or translating the earliest source of a reference with full bibliographical information. In most cases I give, instead, a brief identification or the gist of a story. Not only is this more useful for a reader, it may indeed be truer to Du Fu’s actual practice. Traditional Chinese annotation presumes that Du Fu had access to the same books that were available when the annotation was being done, or that Du Fu had memorized those books. First of all, many stories were surely known “as stories”; in some cases Du Fu surely knew the written source, while in other cases knowledge of a source text may not have mattered. Some phrases had obvious implications that did not depend upon knowing a textual source: “fine silk pants” is noted as a reference to “the wealthy and noble”; the earliest usage is immaterial. Second, later commentators wrongly assumed that Du Fu always had the same books they had and that his learning derived from those books. If a second century CE recluse appears in the History of the Latter Han (Hou Han shu), that helps later commentators identify the person; but we do not know if this was Du Fu’s source, or some epitome of that work, or one of the other histories of the period still extant, or some compilation on recluses. The textual past available to a Tang poet was more various than the textual record of the same period as it appeared in the twelfth or eighteenth century.

In the “Additional Notes” sources are given. First we have the number in the Quan Tang shi 全唐詩 given in Hiraoka Takeo 平岡武夫, Ichihara Kokichi 市原亨吉, and Imai Kiyoshi 今井清, Tōdai no shihen 唐代の詩篇, Tang Civilization Reference Series 11–12 (Kyoto: Institute for Humanistic Studies, 1964–65). This is followed by early sources such as Wenyuan yinghua, the fascicle in the “Song edition” (SB), the fascicle in Guo Zhida (Guo), and the page number in the standard Zhonghua
shuju reprint of Qiu Zhaoao (Qiu). After this are supplementary commentaries and critical notes used, including the page number in Xiao Difei’s new edition.

Textual variants follow, primarily confined to the earliest Song editions, though occasionally making reference to other editions. “Var. A/B” means “cites the variant A for B.” “Additional Notes” treat questions not appropriate for footnotes, but of interest to the scholar, including why a certain word or compound is taken a certain way. These are nowhere as extensive as they could be, out of the hope that the translation can be finished in my lifetime. In citing standard pre-modern Chinese sources I often cite the fascicle rather than the page number. Books are continually being reissued, and the fascicle number is far more likely to remain stable than a page number.