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978-0-521-02828-8 - Reconsidering Tu Fu: Literary Greatness and Cultural Context

Eva Shan Chou

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Tu Fu is, by universal consent, the greatest poet of the Chinese tradition. In the epochal An Lu-shan rebellion, he alone of his contemporaries consistently recorded in poetry the great events and pervasive sufferings of the time. For a millennium now, his poetry has been accepted as epitomizing the Chinese moral conscience at its highest, and as such his work has been placed almost beyond the reach of criticism. Indeed, objectivity about Tu Fu is often viewed as criticism of him.

In *Reconsidering Tu Fu*, Eva Shan Chou proposes that these thorny problems be met by separating his legacy into two distinct but related aspects: as cultural monument and as a great and original poet. Examining Tu Fu as cultural icon, she investigates the evolution and nature of his reputation and shows its continuing effect upon interpretations of his poetry. In her discussions of the poetic legacy, she introduces concepts relating to subject matter, style, genre, structure, theme, and voice, in order to provide for a fruitful reconsideration of his poetry. Many poems are discussed and translated, both well known and less familiar. Dr. Chou's analyses are original in their formulation and also considerate of the many fine readings of traditional commentators.

James R. Hightower's foreword introduces the book.

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CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS

Cambridge, New York, Melbourne, Madrid, Cape Town, Singapore, São Paulo

Cambridge University Press

The Edinburgh Building, Cambridge CB2 2RU, UK

Published in the United States of America by Cambridge University Press, New York

www.cambridge.orgInformation on this title: www.cambridge.org/9780521440394

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First published 1995

This digitally printed first paperback version 2006

*A catalogue record for this publication is available from the British Library**Library of Congress Cataloguing in Publication data*

Chou, Eva Shan

Reconsidering Tu Fu: literary greatness and cultural context/Eva Shan Chou

p. cm. – (Cambridge studies in Chinese history, literature, and institutions)

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 0-521-44039-4

1. Tu Fu, 712-770 – Criticism and interpretation. I. Chou, E. Shan (Eva Shan) II. Tu Fu, 712-770. Poems. Selections. 1995.
III. Series.

PL2675.R43 1995 895.1'13 – dc20

94-25029

CIP

ISBN-13 978-0-521-44039-4 hardback

ISBN-10 0-521-44039-4 hardback

ISBN-13 978-0-521-02828-8 paperback

ISBN-10 0-521-02828-0 paperback

Cambridge University Press

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Foreword

Even the most casual acquaintance with Chinese poetry will have made the name of Tu Fu a familiar one, as the poet acknowledged throughout history by his countrymen to be China's greatest. And it is not only the poetry that is admired; the poet himself inspires respect, veneration even, as a good man. Though separated from us by a gap of thirteen centuries and an unfamiliar culture, we feel we know him, because the 1,400-odd poems reliably ascribed to him constitute a record of his life and his times that has earned him the epithet of poet-historian. There are poets of whom we know very little whose poetry is highly esteemed – Homer or Shakespeare, for example – and others of whom what we know does not enhance our appreciation of their poetry. In the case of Tu Fu, the identification of poet with the poetry is complete, to the point where it is possible to wonder how much of the esteem for the poetry is a product of admiration of the poet: how would we read “Journey to the North” if we thought it had been written by the lively Li Po? And conversely, how much do we like a poet who is continually telling us what a good man he is?

These are awkward questions that do not usually get asked. Professor Chou faces such problems and suggests solutions with far-ranging implications for future scholarship. By examining the part played in the judgment of Tu Fu's poetry by his status as a cultural icon created by the Confucian orientation of traditional critics, she is able to separate the “poetic and cultural factors in the legacy of Tu Fu,” as she puts it, and to take a fresh look at the poetry. In the process she introduces a number of analytic concepts that significantly enhance our understanding of his work. Principal among these is an abrupt change of topic and tone that seems to break a poem into two unrelated parts, apparently fracturing its unity. She argues persuasively that this structural disjunction can be seen as a functional part of a poem that reinforces its effect by referring us back to the poet himself.

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Professor Chou's criticism of poetry inspires respect. Her analysis is of great subtlety and originality, clearly presented and mercifully eschewing fashionable literary-critical jargon. Scholars already familiar with the poems she cites will recognize the aptness of her observations and will find their appreciation of the poems increased. This has certainly been my experience. On the other hand, those who come to Tu Fu from outside the tradition or whose access is limited to translations will be afforded a real grasp of the poetic achievement of the original Chinese versification and a glimpse of its dazzling dexterity. This is literary criticism of high order, focused on the poetry and not constrained by theory or dogma.

Despite the profoundly novel ideas advanced, this is not a debunking, revisionist study. Professor Chou raises questions ignored, glossed over, or rationalized by traditional Chinese critics, and she arrives at readings that make it possible to appreciate the poetry at its real value. Tu Fu emerges with his work newly illuminated and his reputation intact, both as a poet and as a good man.

James R. Hightower

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Preface

The study of a monument is not easy to write. For ten centuries, scholars and appreciative readers have devoted themselves to the examination of Tu Fu's every word and action. Erudition and personal attachment together produced a body of work on this poet that is formidable not only in volume but in dedication. Indeed the intense personal devotion which Tu Fu has always been able to inspire secured for both his poetry and the responses to it a certain immunity from objective evaluation. Today, when the personal patterns of the cultivated past cannot be convincingly reproduced, a critic venturing upon the study of Tu Fu cannot presume to the roles of either learned scholar or passionate reader in the old mold. Other available roles for the modern critic seem limited to the false promise of revisionism or the naïveté of a fresh Western approach. It is hoped that the present work has avoided these tendencies by undertaking to examine Tu Fu in terms of his two distinct but related legacies, as a cultural monument and as a figure of great poetic achievements. In approaching Tu Fu anew, my intentions were also to reformulate and answer some questions that are often asked about Tu Fu and to pose questions that I have not found asked elsewhere.

A formal occasion for the expression of gratitude brings on reflectiveness and a certain somberness. Life engenders debts of gratitude of many kinds, and in an academic life, where intellectual and personal debts are often intermingled, it is difficult adequately to express all that is due.

My first thanks are owed to Professor James R. Hightower of Harvard University and Professor Ronald C. Egan, now of the University of California, Santa Barbara. Not the least of their importance to the present work is chronological. Professors Hightower and Egan had earlier supervised my Ph.D. thesis, which concerned a group of Tu Fu's late poems

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and their employment of allusion. When, upon its completion, I decided to put it aside and to make an entirely new start, this time analyzing Tu Fu's poetry as a whole, they demurred at the practical consequences but were steadily encouraging in their confidence that such a project was possible. Each has generously read the chapters of this work in more than one version and made many improvements and corrections. Professor Hightower's sensitive appreciation for poetry has been a constant source of inspiration to me, especially in today's academia, where poetry is so often treated only as a "text." Moreover, his unerring sense for weak or trite arguments has saved me from many missteps. I am honored that he has written a Foreword here. Professor Egan has been both teacher and friend, invariably generous in sharing his insights and his extensive knowledge. In particular, the general argument of the section "Tu Fu and the Tradition of Tu Fu" in Chapter 1 was developed over the course of several months of enlightening conversations with Professor Egan. I am most grateful for his constant encouragement over the years.

To many others I owe much for advice and help on a range of matters. I thank Professors Denis C. Twitchett and Kao Yu-kung, both of Princeton University, for their support. Professor Kang-i Sun Chang of Yale University came to my aid, both practically and with moral support, at a difficult time. I would like also to thank Professors Donald Holzman of Institut des Hautes Études Chinoises, David Knechtges of the University of Washington, Patrick D. Hanan of Harvard University, Morris Rossabi of CUNY and Columbia University, Arthur N. Waldron of the U.S. Naval War College and Brown University, and Dore Levy of Brown University. Dr. Grace Chün-ying Yen of Academia Sinica, Taipei, made comments about early versions of the manuscript that were both sensitive and rigorous. Two anonymous referees for Cambridge University Press offered valuable suggestions which improved the order of presentation of material in Chapter 1. The members of the Chinese Study Group, with whom I enjoyed nearly five years of monthly meetings in New York City, were a source of friendly intellectual stimulation; they included Cheng P'ei-k'ai, Wang Hao, Wu Wei-yuan and Hsieh Shih-min, Li Yao-tsung, Yü Kuang, and Hung Ming-shui. I also thank Christie Lerch, Camilla Palmer, and Elizabeth Neal at Cambridge University Press for their expert assistance.

A fellowship from the National Endowment for the Humanities provided me with a year in which to work through the basic issues underlying Chapters 3 and 4. A travel grant from the American Council of Learned Societies enabled me to present a paper at a conference at the University of Durham, England, that resulted in some parts of Chapter 1. I am grateful as well to the Bunting Institute, Radcliffe College, and to

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its director, Dr. Florence Ladd, for a fellowship year that provided intellectual stimulation and collegial friendships. A subvention from the Chiang Ching-kuo Foundation defrayed some of the costs of publication, for which I owe thanks. Chapter 2 has appeared in a somewhat different form in the *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies*; this chapter benefited from the meticulous attention of the journal's editor, Dr. Joanna Handlin Smith.

I cannot end without acknowledging the friends and family who supported my work without questioning its practicality: my mother, Jun-mei Chang Chou, and my sisters May, Ida, and Ana; Christie and Chris Wilbur, Carol Munroe and Andraś Riedlmayer, Andrew Klein, Elizabeth Perry, Marsha Collins, Dennis Grafflin, Wendy Zeldin, Ginny Mayer. My daughter, Heather, has helped put books in library return slots since she could lift books and stand on tiptoe. My husband, Richard G. McCarrick, has by his unfailing support and interest provided the secure and appreciative haven that so sorrowfully eluded the subject of this volume.