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## Du Fu and Chinese Poetic Expression: How Politics, Nature, and Self Become One

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Du Fu and Chinese Poetic Expression:  
How Politics, Nature, and Self Become One

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Born in 712 C.E., Du Fu is regarded as one of the most influential classical Chinese poets. He was born into an aristocratic family during the Tang Dynasty (618 – 917), but after the An Lushan Rebellion (755 – 763) reached the capital of Chang'an in 756 where he was living, he was forced to flee from the city with his family. The Tang Dynasty started out strong, flourishing politically, economically, and within the arts and literature, but the second half of its rule was littered with conflicts, having failed to recover from the damages done by the Rebellion.<sup>1</sup> It was not until the latter half of Du's life, during that period of dynastic wars and instability, that he began writing poetry. The political state of his country motivated Du to write about his wish for prosperity and an end to the wars. His relentless sentiments for national well-being often drove him to openly criticize the emperor's inept abilities as well.<sup>2</sup> His poems speak to his experience escaping the Rebellion's invasion with his family, the war-torn cities he witnessed along the way, and his anguished feelings over the shape of his country that was falling apart before his very eyes. The deep passion and worries Du expressed in his work helped portray him as a patriotic and devoted citizen to his readers. He also gained traction over his poetry because of his use of metaphorical statements about nature and its beauty to juxtapose that of the broken dynasty. The verses in his poems are filled with emotion and lyrical when read. By inserting his own feelings into his poems and creating an image of himself for his readers, his writing represented a form of personal expression as well as political advocacy. Before Du, no poet had written poetry with such a style. Poetry was much less of an art, but more often used by government officials to make announcements to the public. Such announcements often spoke highly of the empire and contained high Confucianist values of devotion to the country and serving it wholeheartedly morally and ethically.<sup>3</sup>

Qiang received grace from the king to case this precious vessel. It is the fortune built by my forefathers that gave the Qiang their land. May good luck and blessings last until my hair turns white and my skin becomes dry. May we serve our king well. May the vessel be treasured ten thousand years.<sup>4</sup>

An example of some of China's earliest writings, this message was inscribed in bronze by Qiang the Historian during the reign of King Gong of the early Zhou Dynasty sometime between 946 – 935 B.C.E. Referring to himself in the poem, he speaks of a military ship gifted to him by the king and the historical importance it holds. He also speaks of his own ancestral history and acknowledges their efforts that helped his generation get to where it is now. Most distinct in Qiang's inscription is the line asking for faithfulness of the king. Indicative of a common theme

in ancient Chinese poetry, many of China's ancient texts and literature that are classified as poetry were politically framed messages in support of the king or empire.

In contrast, Du's era of poetic writing was characterized by nature, beauty, and aestheticism. However, both contained strong political overtones. In his poem *Spring Scene* (757), Du compares the unrest in Chang'an after the invasion to the predictable and constant seasonal changes every year. He begins the poem by describing the seasons' unbothered response to human sorrows, but switches tone into one of recognition and personal want later on.

The state may fall, but the hills and streams remain. It is spring in the city: grass and leaves grow thick. The flowers shed tears of grief for the troubled times, and the birds seen startled, as if with the anguish of separation. A letter from home would be worth a fortune. My white hair is getting so scanty worried scratching that soon there won't be enough to stick my hatpin in!<sup>5</sup>

He uses nature to describe both the takeover of the city and his own distraught feelings being a victim of the war that many others will be able to relate to. The personification of the flowers conveys a stronger feeling of sadness because flowers are universally used to represent the loveliness of nature, but instead, they are crying here. The structure of Du's poem also adds rhythm and flow that is noticeably absent from Qiang's prose. While both poets made self-references in their pieces, Du creates this carefully detailed image focused on himself instead of his familial background in the poem that makes him out to be this pitiful old man awaiting a letter from his loved ones. He would reference himself frequently in many of his later poems that often poked fun at his own age.

In *Walking Alone by the Riverbank Seeking Flowers* (760), he writes about how his age has reached the point of becoming a hindrance to his favorite pastimes. As the spring seasons near, he is reminded of how old he has become, thinking back to all of the springs he has seen come and go throughout his lifetime. Yet, he is unwilling to let time defeat him, making him give up on the pleasures spring can bring. "But I walk on, precariously tottering, / truly afraid of spring. / And bear still the drivings of wine and song, / I endure, / Not yet finished off – this white haired-old man."<sup>6</sup> Although Du recognizes how age can become an obstacle to his pursuits in beauty and the arts, it is still not enough to stop him. The tone Du used in this poem is less serious than in *Spring Scene*, but retained the same mockery of his poetic persona. In many of his poems, he is depicted as a self-recognized intellect, but with flaws, therefore making him a modest one. This self-awareness and humorous touch made him appeal to many readers without

having to devalue his own worth as a brilliant poet. A stylistic choice unique to Du, it was a revolutionary technique at the time his poems were published.<sup>7</sup> Because poetry was initially used as a tool instead of as a form of expression, Du's usage of poetic writing for personal reasons caused his popularity as an author to resonate amongst future poets. The stylistic approach Du Fu used in his poems about the Tang Dynasty wars – blending politics, the beauty of nature, and self-expression into one – opened a new manner of poetry late Song Dynasty poets would adopt for the next four hundred years.

The Song Dynasty lasted from 960 to 1279. Unlike the Tang Dynasty, the Song Dynasty made no significant political achievements during its reign and instead, was struggling to keep hold of its power and control. After the Manchurians occupied the northern half of the Song Dynasty in 1127, their capital was moved to the south and the lands became known as Southern Song and Northern Song. However, the Song Dynasty had a thriving economy and arts and literature scene that grew during this time. With a population of tens of millions, they were able to establish a well working market economy and the silk roads trade routes made China an important player of the trade world.<sup>8</sup> After the North and South split, the two divisions continued to develop their individual identity in the arts. The Northern Song Dynasty is known for their landscape and naturalistic centered art that wanted to depict nature in the most honest and accurate way. Because the dynasty was in the midst of major political and social change, the climate of its reality played a crucial role in shaping the way artists expressed their work as well.<sup>9</sup> In the Southern dynasty, nature was also an important theme in how they produced their art. Artists wanted to express life and beauty aesthetically and realistically and found inspiration from the natural environment around them.<sup>10</sup> Embracing Du's new adaptation of poetry, many poets from the Song Dynasty addressed the political turmoil their country was in by conveying their personal frustrations and distress in their work using nature as the essence and incorporating themselves as a character of their poems.

A poet of the Song Dynasty who lived in the north, Ouyang Xiu (1007 – 1072), followed after Du's distinctive poetry style and similarly addressed himself as “Old Drunkard” and using that title as his pen name for several of his works. He passed the civil exam and was working for the government, but his interest was in literature. His lavish lifestyle, surrounded by women and drinking, was often criticized by the public, but he took the criticisms in stride and instead, wrote them away through his poetry. In a poem Ouyang wrote about the time he was invited to a party

at his friend's house, he talks about the younger guests who were there, "all of them worthy and free of care," as he was "going bald at the temples." As he acknowledged his old age and ongoing frivolous tendencies, he remarked, "You must know that rosy young faces will not last very long."<sup>11</sup> Ouyang knows how people view him and is open to confronting the matter in his poem, but at the same time, will not let the criticisms make him falter. His headstrong attack on the youth and self-defense is synonymous with Du's will to continue seeking excitement from writing and producing beautiful poetry. Ouyang went as far as to declare that his seemingly constant drunken state is what made him intelligent and wise enough to understand the mechanisms of nature and the world better than sober people would be able to. "Vulgar people are clear, / I alone am drowsy. / Vulgar people are alert, I alone am muddled. / If [they were] not one guests of the Old Drunkard, / Don't expect [their] vulgar ears to understand the tone of your music."<sup>12</sup> His poem still stays within the context of different fields of art, as that is what he is an expert on and is able to represent thoroughly. Despite what others might think, Ouyang has faith in himself and knows where his attributes lie. This confident display of a public persona can be traced back to Du's poetic styles that allowed future poets like Ouyang to pursue the same genre and write their personal conflicts into their poems with assurance.

A Song poet from the generation after Ouyang mimicked the same sense of duty to his country that Du had expressed in many of his poems. A devoted political poet and essayist, Su Shi (1037 – 1101) led the next group of poets in the history of Song literature. His intense denunciation of the country's political affairs made him an enemy of the state which eventually led to his exile. Like Du, his background in politics acted as a catalyst for his poetic career.<sup>13</sup> After he was exiled to Huangzhou, he continued writing about how he felt, but also self-examined his relationship with politics. His exile was not met with as much resentment as one would expect from someone who proudly spoke against the government's lack of stability and service. Instead, he took advantage of the situation to examine his own civic duty and how he should approach politics.

I laugh as myself, busied all my life on account of my mouth: / The older I get, the more preposterous I pursue. / Where the long river rounds the city wall, I know the fish will be good, / Fine bamboo covers the hills – I can detect the fragrance of the shoots. / It doesn't hurt an exile to be posted as a supernumerary, / Nor is it unprecedented for a poet to serve as a Water Bureau clerk. / Only I am ashamed not to be a single shred of use, / While still troubling the government to press out wine sacks for me. (*On First Arriving at Huangzhou*)<sup>14</sup>

Su's exiled status is not bothering him as much as how he feels useless and self-loathing. He looks back and blames his outspokenness for causing the exile and expresses remorse. Rather than anger, Su is regretful because he can no longer serve the government more helpfully and feels he is wasting their resources instead. From the poem, the serene descriptions of nature are used in pair with different city locations, showing that Su has reached a change of heart and sees the government's efforts in a new light. The fish swimming in the river near the city are well-behaved, alluding that the situation is positive and promising. The sweet scent from the bamboos that Su can smell demonstrate his more lighthearted approach to the situation. In his poems, he often uses descriptions of natural aspects to help depict his own emotions, add context, and transition from one scene to another,

Broken moon hanging on a leafless paulownia, / Water-clock stopped, everyone still at last. / Who sees the hermit walking back and forth alone? / Faraway and dim, the silhouette of a single goose. / Starting up, it turns around again, / Full of complaints understood by none. / Branch upon wintry branch, all unfit for rest: / Lonely on the islet cold. (*Pu suan tsu*)<sup>15</sup>

Referring to himself as the hermit, he compares himself to the lone goose. Both are companionless. Taking place in winter, with fruitless trees and a "broken moon" as the backdrop, Su creates a melancholic ambience where his loneliness is further emphasized. The metaphors he used includes nature and wildlife, creating the same rhythmic feel that was popularized because of Du. Du's influence is notable in the poetic art that take after the songlike reading he had introduced in the late 750's and 60's.

The time period after Su's was during the Song Dynasty's official separation into a North and a South. Many poets of the Southern Song Dynasty used the divide as the premise for their poems. Although, Lu Yu (1125 – 1209) grew up in the south and has no recollection of a united Song Dynasty, his father was a government official who openly vocalized his irate feelings over the separation of the state. Growing up influenced by the unfiltered opinions, Lu brought those views into his own poems. The politically charged language in his poems closely resembled Du's own patriotic hopes for a successful and affluent China and Lu would directly quote Du or make references to him in several of his own poems.<sup>16</sup> In order to illustrate his own agitated feelings, he used nature to set up the atmosphere and as analogies to the current turmoil of the country. In *Third Month, Night of the Seventeenth, Written While Drunk*, Lu begins his poem by describing the vigorous activities he participated in years back, "feasting on raw whale" as he looked out at

the “white waves like mountains flinging [him] their beauty and awe” or “shooting tigers” in the “south autumn mountain.” Instead, the glorious days are over and his “hair flecked gray” and “ashen face” is “so worn and broken it really makes [people] laugh.” The “traitorous barbarians are still not crushed, [his] heart never at peace,” as “the lone sword by [his] pillow sings out its clanging cry.”<sup>17</sup> Nature holds a strong presence which allows for vivid imagery that elicit impactful reactions from the reader. The personification of inanimate objects, such as his sword that can weep and sing or the waves that emanate beauty, are characteristic of Du’s own poetic style – one that is more expressive, personal, and raw in emotions – than was previously being produced before him.

Many of Lu’s political poems start by setting with scene with politically affiliated characters before ending with descriptions of nature and the weather to add emotional, lingering feelings.

Heartland in strife and turmoil, / robbed of its age-long peace, / battle fires, barbarian dust / spreading to the two capitals – / old official of the imperial retinue, / ten thousand miles away, / came here when skies were cold, / heard the sound of the river. (*At Lung-hsing Temple, Paying Sad Respects at the Place Where Master Shao-ling Stayed for a Time, 1178*)<sup>18</sup>

In this poem, Lu is speaking of the An Lushan Rebellion from 756. The official in the poem is Du. Saddened by the fighting and takeover of the capital, he moves to the temple where he can find peace from the unrest. The cold skies match well with the feelings he has and creates a bleak, sorrowful mood where Du knows nothing else other than to listen to the flow of the river. The images of nature are not used for comparison, but play a part in supporting the main role of poem with added emotional undertones. Although Lu’s poem is directly speaking to a particular event and person in Chinese history, the poem can easily be used to parallel the state of the Song Dynasty that experienced its split a year prior to the time this poem was written.

Another popular poet, Yang Wanli (1127 – 1206), lived and wrote during the same time as Lu. He held similar political views, pushing for the reunification of the Song Dynasty, but his distinctive style lies specifically in his dynamic descriptions of nature. His focus on politics was less dramatic than his predecessors due to the Ch’an Buddhism influence in his writing, which instead, enhanced his writing of nature and the idea of its being. The progression of his writing chronicles his own path towards finding peace and understanding the meaning of life.<sup>19</sup> A brief mention of the conflict between the North and the South was made in *Traveling Early on Dragon*

*Stream*. Yang references the problem subtly and without the heavy emotions that can be noted in the other poets' writings. "The mountains and streams are covered with thick vapors – not mist, not fog, not cloud. / Fellow Northerners, if you have never seen these miasmas of the South, / come to Dragon Stream and I'll show them to you."<sup>20</sup> His focus lies in the descriptions of nature and the undertone of the piece is calmer and less of a call to action despite mentioning politics. He also calls out to his fellow people separated by the Manchurians takeover, and reaches out to them in hopes of reconnection. His style, using lyrical lines to illustrate an image of nature that tells his personal story, is still a result of Du's influence. Later works talk about how "all [his] life [he has] heard rain, / and [he is] an old man; / but now for the first time [he understands] the sound of spring rain / on the river at night."<sup>21</sup> Despite having heard the sound of rain fall all his life, he came to understand what it really means for the first time. Readers are not let into the secret and allowed to see what exactly Yang means by that and what it is he finally understands, but this method of documenting the trajectory of his own understanding through poetry was introduced to Chinese poetic expression by Du and used here by Yang. The realization and relationship he has with nature is for him to know alone, but he uses nature to symbolize his own life and detail his personal attainment of the meaning of it.

A strong influence in Song poetry, Du's impact left effects on even the poets we read today. Modern-day Chinese poet Guo Lusheng (1948 –), also known by his pen name, Shi Zhi, became famous in the late 1960's during the Cultural Revolution under the rulership of Mao Zedong. After Mao assumed control of the Chinese government, he proceeded to initiate a movement called the Cultural Revolution that targeted educated and radical youths who had the potential to threaten his leadership and communist ideology. This included suppressing people's freedom of expression, especially of those who protested him.<sup>22</sup> Guo's poems were well-known amongst his community, but were brought to the attention of Mao's Red Guards after youths who had been sent to the countryside showed interest in the messages Guo was relaying. Despite persecution, Mao's restrictions on literary pursuits only motivated Guo to write more.<sup>23</sup>

My life is a tumbling withered leaf, / My future is a grain never to sprout; / If such is the true destiny for me, / I'd rather sing for brambles and stout. / Who cares if the thorns pierce my heart, / Fiery blood burns as if in flame, / Finding its way into rivers and lakes, / The man dies, but the spirit remains. (*Destiny*, 1967)<sup>24</sup>

Describing his life in terms of the elements in nature, Guo stays true to his beliefs despite the dangers he is faced with. Even though the combination of politics and nature is used differently

in this poem, not so much as to set the tone of the poem, but simply used as analogies, the sense of nature as a breathtaking phenomenon, creates a wider understanding of the sentiments being emoted, placing the feeling that occurs onto a grander scale. His passion is evident and can be translated for readers to understand better. Like many other Chinese poets, the root of Guo's poetic style is traceable to Du's technique that generated a new style of Chinese poetry so influential and crucial to Chinese poetry that it is still being imitated today. The idea that nature can be used to enhance political problems and/or create a story important to one's self while exercising their right and power to be themselves in the work they produce was made possible because of Du's own fervent passion and individualism.

The Northern Crown crosses the sky / Cut by the temple roof, / Where an iron phoenix soars and twists in the air. / The chanting prayers floats from the hall. / Fading bell notes eddy by my bed. / Tomorrow in the sunlight / I shall walk in the manured fields / And weep for the yellow dust of the dead. (*Visiting Zan, Abbot of Dayun*)<sup>25</sup>

Whether it is motivation caused by an undying dedication to the state, a love for his compatriots, or torment over their suffering, each of those sentiments move fluidly through time and can be understood by people who would come to exist hundreds of years later. The themes Du used are relatable and easy to empathize with and when those themes stress on the values of intimacy and genuineness, poetic writing transforms into something more than a declaration; it becomes a personal statement. Joined by the energy produced by nature's aestheticism, Du's new stylistic approach towards poetry leaves a great impact on the Chinese poetic community that opened a new manner of expressing poetry still detectable today.

After Mao died in 1976, Wang Xiaoni was part of the first wave of people to go to college, where she was introduced to poetry. When she graduated, Wang established and reached mainstream popularity in the 1980's as a representative poet of her generation. Her latest book, *Something Crosses My Mind*, was published in 2014 as a collection of poems she had written between the early 80's to late 2000's. Her writing is motivated by social activism and exploration of human relationships with the environment they live in.<sup>26</sup>

The ocean is coming ashore, ah salt, spreading over the earth / the wind blows past, a layer of barely perceptible white / the moon makes people unsteady. / Wealth grinds equality to a powder / the sky is very cold, retreating further and further, salty and astringent. / The only coin that rose to the top is about to drop / all around fugitives brandish white flags. / Money has depreciated, like salt has depreciated. / I stand on the other side of this age of wealth / and watch how the silent drama will play out. (*Moonlight, No. 3, 2006*)<sup>27</sup>

By describing the ocean, winds, and sky, Wang creates an empty, desolate atmosphere where the moon hangs above all “making people unsteady.” She then introduces the image of money and fugitives with white flags. In a somber mood where there is nothing else, she explicitly criticizes money being an ultimate power and its responsibility of preventing equality from being achieved. The coin at the top represents the few who are capable of reaching such high status when all around, the majority have strived and failed, to do what they were capable of. Detached from this reality, Wang stays on the sidelines observing what will happen next. Although those last lines might make her seem uninvolved and uncaring of the situation, by writing this poem, Wang had already expressed her concern and noted her standpoint on the problem, circling the reader back to the beginning of the poem. The subject of Wang’s poem focuses on more materialistic aspects and is a commentary on capitalism, but her poem still expresses concern for the people in China and how they can keep functioning in a society that only benefits the wealthy. By alternating between descriptions of nature that sets the ambience of the poem and the issue of wealth, her emphasis on the grim reality of the situation she is presenting is not lost or forgotten by the reader. This technique stresses on the importance of the issue and warns people of potential consequences. With new approaches towards poetry and poetic expression that were brought to the forefront and promoted by Du then revered by future generations, issues about politics, society, advocacy for the people, and wishes for national prosperity became common themes in Chinese poetry, intensified by the natural descriptions and personal attachment.

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