A literary form has no meaning in its own right, but it offers a set of possibilities and constraints that enable new ways of representation. Form is what a writer receives, and it is the writer who may see and use what the form offers. Brilliant innovations in a form are often reused until they become commonplace, and we forget the moment or process by which the commonplace came into being. There are also, however, beautiful dead-ends, in which the writer opened a discursive space so unfamiliar that it was largely or entirely forgotten by immediate posterity. Such moments often become visible only across long distances of history and culture; they can anticipate something that became important only much later. Such leaps are never pure creation; we can see how they grow out of more conventional contemporary representations; nevertheless, the writer has seen a possibility, tried it, and discovered something new in the process.

Although there was a considerable corpus of longer poems, both stanzaic “songs” (歌行 gēxíng and 樂府 yuèfu) and non-stanzaic pieces, the norm of poetic representation in the Tang dynasty was the short poem. By far the most interesting solution to the “long poem” can be found in sequences of short poems in which the particular strengths of the short poem are combined in new ways.

Du Fu 杜甫 (712–770) saw the possibilities of the poem sequence like no one before him. “Qiuxing ba shou” 秋興八首 (Autumn Meditations) is not only one of Du Fu’s most famous works, but also explores the possibility of “squaring” the formal properties of regulated verse in eight poems of eight lines each. Less famous sequences, such as “Jiemen shi’er shou” 解悶十二首 (Getting Rid of the Blues), have a more fluid structure in which themes of food, empire, and poetry weave together with a complexity that a single poem could never achieve. These sequences, however, like most of the sequences by
other Tang poets, are unified by the poet as speaker, so that the interval represented is the interval of composition. The greatest limitation of Chinese lyric is the limitation of its represented duration to some interval of immediate experience.

An entirely new set of possibilities appears when the sequence is comprised of yuefu, with a conventional persona as a speaker. Here we have the possibility of much longer duration, an interval during which the speaker changes. In other words, the conjunction of the poem sequence and yuefu raises the formal possibility of representing personal development and maturation (Bildung) in style indirect libre (with the peculiar variation of Chinese poetry that we usually cannot distinguish the first-person speaker from a third-person narrator). Neither the representation of complex personal development nor style indirect libre were part of the repertoire of medieval Chinese narration, either in verse or prose. When we see this unmistakably in Du Fu, it is a chance gift of form that Du Fu knew how to make use of.

Du Fu wrote two such sequences, both under the then popular yuefu title “Chusai” 出塞 (Going Out the Passes). The conventional soldier speaker is taken through a series of phases, mapped onto current history: the periods preceding and following the An Lushan Rebellion. The two sequences are distinguished in several ways: the former represents a conscript; the latter, a volunteer seeking to distinguish himself in arms. The conscript is sent off to the northwest, to the loyal Central Asian command; the volunteer goes to the northeastern army under the command of An Lushan 安祿山 (703–757), the army that will rebel.

The first of these sequences is more subtle in its representation of a ten-year transformation of a reluctant peasant-conscript into a “soldier of the empire.” The conscript begins as a “body” acting under the compulsion of others and ends as an autonomous subject whose decisions are not only for himself but for the good of the empire. As we follow the soldier through these phases, we know only what he knows at the moment from which he speaks. Such immersion in the values of the moment was characteristic of yuefu with conventional personae as speakers. Here, however, the presumption of a unified subject over time calls attention to the differences between the successive “values of the moment” and invites us to see them as articulating change.

Always in Chinese classical poetry the determination of pronouns in translation is a problem since the Chinese does not distinguish person