

With the Army

Thinking of my Home on the Ninth Day of the Ninth Month
(756)

The tradition of the Ninth Day festival is to climb to some point of vantage (the better to look toward one's distant home), to flavor the holiday wine with freshly-blossomed chrysanthemum flowers, to share one's sorrows with friends. Ts'ün Sh'ün, who has plenty of high places, lacks both chrysanthemums and friends, and might easily make a sad poem out of that fact: he has neither happiness nor the proper materials for melancholy. But in this, the autumn of the outbreak of the Añ Lù-shān rebellion, all the usual conventions are upside-down: it is the officer on the far frontier who is safe, while the flowers, and his family back in the capital, are helpless before the rebel army, which occupied the city in 756.

I'd gladly go and climb to someplace high,
But there's no one to send the wine around;
I pity the chrysanthemums back home –
They must have blossomed by a battleground

Dù Fǔ (712-770)

Spring Prospect

(757)

Dù Fǔ's family were living nearby when the rebels came. With great difficulty he escaped over hazardous roads to a place of relative safety in the northwest. Then, while making his way to the displaced Emperor's court, he was captured and detained in the occupied capital. We find him there the following spring, amid the ruins of former sovereignty. This studied but eloquent piece reflects dismay at the merely physical survival of China after the devastation of the An Lù-shān rebellion, which brought to an end what is usually considered to be the most brilliant literary epoch in all Chinese history. Spring, ironically, is an occasion of sorrow: the persistence of nature merely underlines the destruction of the human edifice in which alone, like the Confucians of old (p55), he could feel at home. The verbalization of "spring" in line 2 serves to mark the inexorability of the seasons, and thus to contrast them with the vulnerability of the works of man. The poet, unable to bear the contrast, projects his own tears onto the dewy flowers in line 3, and his own cries into the birds' calls in line 4. The military signals in line 5 and the failure of civil communications in line 6 bracket the collapse of both facets of government. The poet makes a personal appearance in the last couplet of the "prospect" – loyal, anxious, scratching his head for a plan to save the dynasty. The straight hairpin secured the standard court coiffure.

The nation is shattered; hills and streams remain,
 The city comes spring, as verdant as of old:
 Flowers are splashed with tears for evil times,
 Birds evoke a heartsick grief untold;
 Beacon-brands for three months in succession,
 Letters from home were worth a myriad gold –
 My white hairs, all the sparser for much scratching,
 Scarce afford the pin a decent hold

The Sergeant of Shí-hàu
(759)

Dù Fǔ escaped from the capital, joined the headquarters of the new emperor in Fúng-syáng, and was made an Omissioner. In this role he made a nuisance of himself with many small suggestions. He recommended a friend, Tsún Shǐn (p223), for office, and got in trouble defending another friend. His request for leave, that autumn, was readily granted. The court later transferred him to Lwò-yáng, which was soon threatened by a new campaign from the rebel base in Yw-yáng. On his way back to the western capital after resigning this office, he saw the preparations being made to raise a defending army, and empathized with the hardships of the villagers. This “old-style” poem, with its quatrain modules, wide rhymes, and direct parallelism, is a protest poem. It is easy to fault its unlikely situation. Stronger works in this vein would be written by Bwó Jyŵ-yì (p274), and more fiscally trenchant ones by Dù Syŵn-hv̄ (p333). But the hard thing in poetry is not to improve on a model, but to create a model. Here, Dù Fǔ defines the prototype.

I stop in a Shí-háu home at close of day,
That night the recruiting-sergeant comes their way;
The old man climbs the wall and keeps on going,
The old wife goes out front to have her say.
Sergeant shouting – is he ever mad!
Old wife crying – is she ever sad!
I hear the words the wife then speaks to him:
“Three sons in the Yè-chǔng force I had:
One wrote a letter home: the letter said
Two in the latest skirmishing were dead –
One survivor: living a borrowed life,
Two departed: no more life ahead
Here in the house no other men are left
Except a little grandson at the breast;
His mother isn’t fit to come outside:
She lacks a decent skirt to get her dressed
Although this old crone’s strength is now but frail,
She asks to go along your nighttime trail;
To join the Yw-yáng troops assembling now –
She’s strong enough for breakfast-cook detail”
Late that night, the talking voices die,
But still I hear a lonely, wailing cry:
At dawn my onward journey I resume –
With just the old man left to say goodbye.

Dù Fǔ (712-770)

A Guest Arrives
(Spring 760)

Dù Fǔ's further travels brought him to the less threatened southwest, where he finally found patronage in the Shú capital, Chǐng-dū, and took up residence in a modest home in which he lived for several years. His visitor, an official (and perhaps relative) named Tswēi, occasions a party into which Dù Fǔ enters with his usual disorganized sincerity and improvident charm. The flood, the Lyèdz gulls (p101) attesting the inner calm of mind of the poet, the isolation, the poverty, the neighborliness, the last-minute drinking guest – it is impossible, at the socially safe distance of twelve hundred years, not to wish that one had been invited also.

South of my hut, north of my hut,
 all is springtime flood,
Only a flock of wheeling gulls
 comes day by day to view.
The flowered path has never yet
 been swept for visitors,
The wicker gateway, closed before,
 opens now for you.
The food on the plate, with the market far,
 lacks variety,
The wine in the cup, with the family poor,
 is only last year's brew;
If you wouldn't mind a drink
 with the old man next door,
I'll call him over, and he can share
 the final one or two.

Night on a Journey
Expressing My Feelings
(Spring 767)

And here is a more personal piece, in a somewhat precarious diction, but enjoying all of the immediacy of direct reportage. It well summarizes Dù Fǔ, from near the end of his life, as he is permanently remembered by posterity: his literary virtuosity, his personal sincerity, and his puzzled sense of failure. Of the great trio Wáng Wéi, Lǐ Bwó, and Dù Fǔ, only Dù Fǔ outlived the Ān Lù-shān turmoil long enough to suffer the loss of context which was its legacy to the future. Wáng Wéi's reticence and Lǐ Bwó's detachment both depend for their validity on a stable civil frame of reference. It is the loss of this civil frame of reference – the sense that even if oneself is hard up, the human universe, the public order, the dào (p13), still works – that bothers Dù Fǔ in this poem. His context, the civil, aspirational, governmental Chinese world, has vanished. His artistic response to this loss defines his position in literary history: he is the first modern Chinese poet. That the literary alternative to civil usefulness was not satisfying to Dù Fǔ himself (line 5, in the climactic third couplet) deepens the irony: the literary alternative satisfied very few of those who tried it, in the centuries to come. The last line shows Dù Fǔ putting himself into the scenery. Mǐng Hàu-rán (p208) had stopped at the equivalent of line 4. Dù Fǔ goes ahead and has the feeling, and then tells you about it: his poems are “lived through” as those of earlier masters are not. Lǐ Bwó knew where his home was; he merely couldn't (except briefly, p221) get back to it. Dù Fǔ had no home. He is a post-Lyèdžian gull, deprived of its envelope of trust.

Lǐ Bwó had reanimated the distant past, and celebrated the fleeting present. Dù Fǔ's subject is China., and he sees himself constantly against that background.

A breeze-swept bank whose grasses gently wave,
A lonely boat whose one mast stretches high;
The stars lean down, the level moors are wide,
The moon boils up, the River flows on by;
To writing, for renown I cannot look,
On office, old and ill, I don't rely –
Blown hither and yon, what is it I am like?
A single gull, between the earth and sky.