
Tu Fu, considered by many to be China's greatest poet, has certainly been the most studied. Traditional commentaries, editions, and criticism are voluminous. And in the West, where the T'ang masters have been surprisingly neglected—we still await thorough biographical and critical monographs on Li Po—Tu Fu has been comparatively well treated. We have William Hung's masterful biography, *Tu Fu: China's Greatest Poet* (1952), A. R. Davis's excellent introductory study, *Tu Fu* (1971), and Stephen Owen's chapter on Tu Fu in *The Great Age of Chinese Poetry: The High T'ang* (1981). With such traditional and modern scholarship as a foundation, we are ready to move beyond the biographical, introductory stage of the study of Tu Fu. And indeed, more specialized monographs have appeared recently: David R. McCraw's *Du Fu's Laments from the South* (1992), a study of the late lü-shih, and now Eva Shan Chou's *Reconsidering Tu Fu*, the most ambitious literary study of Tu Fu to date.

The study opens with an evaluation of Tu Fu's reputation along with an account of its evolution through the T'ang and Sung dynasties. Arguing that much of his fame is due to admiration of his life and character as expressed in his verse (his empathy, patriotism, Confucianism, etc.), Dr. Chou maintains that such attitudes have strongly affected Tu Fu scholarship. He has, "in effect, been placed out of the reach of the usual bounds of literary criticism. Thus the objective tone that modern criticism tends to assume is often perceived as too objective for him" (p. 11). Dr. Chou hopes to redress this imbalance, shifting the focus from biography to poetry, by both reevaluating his reputation and focusing on more purely literary issues. With this opening Dr. Chou proceeds to discuss a variety of topics ranging from Tu Fu's political views and advice (characterized as "naïve" [p. 16]) to the nature of Tu Fu's "sincerity," to various literary issues such as "topicality," realism vs. stylized realism in his poems of social concern (e.g. yüeh-fu verse), and most importantly his use of juxtaposition. It is the literary issues that form the heart of the book, and here I will review some of Dr. Chou's main points.
The concept of topicality is an invention of Dr. Chou's that is meant to shift critical concern with the moral issues in Tu Fu's poems of social concern (Tu Fu's much admired patriotism and empathy in what she calls his "compassion poems") back to the poetry itself and literary issues:

The need is clear for a concept equivalent to compassion which has an equally unifying capacity but refers directly to the poems....This equivalent is topicality....The concept of topicality, however, has an important advantage over that of compassion. It provides an objective way of regarding his particular contribution to poetry, for the recording of topical events is not as fraught with moral values as is the act of bearing witness to suffering. Recasting the concept of compassion as one of topicality enables one to open the discussion to literary issues, for it is then easier to ask related questions: which topical issues are treated? how is the selection made? (p. 65)

Dr. Chou then addresses several issues related primarily to Tu Fu's compassion poems: most notably his expansion of subject matter and the nature and choice of styles used in these poems. In the case of the former she downplays what she calls the common explanation that it was due to his social conscience and suggests that Tu Fu was an "unusually clear-sighted person" and that it was a part of the "mystery of his genius" (p. 74). In the discussion of the styles found in these poems she distinguishes between Tu Fu's use of realism and stylized realism. Realism refers to his detailed, physical, concrete descriptive style, often with direct historical references, whereas stylized realism refers to a more generalized, formulaic style of writing rooted in traditional yüeh-fu ballads. Several examples of each type are translated and discussed, as well as examples in which the two styles are mixed. Tu Fu's realistic style is described as new and innovative, and stylized realism as conventional and unproblematic. Dr. Chou asks such questions as why one style is used over the other; choice of forms (ku-t'ı verse vs. ballad) and choice of style; she also illustrates the problems of reading poems when the two styles are mixed. Throughout the discussion the implication is that realism is perhaps superior to stylized realism, and it is asked why Tu Fu would resort to stylized realism, why he did not just abandon the ballad.

The most important topic addressed by Dr. Chou is Tu Fu's use of juxtaposition. Two chapters of the book are devoted to juxtaposition which is explained as a structural principle with which she hopes to define a category of poems and explore the connections between Tu Fu's life and poetry. It essentially refers