

*Spring in the Ruined City*



DU FU

**Spring in the Ruined City**  
*Selected Poems*

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To the memory of my father  
S.G. Waley, 1922–1993,  
and  
for my mother.

## INTRODUCTION

This selection of Du Fu's poems concentrates on the ten years of his life<sup>1</sup> during which the Tang dynasty (618–907 AD) was very nearly overturned by rebellion, and Du Fu himself experienced great physical and emotional hardship. It is also the period when he began to write his greatest poems, and the range given here aims to demonstrate at least some of the qualities for which he is so famous.

The poems (and the notes on them in the Appendix) chronicle a definite movement from the bleak depression in the earlier verses, written in northern China during the near-fatal rebellion mentioned above, to a more hopeful note as the military tide turned<sup>2</sup>, to a whole variety of moods, inspired by such stimuli as the lush landscapes of southern China<sup>3</sup> or his increasing despair that yet more disturbances (in effect, local rebellions) had broken out.

Du Fu put a great deal of his life and times into his poetry—indeed, much of the information we have about him is derived from his own writings. His response to such extreme times was itself extreme, not only in terms of emotion expressed, but also in terms of artistic achievement. In other words, this emergency (of the Tang dynasty) drove him to express himself with yet more urgency and innovatory daring. This is to be seen in particular in his handling of the eight-line verse form<sup>4</sup>. Bearing in mind, then, the historical context, much of what Du Fu says, and why he says it, should be fairly obvious—he gives his opinions freely, after all. The reader who would like more detail (perhaps more

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<sup>1</sup> 755 to a little after 763 AD; the date of some of these last poems is not precisely certain. For more details on dates and background, see Contextual Background and Appendix, pp 96-100.

<sup>2</sup> See 'The Great Trek North', p38.

<sup>3</sup> where he moved after 759. There is more on this in the Contextual Background on pages 96-97.

<sup>4</sup> (technically known as *lǔ-shi*, ie regulated verse). This is discussed in more detail on the next page.

certainty) is advised to turn to pages 96–100, where there is an overview of events, which is followed by notes on individual poems.

Without doubt, he was a great risk-taker, in his life<sup>5</sup> as well as in his art. And there is a very real sense in which both the long poems given here—‘Five Hundred Words’ and ‘The Great Trek North’<sup>6</sup>—which are considered among his greatest, bring out these qualities very clearly. In them Du Fu explores as fully as he can the potentialities of travelling, so that the journeying is metaphorical as well as literal; he also explores and celebrates his different moods, which ranged from near despair to near triumph. And with all this he combines vehement protest on social issues. It is hardly surprising that Du Fu’s career as an official was extremely modest, and that he later (again, during the time-frame of these poems) abandoned such aspirations altogether. He was almost certainly too outspoken, and too original, to be awarded real power. Indeed, at one point during this period his outspokenness so angered the emperor that friends had to plead for his forgiveness.

The translations given here aim to re-create the huge variety, vigour, and passion of his work. Any translator also has to confront the more daring, innovatory tendencies evident in some of his four- and eight-line poems<sup>7</sup>. These poems are well known for the extent to which the images in them combine and contrast to make most of the meaning of the poem. To put it rather simply, in a poetic tradition where concrete images abound, the images in these poems almost work overtime, with the result that they begin to appear more important than the statements which would normally bind them together. An example of this is to be found in ‘Spring View’ (p32), where the first two lines run, literally

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<sup>5</sup> This is probably less true of the earlier part of his life, when he cultivated various important people in the hope that this would encourage official advancement.

<sup>6</sup> Pages 14 and 38 respectively.

<sup>7</sup> That is, those on pages 32, 68, 70, 84, 86, 88.



GUO	PO	SHAN	HE	ZAI
state	shattered	mountains	rivers	remain

CHENG	CHUN	CAO	MU	SHEN
city	spring	grasses	trees	deep.

This careful vertical balancing (state/city// shattered/spring etc) is obviously part of the whole unit of sense, which works vertically as well as horizontally, and is (usually) in Chinese poetry not one line, but the couplet. And whilst this had usually been limited to the middle couplets of such eight-line, 'regulated verse' forms, Du Fu goes further, in the way he uses them in the first couplet (as here) or the last couplets as well. Often he implies much more through juxtaposed images than he actually states<sup>8</sup>. This is seen in lines 5 and 6 of the poem quoted (see p33), where

Look-out beacons	flash fire for months
Letter from home	would be gold

obviously contrast carefully. One might say that Du Fu pinpoints his emotional position with a kind of geographical accuracy.

When translating these poems, I felt the very strong images pulling apart within the line, which is why in my translation I broke up the lines in these poems. There is always a small tendency in this direction anyway, as much Chinese poetry up to this time has a caesura after the second or fourth syllable in five- and seven-syllable lines, respectively. This creates a mini-break in the meaning (and also, often, in the grammar). True, there are eight-liners (and four-liners too) where I have not separated the lines in this way. My reason for this is that a poem such as 'Spring Night in the Imperial Palace', or 'Two Verses Written by the Serpentine' (pages 58 and 59) contain more statement,

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<sup>8</sup> In fact, this is common in much Chinese poetry. Du Fu, though, carried this further than his predecessors.

and are less imagistically ‘strong’, than ‘Spring View’ (already discussed) or ‘This Wearisome Night’ (p86), and this is equally true of the two series of quatrains on spring: those on p72–77 are clearly far more discursive and less tight than those on p84.

Readers may have encountered other leading poets of the Tang dynasty (618–907 AD), such as Li Po, Po Chu-yi and Li Shang-yin, to name just a few. It would be tedious (indeed, pointless) to enumerate the virtues of these poets without detailed examples of their work. However, this was indeed a period of great self-assurance, innovation and achievement by many gifted poets, and poetry was celebrated as an art-form, by its audiences as much as its practitioners, as never before. More prosaically, the relative stability of this dynasty—the country was united under one ruler for the first time in roughly four hundred years—enabled many poets to practise and refine their craft, building (in some respects) on the achievements of their predecessors.

What is extraordinary about Du Fu, though, is his ability to take us through the whole range of human emotions<sup>9</sup>, from the peaks of excitement or joy to the depths of despair, from the deeply earnest to a light-heartedness which flirts with frivolity; and to do this whilst simultaneously reacting to his own position as someone living through his eventful times. It is no exaggeration to say that he lived his times through his poetry, with an intensity and an artistry which other Tang poets rarely achieved. These qualities, combined with the ability to handle, and greatly enhance, all the forms of verse then current, are the qualities which Chinese readers most admire in him—and have admired for the last 1,200 years.

It is the aim of these translations to convey at least something of the subtlety, vigour and versatility of Du Fu’s poetry.

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<sup>9</sup> Sometimes within a single poem, as in ‘Five Hundred Words’ (14) and ‘The Great Trek North’ (38)

## NOTE ON TRANSLITERATION

Chinese names have mostly been represented in English by the Pinyin system. This is the official system used by the Chinese government, and has the obvious advantage of being accessible via any material on the Chinese language (Mandarin) or modern books on China itself. I have, however, followed the practice of Western authors in falling back on familiar spellings already well established in English: so the great river of southern China is (still) the Yangtze, (rather than the Yangzi, as in pinyin), and the other famous Tang poets mentioned on the facing page have enjoyed similar treatment. I have extended this licence to “Chiang”, as in (‘Three Poems written at Chiang Village’, page 54), as the proper pinyin letter here is a Q (see below). I have found from my own practice, and through reading the translations of others, that odd-looking names, especially those which do not lend themselves to an immediate pronunciation in today’s English, are just about the surest way to dam the flow of almost any line of verse<sup>10</sup>.

Having said all of the above, the three letters used in pinyin which are most obviously different from what an English reader might expect are:

- c:** using pinyin, the musician Fats Waller would have spelt his name Fac Waller. So a word like ‘cao’, meaning grasses, starts with an aspirated ‘ts’ sound.
- x:** a ‘sh’ sound but with the tongue far lower in the mouth than in English. To approximate this, say ‘see’, then lower tongue/bring it forward until you get a ‘sh’ sound.
- q:** used to make a ‘ch’ sound in exactly the same position as the x-sound above.

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<sup>10</sup> This is why, in some instances, I have paraphrased where (for instance) Du Fu’s original text used a Chinese name for symbolic purposes. In line 4 of the first poem, on p14, for instance, the original text names two ‘sage rulers’; Du’s point, however, that in this (fantasy) role he is a most definitely a flop, is unaltered.

## FACING A SNOW STORM

Fresh corpses' ghosts sob on the field of battle,  
In the city an old man sits alone and chants.  
Ragged clouds scud past in the withering light,  
Snow dances its hectic flurries in the wind.  
In the empty bottle and cup, no glint of wine;  
In the stove's dying embers, hope still faintly glows.

Cut off from news and loved ones, in the air

8 He traces DESPAIR in empty characters.

---

8: This refers to the Chinese habit of tracing characters (where no pen is to hand) with (e.g.) a chopstick on a restaurant table, or with a finger on the palm of one's hand.

對雪

戰哭多新鬼  
愁吟獨老翁  
亂雲低薄暮  
急雪舞迴風

飄棄樽無緣  
爐存火似紅  
數州消息斷  
愁坐正書空

## THE YOUNG PRINCE

White-hooded crows flew over the capital,  
Perched on the Welcoming Autumn Gate, and cawed,  
Pecked tiles off the roofs of the gilded mansions,  
Panicked officials into flight from the horde.

Horses were flogged to death in the rout, whips broken,  
Fleeing Imperials left their own kin behind:  
Madly adorned still, belted with jade and coral,  
He stands alone at the corner, weeps for his kind.

Too scared to greet me, he barely answers my questions,  
Just begs for shelter, willing to serve as my slave!  
For a hundred days he hid like a rat in a hole:  
Thorns travelled his body, but he was saved.

The moment I saw that aquiline face, I knew it,  
The Imperial features traced in every line!  
15 But the Dragon is now in the wild, wolves roam the City,  
'You must hide yourself, Sir, try to bide your time.'

'It's much too risky to stand at this corner chatting,  
Yet I will briefly tell you what little I know:  
Last night in the stink of slaughter the rebels' camels,  
Laden with royal plunder, lumbered along the roads.

---

15: The emperor, in temporary exile.

長安城頭頭白烏  
哀王孫  
夜飛延秋門上呼  
又向人家啄大屋  
屋底達官走避胡  
金鞭折斷九馬死  
骨肉不得同馳驅  
腰下寶玦青珊瑚  
可憐王孫泣路隅  
問之不肯道姓名  
但道困苦乞為奴

已經百日竄荆棘  
身上無有完肌膚  
高帝子孫盡隆準  
龍種自與常人殊  
豺狼在邑龍在野  
王孫善保千金軀  
不敢長語臨交衢  
且為王孫立斯須  
昨夜東風吹血腥  
東來橐駝滿舊都

The Northern Veterans, so staunch and strong,  
Are now the pathetic butt of rebel jibes.  
But also, I've heard, the old emperor's handed on  
24 His throne to his son, who won over the Northern Tribes.

These have gashed their faces, sworn revenge or death—  
But we must stop whispering words for spies to hear!  
Alas, sir, you cannot afford the tiniest slip,  
May your ancestors' guardian spirits always be near.

---

24: The new emperor has 'won over' these barbarian tribes, who will fight on 'our' side against the rebels.



朔方健兒好身手  
昔何勇銳今何愚  
竊聞天子已傳位  
聖德北服南單于

花門勢面請寧恥  
慎勿出口他人狙  
哀哉王孫慎勿疎  
五陵佳氣無時無

## NORTH WEST MOON

Tonight's moon, over the northern plain,  
My wife watches in lonely isolation.  
With her our children, pitiful and little,  
Gaze at the moon in lost bewilderment.

In the fragrant mist, her cloudlike hair is damp,  
In the clear moonlight, her arms gleam white and cold.  
Oh when shall we two stand by the open window  
Drying our joyful tears by the light of this moon?

月夜

今夜鄜州月  
閨中只獨看  
遙憐小兒女  
未解憶長安

香露雲鬟濕  
清輝玉臂寒  
何時倚虛幌  
雙照淚痕乾