

Snapshots of Chinese Poetry
Du Fu, Xin Qiji, Huang Xiang

Commentary by John Balcom

Poetry is the glory of the Chinese literary tradition. With a continuous history of several thousand years, it is impossible to do justice to the tradition with such a small selection. We have opted here for a selection from two of China's most important dynasties for poetry, the Tang (618-907) and Song (960-1126), as well as work from the contemporary period, three "snapshots" of Chinese poetry.

The Tang dynasty is generally acknowledged to be the golden age of Chinese poetry. The early eighth century saw the perfection of regulated verse forms normally associated with the dynasty. Regulated verse is characterized by strict tonal prosody and rhyme. It is largely occasional verse and brief. The great age of Tang poets coincided with the reign of the Xuanzong Emperor (713-756) and the apogee of Tang political power. Poets such as Wang Wei (699-761), Li Po (701-762), and Du Fu (712-770) were active during this period. Anyone with even a cursory knowledge of Chinese poetry in translation will be familiar these names.

Du Fu (Tu Fu) is arguably China's greatest poet. It is commonplace to compare his stature to that of Homer, Virgil, Dante, Shakespeare, and Goethe as one of the great masters of world literature. The critical literature on Du Fu's work in China is immense, comparable to that on Shakespeare in the West. Kenneth Rexroth called Du Fu "the greatest non-epic, non-dramatic poet who has survived in any language." Yet given his importance in the Chinese tradition, it is amazing that to this day, there is no translation of his complete poetry into English.

Du Fu is a difficult but rewarding poet. He is referred to as the "poet-sage" or "poet-historian" because his poetry is often concerned with morality and history. The range of styles in his work is impressive; his work is richly allusive, and syntactically dense, with an erudite vocabulary. But his work is in no way bookish; he is able to combine a mastery of the poetic tradition with a creative spontaneity. His broad range of styles had a tremendous impact on the development of later Chinese poetry. Throughout his life, Du Fu was an innovator. As a young poet, he was indifferent to the themes

of popular verse subgenres; later he violated the boundaries of poetry by introducing themes and vocabulary that were considered “unpoetic”; late in life his work displays a combination of technical mastery and free idiosyncratic inwardness not unlike Beethoven in his late period.

Steve Bradbury and the late Geoff Waters offer two different approaches to Du Fu. I met Steve and Geoff through the American Literary Translators Association (ALTA). Steve favors providing the reader with a sense of the formal qualities through his use of fixed rhyme and meter, something rarely attempted by translators today; Geoff, a scholar of Tang poetry, on the other hand, is strongly within the modern tradition of free verse translation in the contemporary idiom. At the time of his passing, Geoff was working on a translation of Du Fu’s complete poems. He is sorely missed by his friends and fellow translators.

The selection of Du Fu’s poetry contains both regulated verse and *yuefu*—the ballad form. *A Ballad of War Chariots* is an example of a poem that deals with war, the military and politics, things that were generally considered “unpoetic.” It was written during the An Lushan rebellion (753-763), which lasted eight years, through the reigns of three emperors. The rebellion devastated the country—it has been estimated that 36 million people died or were displaced, approximately two thirds of the country. The poem does more than express sympathy for the soldiers and their families; it offers a moral judgment on the situation. Quite apropos today.

Xin Qiji (1140-1207) wrote during the Song dynasty, the Silver age of Chinese poetry. The poetic form associated with the Song dynasty is the *ci*, or lyric, as it is often translated. The *ci*, one of the major poetic genres of China, was originally a song text set to existing musical tunes. It actually emerged at the end of the Tang dynasty. The form replaced the *yuefu* and came to be considered a continuation of the form. Unfortunately, the musical notations of the tunes have been lost and only the titles remain. *Ci* poetry is characterized by lines of unequal length and often popular themes. During the Song dynasty the range was extended when innovators such as Liu Yong (987-1053) and Su Shi (1037-1101) broadened the

range of styles and narrowed the thematic differences between the lyric and literati poetry. Xin Qiji, an admirer of Su’s work, was one of the most prolific authors of *ci* poetry. Of his work, 626 *ci* composed to an incredible 101 different tunes have been preserved. In China he has been praised for his patriotic poems, but Mike Farman’s translations capture his also noteworthy lyricism. Mike is another ALTA cohort who has translated a lot of *ci* poetry as well as selections from the *Book of Songs*, China’s earliest anthology of poetry.

Huang Xiang (b. 1941) is a contemporary poet who has spent his life in the pursuit of the freedom to write. He has espoused artistic freedom in the face of a monolithic cultural bureaucracy that saw all art as subservient to politics. Modern Chinese poetry can be said to have two main streams: the modernist and the social-realist. In the case of mainland China, the early social-realist stream evolved into state-sponsored propaganda, which poets such as Huang Xiang have fought against, often to their own detriment. His work has appeared in underground publications, and he was the founder of *Enlightenment*, an unofficial literary magazine of Democracy Wall days during the 1970s. Not widely published in China, he spent a good deal of his adult life in prison, but Huang Xiang has survived against all odds. For the past three years, he lived in Pittsburgh under the auspices of the Cities of Asylum program, and is now living in New Jersey. Michelle Yeh, a noted scholar of modern poetry and old friend, has provided excellent renditions of Huang’s poetry.

One thing the reader will not necessarily be aware of from reading these translations is the extent to which modern poetry has broken with the past. With the demise of the imperial system in 1911, the jettisoning of its exam system, and the emergence of the New Culture Movement in 1915, classical verse forms were forsaken for free verse written in the modern vernacular. Looking at the Chinese texts included here, one can see that the poems from the Tang dynasty are quite regular and terse, something the English versions generally cannot reproduce. Modern Chinese poetry in the vernacular is slightly easier perhaps to render in translation. Enjoy the snapshots.