


Article

A Discussion on Life Consciousness in Du Fu's Poems

Shuchu Liu 

College of Chinese Language and Literature, Fujian Normal University, Fuzhou 350007, China; lsc75@126.com

Abstract: Respecting life and protecting life are the core values of Chinese culture. As the greatest poet nurtured by Chinese culture, Du Fu showed a distinct consciousness of life in his poems. With the passage of time and the changes in his physical body, Du Fu became sensitively aware of the existence of life. Government service was the main way to realize the value of life for scholars of Tang, and this way was frustrated by reality for a long time, particularly for the poet Du Fu, who faced the crisis of settling his life. Although Du Fu wanted to find a place to settle his life in the other dimensions of the human world, in the real and imaginary drunken world and the natural world, he could not overcome the frustration concerning the relationship between the ruler and the minister, and he often felt the pain of nowhere to settle his life and the insignificance of life when its meaning becomes absent.

Keywords: Du Fu; Poems of Tang Dynasty; life consciousness

The Chinese culture has a profound history and extensive significance. "It's a range viewed in face and peaks viewed from the side, assuming different shapes viewed from far and wide," to quote a famous line from the Song 宋 (960–1279) poet Su Shi 苏轼 (1037–1101) to describe the diversity of Chinese culture.¹ Various characteristics of Chinese culture can be discovered from different perspectives. Among them, interpreting the world from the perspective of life is a universal ideological path in Chinese culture. As one important representation of Chinese culture, *Yi Jing* 易经 (*Book of Changes*) is an ancient Chinese divination text among the oldest Chinese classics. In the early interpretation of *Yi Jing*, "The Great Treatise I, (*Xici shang* 系辞上)" states, "production and reproduction are what is called (the process of) change 生生之谓易." (Yingda Kong 1980a, 孔颖达 (574–648), vol. 7, p. 66), while "The Great Treatise II (*Xici xia* 系辞下)" states that "the great attribute of heaven and earth is the giving and maintaining of life 天地之大德曰生." (Yingda Kong 1980a, vol. 8, p. 74) By using "life" to define "change", the chapters believe the greatest attribute of heaven and earth is creating and maintaining life. *Ren* 仁, or humaneness, is the primary Confucian virtue. Confucians in the past not only interpreted *ren* through the aspect of life but also used life to elaborate on *ren*. As the Han dynasty (202 BCE–220 CE) Confucian Dong Zhongshu 董仲舒 (179–104 BCE) states in *Luxuriant Dew of the Spring and Autumn Annals* (*Chunqiu fanlu* 春秋繁露).

The best *ren* is heaven. Heaven is *ren*. Heaven covers and nurtures all things, has changed and created, has nurtured and accomplished, goes on and on, ends and begins again, offering all things to mankind. Understand the purpose of heaven; this is an infinite *ren*.

仁之美者在于天。天，仁也。天覆育万物，既化而生之，有养而成之，事功无已，终而复始，凡举归之以奉人。察于天之意，无穷极之仁也 (Yu Su 1992, 苏舆 (1874–1914), vol. 11, p. 329).

The passage argues that heaven possesses the most original form of *ren*. On the other hand, the characteristics of heaven are to nurture every life in the world, giving birth and sustaining them. Nurturing, creating, and maintaining are all forms of life. Dong Zhongshu argues that *ren* is the embodiment of heaven, while life is the application of heaven. Life and *ren* form a complete entity in nature.



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As the Song dynasty Confucian thinker Zhou Dunyi 周敦颐 (1017–1073) mentioned in *Tongshu* 通书 that: heaven uses *Yang* to produce all things and *Yin* to complete all things. Production is humanness; righteousness is completion. Therefore, the sage nurtures all things with humanness and rectifies all people with righteousness.² Cheng Hao 程颢 (1032–1085) stated “The spirit of all things is most worthy of appreciation. This is the beginning, is the best kind, this is humaneness.”³ Zhu Xi 朱熹 (1130–1200) mentioned, “Heaven and earth create things, this is a kind of warmth. This is humaneness.”⁴ Zhou Dunyi, Cheng Hao, Zhu Xi, and other Song dynasty Confucians explained *ren* in terms of life, regarding the creation of life as the principle of *ren*.

On the other hand, the main philosophy of Taoism is Dao. Chapter 51 of *Dao De Jing* states, “All things are produced by the Dao and nourished by its outflowing operation. They receive their forms according to the nature of each and are completed according to the circumstances of their condition.”⁵ Using life to interpret Dao and deeming it as the fundamental rule of Dao. In the *Xiang'er zhu* 想尔注 commentary to *Dao De Jing*, it states that life is another way of being the Dao, considering life as another form of Dao.⁶

Valuing life is a critical characteristic of Chinese culture. As a crucial component of Chinese culture, Chinese poems naturally focus on life. The life consciousness in Chinese poems is vibrant and instinctive: contemplating the limitations and things beyond life in space and time, drifting through the rises and falls of mortal life, and tasting the silence and noise of life in spirits and wine. As one of the greatest poets in ancient China, the life consciousness in Du Pu’s poems demonstrates the influential direction of thinking about life and points out an upward and noble path for life.

1. The Perception of the Existence of Life

“From the instinct of survival, perhaps the most sensitive experience of human life is the experience of this flow of life,” such is Zhan Furui’s 詹福瑞 commenting on Li Bai 李白 (701–762).⁷ We can adopt this in identifying Du Fu’s perception of life. The flow of life is marked by time. In days and nights, with the shifting of the sun and moon, and the change between seasons, life passes as time goes by. “Feel the passage of time, also know the passage of human life.”⁸ Human perception of the existence of life is often expressed through the flow of time.

Time is intangible. The ancient Chinese observed the movement of plants and formulated the units of time, such as day and night, month, season, and year; they thus established a complete system of measuring time. These units of time denote the flow of time. Therefore, time consciousness is often expressed as the notion of time units. As the *Book of Songs* (*Shijing* 诗经) poem “Caige” 采葛 reads:

There he is gathering the dolichos!
A day without seeing him
Is like three months!
There he is gathering the oxtail-southernwood!
A day without seeing him
Is like three seasons!
There he is gathering the mugwort!
A day without seeing him
Is like three years!

彼采葛兮，一日不见，如三月兮。
彼采萧兮，一日不见，如三秋兮。
彼采艾兮，一日不见，如三岁兮。⁹

The “*qiu*” 秋, autumn, in the poem is equivalent to a season. As the thoughts of loved ones become unbearable in lovers’ hearts, days feel longer and longer, growing into months, seasons, and years. The poet uses time units as scales, comparing a day with the exaggerated, subjective feeling of months, seasons, and years, building on the emotion with the gradual expansion of time consciousness.

Du Fu was most sensitive to the time units on autumn nights. On the long autumn nights, when the poet was away from the disturbance of days and free from following the rules and formalities in social courtesies, his true self began to reveal. It is one step away for the poet to contemplate and realize life on autumn nights. For instance, the poem “Su fu” 宿府 (Staying Overnight at Headquarters) reads:

Clear autumn at headquarters, the tung tree by the well is cold,
I spend the night alone in this river city, the wax torch dying.
Through the long night, the sound of the horn sadly speaks to itself,
the color of the moon mid-sky is quite fine—but who looks at it?
The dust of armies goes on and on, all news is cut off,
in the dreariness of barrier passes, hard traveling.
I have put up with rootless wandering, it’s been this way ten years,
I make myself move to take a roost on one secure branch.

清秋幕府井梧寒，独宿江城蜡炬残。
永夜角声悲自语，中天月色好谁看。
风尘荏苒音书绝，关塞萧条行路难。
已忍伶俜十年事，强移栖息一枝安。¹⁰

This poem was composed in 764, when Du Fu was a military staff in the Jiannan 剑南 Military Commissioner government. The first four lines paint an image that the poet rests alone in the military government on an autumn night. The image is filled with sad tones by describing the near scene to that of the distance. The last four lines depict the loneliness of spending the night by himself at the military government on an autumn night. In the times when the contacts were lost and the travels were dangerous due to the war, the poet drifted for ten years, only hoping to search for a humble place to settle down. In the lingering autumn night, the poet reminisces on his life, relived 10 years of wandering and a dim career. On this longest night of autumn (*qngqiu* 清秋, *yongye* 永夜), the poet looked back to the past ten years, and his perception of life became increasingly deepened as time consciousness progressed.

Two years later, in the first year of the Dali Era 大历 of Emperor Daizong 代宗 of Tang (766), Du Fu composed the poem “Jiangshang” 江上 (On the River) during his stay in Kuizhou 夔州:

Daily much rain on the River,
wind whistles, autumn in Jing and Chu.
High above, the wind brings down leaves from the trees,
through the long nights, I clasp my sable cape.
Merit’s legacy: I often look in the mirror;
conduct and carriage: I lean alone in a tower.
In times’ peril I long to repay my lord,
and though wasting away, I cannot stop.

江上日多雨，萧萧荆楚秋。
高风下木叶，永夜揽貂裘。
勋业频看镜，行藏独倚楼。
时危思报主，衰谢不能休。¹¹

The poem draws attention from the deserted autumn view to the lonesome poet, exploring the internal activities from the external actions. The leaves sway gently with the breeze, symbolizing the decaying process of nature. The poet's physical strength was declining, yet his spirits were still high. The faith in serving the emperor grew even more intense in the turmoil caused by the war. The ever-lasting aspiration never dies along with the aging body. In the course of days, seasons, and long nights, the poet sensed the conflict between the body and spirit in his life force. The vitality in the spirit eventually broke free from the restraint of physical form, transcending into an inspiring shout. The stress on the spirit over the body was an essential trait of the spirit in the glorious age of the Tang dynasty. It was also the driving force that molded the style of poems at the time. Despite the fact that "Jiangshang" was composed in the Dali Era (766–779) of the mid-Tang dynasty, the essence of the poem remains intact with the glorious age of the Tang dynasty.

Du Fu displayed his perception of the existence of life in the consciousness of time in both "Sufu" and "Jiangshang." In "Sufu", the poet experienced the existence of life, acting as a restless entity struggling with the external environment, whereas, in "Jiangshang", the poet sensed the conflict between his ambition and his weakened body in the internal activities, hence mediating and resolving the issue while encountering the conflict. The state of Du Fu's life existence can be fully comprehended based on these two poems: in the ever-lasting battle between ambition and the body, sometimes the ambition surpasses the body while at other times the body confines the will charged with a constant, variable tension; on the other hand, life itself clashes with the external environment of society, causing a perpetual state of struggle.

Human life exists in physical form and can only live through the flesh. The body is both the material cause and effect cause of life's growth and completion. Therefore, the senses not only function as the primary channel to feel existence but also as the significant content of experiencing the existence of human life. In the second year of the Shangyuan 上元 Era (761) of Emperor Suzong 肃宗 of Tang, Du Fu was fifty years old and made his home in Chengdu 成都, where he wrote "Baiyou jixing" 百忧集行 (A Hundred Cares Gather: A Ballad):

I recall when my age was fifteen, my mind was still a child's,
I was sturdy as a yellow calf running back and forth.
In the eighth month in our yard, the pears and dates were ripe,
In one day I could climb that tree a thousand times.
At present—in a flash—I'm already fifty,
For the most part sitting and lying down, standing and walking less often.
I force myself to be amusing when serving my patrons,
But sadly I see the span of my life and a hundred cares gather.
Coming in my gate, as ever the four walls are bare,
My old wife looks at me, our faces are the same.
My childish boys do not yet know the proper way to treat their father,
They shout angrily demanding food and weep east of the gate.

忆年十五心尚孩，健如黄犊走复来。
庭前八月梨枣熟，一日上树能千回。
即今倏忽已五十，坐卧只多少行立。
强将笑语供主人，悲见生涯百忧集。
入门依旧四壁空，老妻睹我颜色同。
痴儿不知父子礼，叫怒索饭啼门东。¹²

The poet cleverly used the palindrome of the number "五十" (fifty) and "十五" (fifteen) to associate with the periods when he was 15 and 50. In comparison, the physical change becomes the poet's focus. He recalled that when he was 15 years old his body was agile and energetic. However, compared to his health at 50 years old when he composed the poem, his body was fragile and tired. In the final part of the comparison, the poet makes the statement, "but sadly I see the span of my life and a hundred cares gather," (悲见生涯百忧集),

in which all the sorrow stormed at this moment.¹³ While perceiving the physical change, the poet realized the change of existence: the body was deteriorating, the life was full of sadness and pretense, and there was no way to escape from the family burden.

In Du Fu's poems, the thinking over the body can be summarized into two aspects: aging and sickness. Du Fu felt the process of aging long before this poem, as he stated in "Zeng bibu Xiao langzhong shixiong" 赠比部萧郎中十兄 (To Director of the Bureau of Review Xiao):

The time is already too late to aid my prince,
thoughts of ancient days remain with me in vain.
The Master of Palace Leisure smelted iron at Shanyang,
His Foolish Excellency, village in a wilderness valley.
How could I ask my senior to turn aside his cart-track for me?
I will go home and grow old, let Heaven and Earth go as they may.

致君时已晚，怀古意空存。
中散山阳锻，愚公野谷村。
宁纡长者辙，归老任乾坤。¹⁴

It was the first time that Du Fu mentioned aging. However, this poem was composed in the sixth year of the Tianbao Era 天宝 (742–756) when he was only 36 years old. In the following year, Du Fu discussed his aging in "Zeng Wei zuocheng zhang Ji" 赠韦左丞丈济 (Presented to Wei Ji, Vice-Director of the Left),

Family members worry about armrest and staff,
through many cycles, mixed with muddy roads.
I won't claim to boast that I have surplus energy,
But I still come to pay my respects to the greater shaman.
In the cold of the year, I still enjoy your regard,
At day's end, I pause expectantly a while.
The old steed longs to go a thousand leagues,
The starving hawk waits for just one call.

家人忧几杖，甲子混泥途。
不谓矜余力，还来谒大巫。
岁寒仍顾遇，日暮且踟蹰。
老骥思千里，饥鹰待一呼。¹⁵

In the fifth year of the Tiabo Era (746), Du Fu traveled to Chang'an 长安 for the imperial examination. Due to the sabotage of Li Linfu 李林甫 (683–753), not a single candidate was selected by the state bureaucracy. Du Fu later stayed in Chang'an, searching for opportunities, as described in his poem that: "At dawn I knocked at the gates of the rich, at dusk I chased the dust of plump horses There were dregs of goblets and cold roasts—wherever I went, I had sorrow and pain hidden within."¹⁶ The frustrating career left Du Fu sore and reluctance. He had long felt the loss of time at the age of 36. In "Zeng bibu Xiao langzhong shi xiong", Du Fu complained that "the time is already too late to aid my prince (致君时已晚)," which clearly expresses the poet's anxiety when his dream fell apart.¹⁷ He wished for a place to settle his aging body and ease his distress. In "Zeng Wei zuocheng zhang Ji" he writes: "The old steed longs to go a thousand leagues, the starving hawk waits for just one call (老骥思千里，饥鹰待一呼)," using a simile to voice his unfulfilled ambition. In the face of aging, the two attitudes of retiring and seeking service opportunities were reflected in Du Fu's poems, entangled and twisting.¹⁸

Around the 11th year of the Tianbo Era (752), Du Fu first mentioned his sickness in "Jingzeng Zheng jianyi shiyun" 敬赠郑谏议十韵,

How could this man of the wilds find a place? —
 Heaven's purposes have been stingy with my life adrift.
 Often sick, done with a scholar's vestment,
 I will entrust my traveler's tracks to seek mysteries.
 I will build my dwelling among elusive immortals,
 dine as a wayfarer, the years looming precipitous.
 An envoy sought out Yan He,
 but the various lords disliked Mi Heng.
 I would hope for the weight of a single commitment,
 it will instantly make this heart devoted.
 You see one weeping at a dead end,
 Infantry Commandant Ruan is right to worry.

野人宁得所，天意薄浮生。
 多病休儒服，冥搜信客旌。
 筑居仙缥缈，旅食岁峥嵘。
 使者求颜阖，诸公厌祢衡。
 将期一诺重，歎使寸心倾。
 君见途穷哭，宜忧阮步兵。¹⁹

The poet was 41 years old at that time, an age at which he could more easily sense his dilemma in life: treated unfairly by fate and disgusted by powerful elites, drifting with the wind until this age. Du Fu felt as if he had reached the dead end of his life. This feeling was certainly related to his experience during his wandering in Chang'an, but also due to his illness. The word "*bing* 病" shows up in his poems approximately 150 times. Thirty-eight poems contain specific disease names and conditions, including malaria, lung disease, thirst, losing vision, deafness, numbness, diarrhea, etc. (Yingqiang Zhang 2003). With the frequent occurrence of sickness, Du Fu's physical health was indeed declining. On the other hand, it is also a sign that Du Fu paid considerable attention to the existence of his life. "*Duobing* 多病" (many illnesses) became an important understanding Du Fu had concerning his life. He mentioned "*duobing* 多病" twenty-four times in his poems. In the summer of the first year of the Shangyuan Era (760) during Emperor Suzong's reign, Du Fu wrote in the poem "Jiangcun", "If only I had an old friend to provide rice from his salary, what more beyond that would I seek for myself?"²⁰ In the second year of the Dali Era (767) of the Emperor Daizong of Tang, Du Fu wrote in "Denggao" 登高 the following lines: "Grieving for fall across ten thousand leagues, always a traveler, often sick in this century of life I climb the terrace alone."²¹ During a hike in autumn, uncertainty and sickness were the most profound emotions Du Fu precepted concerning his life. Growing old makes the poet vulnerable to illness, and illness accelerates the aging process. Aging and sickness thus have an inseparable relationship in Du Fu's poems. Du Fu described himself with "*laobing* 老病" (old and ill) eighteen times in his poetry. In the third year of the Dali Era (768) of Emperor Daizong's reign, Du Fu strayed to Hunan 湖南, the last stop of his life. At the beginning of this final journey, Du Fu wrote in "Deng Yueyang lou" 登岳阳楼 that "from kin and friends, not a single word, old and sick, I do have a solitary boat."²² While appreciating the view from the tall building, the poet saw the vast surging lake and an era with endless wars, and aging, and at this moment, sickness had become a reluctant and melancholy recognition of life for Du Fu.

2. The Pursuit of the Value of Life

In the second year of the Qianyuan 乾元 Era (759) of Emperor Suzong of Tang, the An-Shi Rebellion (755–763) had already persisted for four years. The glorious days of the high Tang were shattered by ceaseless wars, leaving ashes and debris for the dynasty. In the seventh month of this year, Du Fu fled to Qinzhou 秦州 with his entire family. In the tenth month, they wandered from Qinzhou to Tonggu 同谷, carrying on with their drifting lives. Du Fu composed twelve poems on the trip, with "Fenghuang tai" 凤凰台 being one of them:

Rising high, Phoenix Terrace,
 facing West Kangzhou to the north.
 The Earl of the West is now lost in silence,
 the phoenix too is far, far away.
 The mountain too steep, the road breaks off,
 a forest of stone with vapors floating on high.
 How can I get a ladder of ten thousand yards
 and for you climb to the very top?
 I suspect there will be a motherless chick,
 hungry and cold, that wails each day.
 I can cut out my heart,
 it can drink and peck to console its lonely sorrow.
 My heart can act as the fruit of bamboo,
 gleaming, it needs seek nothing else.
 My blood can act as a spring of sweet water,
 how can one compare it merely to a clear stream.
 What is important is a good omen for the king,
 dare I refuse to end my humble life?
 Soon one will see its colored wings grow,
 its intent, to rise and circle the world's eight ends.
 In its beak it will hold an auspicious diagram from Heaven,
 it will fly down to the twelve towers.
 The diagram will be to present to His Majesty,
 the phoenix is to pass on the Great Enterprise.
 The legacy of the Restoration will cast new light,
 wash the cares of the common folk entirely away.
 My deepest feelings are exactly these,
 how can the rebel hordes last on?

亭亭凤凰台，北对西康州。西伯今寂寞，凤声亦悠悠。
 山峻路绝踪，石林气高浮。安得万丈梯，为君上上头。
 恐有无母雏，饥寒日啾啾。我能剖心出，饮啄慰孤愁。
 心以当竹实，炯然无外求。血以当醴泉，岂徒比清流。
 所贵王者瑞，敢辞微命休。坐看彩翮长，举意八极周。
 自天銜瑞图，飞下十二楼。图以奉至尊，凤以垂鸿猷。
 再光中兴业，一洗苍生忧。深衷正为此，群盗何淹留。²³

The phoenix pavilion is named after the legend of the phoenix visiting the place. It was not attached with political significance, but in Chinese culture, the phoenix is a sacred bird associated with saints. The phoenix that cried in Qishan 岐山 was regarded as an omen of the rising of the Zhou dynasty and the virtuous King Wen of Zhou. When Du Fu looked up to the phoenix pavilion, the auspicious implication carried by the phoenix presented a contrasting difference with the turmoil and despair of his own time. The poet's emotions were stimulated, and his mind was occupied by thoughts, leaving this poem to express his voice. Du Fu wished to protect the phoenix with his life in exchange for the peace of the empire. The poet poured all his passion and imagination into the poem to demonstrate his attitude toward life. Confucianism values life, advocating that "hair and skin are gifted by the parents and should not be damaged."²⁴ But for the purpose of "reviving the empire and completely washing off the worries of the common folks,"²⁵ the poet did not hesitate to offer his life for the better future of the country and its people. In Du Fu's view, his individual life was as beautiful as the spring and greens. However, he was willing to sacrifice himself for the greater good. The individual is elevated to greater meaning during the sacrifice while the individual purpose is fulfilled. Confucius once said, "The determined scholar and the man of virtue will not seek to live at the expense of injuring their virtue. They will even sacrifice their lives to preserve their virtue completely."²⁶ Similarly, Mencius states that, "I like life, and I also like righteousness. If I cannot keep the two

together, I will let life go, and choose righteousness.”²⁷ In Confucian thoughts, the individual body and life can be given up for the sake of righteousness and virtue. Du Fu evidently followed this Confucian belief. Du Fu used the poetic analogy to convey the message of “sacrifice” discussed by Confucius and Mencius. To be more specific, Confucius and Mencius discussed the optimal decision one should make while facing the conflicts between life and virtue, existence, and righteousness. When the poem was written, Du Fu was a common folk without any official title, nor was he residing in the region troubled by the war. From his perspective, there were no conflicts between life and virtue, existence and righteousness. Still, Du Fu stated that “what is important is a good omen for the king, dare I refuse to end my humble life,” stressing his will.²⁸ In comparison, Confucius and Mencius discussed the passive choice made in the conflicts between life and virtue, existence, and righteousness. On the other hand, Du Fu’s willingness to sacrifice was a voluntary decision. His choice was more passionate and forward-looking. The value of sacrificing himself for the greater good was magnificent and inspiring. As Tian Xiaofei commented on the poem:

But here the poet cuts out the heart and gives blood to the chicks of the birds. This kind of compassion is not only the instruction that the gentleman should stay away from the kitchen but also the Bodhisattva’s great compassion to save all sentient beings and willingly sacrifice their lives.

这里诗人却偏偏要挖心沥血施舍给禽鸟之幼雏。这种同情心不止于君子远庖厨而已，而是佛教教义里菩萨救助一切有情众生、甘心舍身的大悲之心。(Tian 2018).

By defining the poem’s theme with universal compassion in Buddhism, it omits the significance of the phoenix in the Confucian narrative by treating the phoenix as an ordinary bird and deviating from the political intention at the time.

Fulfilling the purpose of his life in serving the country and its people and even sacrificing himself for the greater good to validate his value, Du Fu developed this thought by overcoming countless obstacles in his journey. In his early ages, Du Fu was no different from many in the glorious days of the Tang dynasty, seeking to obtain wealth and fame through studying and passing the imperial exams in order to become a government official. In the sixth year of the Tianbao Era (747), Du Fu first declared his goal of serving the state and improving society in the poem “Fengzeng Wei zuozhou zhang ershier yun” (奉赠韦左丞丈二十二韵), in which he claims to “make my lord greater than Yao or Shun, and cause our customs again to be pure.”²⁹ Nevertheless, he also expressed his longing for fortune and power when he wrote “I would emulate Lord Gong’s delight; hard to accept Yuan Xian’s poverty.”³⁰ In the fourteenth year of Tianbao Era (755), Du Fu wrote in “Zi jing fu fengxian xian yonghuai wubai zi” 自京赴奉先县咏怀五百字 the following lines:

There is a man of Duling in homespun clothes,
as I age, my aims grow more inept.
So foolish in what I swore to become! —
I secretly likened myself to Hou Ji and Xie.
At last I proved to be too large to be useful,
white-haired, and willing to endure hardship.
When the coffin closes, the issue will be settled,
but these aims ever look to fulfillment.
To the end of my years I worry for the common folk,
I heave sighs, and my guts burn within.
.....
Hereby I grow aware of life’s pattern.
and I alone am ashamed to beg for favor.
I have gone on thus persistently until now —
I could not bear just to sink into the dust.
In the end Chaofu and Xu You put me to shame,
for they could not alter their firm resolve.

杜陵有布衣，老大意转拙。
许身一何愚，窃比稷与契。
居然成濩落，白首甘契阔。
盖棺事则已，此志常觊豁。
穷年忧黎元，叹息肠内热。

.....
以兹悟生理，独耻事干谒。
兀兀遂至今，忍为尘埃没。
终愧巢与由，未能易其节。³¹

Du Fu established his life goal as striving to achieve that equal to the legendary Ji 稷 and Xie 契, devoting himself to the state and its people. Since then, Du Fu has transcended from concern for self only to sacrifice for the state. His spirit was purified. He took the identity of common folks and was willing to withstand the hardship of life. Moreover, he devoted his passion to the greater good, worrying about and caring for the people. His ten years living in Chang'an was the most crucial stage in Du Fu's life. After being tempered by reality, he broke free from the vanity of the prosperous of the high Tang and was reborn like the phoenix, forming a great and pure character, as well as a matured value.

His poems often revealed his mature value. In the second year of the Shangyuan Era (761) of the Emperor Suzong of Tang, Du Fu wrote in "Maowu wei qiufeng suo po ge" (茅屋为秋风所破歌):

If only I could get a great mansion of a million rooms, broadly covering the
poor scholars of all the world, all with joyous expressions, unshaken by
storms, as stable as a mountain.

Alas, when will I see such a roof looming before my eyes? — then I would think it
all right if my cottage alone were ruined and I suffered death by freezing.

安得广厦千万间，大庇天下寒士俱欢颜，风雨不动安如山。
呜呼，何时眼前突兀见此屋，吾庐独破受冻死亦足。³²

The roof of his hut was blown away by the autumn wind, yet he wished for thousands of houses to shelter all the poor people in the world, even if it meant for him to die in the cold for the wish to come true. From his perspective, his life was insignificant compared to all the poor people in the world. In the first year of the Guangde Era (764) of the Emperor of Daizong of Tang, Du Fu drifted to Sichuan 四川 and composed "Suimu" (岁暮):

Year's end, a wayfarer far from home,
frontier's edge, troops put in action again.
Smoke and dust invade snowy summits,
Drums, and bugles stir the river city.
Heaven and earth daily flow with blood,
who requests cords from the court?
Dare one begrudge death to save the age? —
melancholy silence, the bold heart alarmed.

岁暮远为客，边隅还用兵。
烟尘犯雪岭，鼓角动江城。
天地日流血，朝廷谁请缨。
济时敢爱死，寂寞壮心惊。³³

The first line writes about his wandering at an old age and the endless wars at the time, indicating the relationship between his personal situation and the circumstances of the country. The second line describes the war from the visual and hearing, showing vivid battle images. The third line acts as a transition, using a question to express his disappointment at the failure of government officials. In the last line, the poet declares his determination to sacrifice himself in exchange for saving the country. Once again, he demonstrated

the value of devoting himself to his country and realizing the meaning of life through serving the country. Individual life is immortal in the eternity of the country. Such a value became a firm foundation to support the poet in pulling through the hardship and maintaining a noble character, driving him to climb higher to the extraordinary path.

3. The Liberation of the Pain of Life

Du Fu's attitude toward life is unquestionably noble and prominent, directing an upward path for individual life to elevate with its encouraging, eternal significance. However, this value was compromised with an underlying crisis: individual value is obtained through serving the country. Once there is no such means to do so, it may lead to the failure of fulfilling individual values. However, the action of serving the country is not an individual decision but rather supported by opportunity. Du Fu wanted to serve in the official bureaucracy through the imperial exam but failed both times, he then wandered in Chang'an for ten years and finally obtained a position in the government. Yet, his career was interrupted by the An-Shi Rebellion. He risked his life to seek patronage from Emperor Suzong but accidentally got involved in the power struggle between Emperor Xuanzong and Emperor Suzong. He was expelled from the court to the army at Huazhou 华州. When famine occurred in the region, Du Fu could not sustain his family, had no choice but to abandon the position and escape to Qinzhou, and had never had any access to the court since. Du Fu later functioned as a military staff under Yan Wu's 严武 (726–765) command, but it was merely a courtesy of an old friend. Du Fu rarely had any chances to serve the country throughout his life. His value could not be obtained. With the passage of time and deteriorating health, the poet realized the short length of existence. The sadness of being unable to realize his value naturally built up in him. In the first year of the Baoying 宝应 Era (762), Du Fu fled to Zizhou 梓州. With his sentiment, he wrote "Keting" (客亭):

In the autumn window, already daybreak's colors,
in leaf-stripped trees, once more heaven's wind.
The sun comes out beyond cold mountains,
the river flows on in the overnight fog.
Our Sage Reign rejects no one,
but sick and aging, I've become an old man.
So many concerns for the rest of my life,
tossed along, like a whirling dandelion puff.

秋窗犹曙色，落木更天风。
日出寒山外，江流宿雾中。
圣朝无弃物，老病已成翁。
多少残生事，飘零任转蓬。³⁴

At the sunrise of autumn, Du Fu noticed the physical change of himself being sick and aging and lamented that he had become an old man. He was reluctant to acknowledge the fact that even though the government had not expelled him, his body could no longer support him to serve the country. A life that could not obtain its value has lost its meaning, drifting like falling leaves. The poem is filled with sadness, but never hatred. It is complete, sober agony.

The pain needs to be relieved or forgotten. A life without purpose needs to settle. In Confucian thoughts, individual life is a part of the family line that connects the ancestors with the future generation; on the other hand, it also plays its role in the relationships between the ruler and minister, father and son, husband and wife, and brothers and friends. Every individual is bound by the social network but also gains meaning and shelter from within. Du Fu was heavily influenced by Confucian thoughts. He conceded to the relationship in the social network. Despite struggling in the government, other parts of the social network made up his world and provided comfort to his life. Du Fu had a sincere affection for his family, brothers, and friends. He obtained emotional relief from their relationship

and forgot the suffering in life. For example, one of his poems about his wife and son is as follows, “Jinting” (进艇):

Long a sojourner in the Southern Capital, I plow my southern acres,
gazing north wounds the spirit as I sit by my north-facing window.
By day I take my wife to ride in a tiny skiff,
under sunny skies we watch the children bathe in the clear river.
Butterflies flying together, always they follow each other,
lotuses sharing a single stalk, by nature form pairs.
Cane syrup to drink with our tea, we’ve brought along what we have,
and our pottery jar will not take second place to a jug made of jade.

南京久客耕南亩，北望伤神坐北窗。
昼引老妻乘小艇，晴看稚子浴清江。
俱飞蛱蝶元相逐，並蒂芙蓉本自双。
茗饮蔗浆携所有，瓷甌无谢玉为缸。³⁵

The poet dwelled in the sorrow of living in Chengdu and being far away from the government. But his life with his wife and son allowed him to forget the sadness and reminded him of flying butterflies in pairs and flowers growing in groups. The poet was impressed by what he saw and decided that even an ordinary life would be a satisfaction. Du Fu found peace in human relationships. For another instance, “Presented to the Recluse Wei” (赠卫八处士):

Never meeting as life goes on,
always like the stars Shen and Shang.
Then what evening is this? —
that we share here lamp and candlelight.
How long can youth’s vigor last? —
the hair at each of our temples has grayed.
Inquiring of old friends, half now are ghosts,
I shout in shock, my innards hot within.
How could I have known that after twenty years
I would once again enter your hall, good sir?
When we parted long ago, you were not yet married,
now all at once sons and daughters form a line.
Pleased, they show respect for their father’s friend
and ask me from where I have come.
Before the questions and answers are done,
the children set out ale.
In night rain they cut spring scallions,
just cooked and mixed with yellow millet.
My host declares how rare it is to meet,
the first toast, then ten goblets pass in succession.
Even after ten goblets we are not drunk,
and I am moved by how your old friendship lasts.
Tomorrow we will be divided by mountains,
for both the world’s affairs are a vast blur.

人生不相见，动如参与商。今夕复何夕，共此灯烛光。
少壮能几时，鬓发各已苍。访旧半为鬼，惊呼热中肠。
焉知二十载，重上君子堂。昔别君未婚，儿女忽成行。
怡然敬父执，问我来何方。问答乃未已，儿女罗酒浆。
夜雨翦春韭，新炊间黄粱。主称会面难，一举累十觞。
十觞亦不醉，感子故意长。明日隔山岳，世事两茫茫。³⁶

The poet reunited with his old friend after a long separation, and a simple dinner filled him with joy. It is precisely because the past has gone through a long separation, and the future will also be endless departures, that this night's reunion makes the poet particularly happy and cherish, temporarily forgetting the helplessness in life and immersing himself in the joy of drinking and chatting with friends.

"The hard lump in Ruan Ji's (210–263) heart must be watered with wine."³⁷ Alcohol functions on the nervous system and excites people, creating a fictional world where the drunk can find comfort. The Confucians are cautious about alcohol. In the "Jiugao" 酒诰 (The Announcement about Drunkness) chapter in *Shangshu* 尚书, King Wen once warned people that they "should not ordinarily use spirits" (*wu yi jiu* 无彝酒),³⁸ the lesson in King Zhou of Shang gave himself over to drinking and women are also often discussed in the chapter. However, after the example of renowned people in the Wei-Jin 魏晋 period (220–420), drowning sorrow with wine became a common practice in the Tang dynasty. Du Fu, who was under the influence of Confucian thoughts, was no exception. For instance, Du Fu writes: "I cannot bear just being old and sick, but how can I esteem insubstantial fame? I take this shallow trickle of ale, deeply dependent on it to see me through this life."³⁹ Suffering from sickness and aging, seeing no hope to pursue his value, Du Fu even wanted to live the rest of his life on wine. Indeed, it was only a fleeting thought with exaggeration. But drinking did serve as a means to comfort the poet at some point.

Nature is another destination where Du Fu sought comfort: "Threading through flowers, butterflies appear deep within, specks on water, dragonflies wing on so leisurely. My message to spring's bright weather—let us roll along together, let us not miss enjoyment's brief span."⁴⁰ On the lively, green day of spring, Du Fu could help to stay in this peace forever to appreciate the quietness in the world of disturbance, settling down his life without the trouble of the world. A similar emotion was expressed more directly in another poem:

At the temple I recall where I recently roamed,
I love the moment of recrossing the bridge.
River and mountains seem to be waiting for me,
flowers and willows show even less favoritism.
The wilderness moist, the misty light thin,
sands radiant, the sunlight moves slowly.
The sojourner's sadness is entirely reduced by this,
except for here, where else will I go?

寺忆新游处，桥怜再渡时。
江山如有待，花柳更无私。
野润烟光薄，沙暄日色迟。
客愁全为减，舍此复何之。⁴¹

Du Fu held a passion for every aspect of nature, and nature provided him with the most magnificent view in return, as if it were waiting to show him all the miracles. All distress in life dissipated in front of such wonders in nature. The poet claimed that "except for here, where else will I go (舍此复何之)", wishing he could rest in celestial beauty.⁴²

Du Fu could not realize his aspiration to serve the emperor. He sought serenity in life from other social relationships, the fictional world in a drunken state, and nature. Nevertheless, Du Fu was persistent in actualizing his value, which was closely tied to serving the country and the time. Nature, the fictional world in a drunken state, and other social relationships are temporary harbors for Du Fu and could not substitute his aspiration in government, as the poet writes that "let us roll along together, let us not miss enjoyment's brief span."⁴³ His purpose in life failed to be achieved due to the struggle in his official career. It is a pain that no remedy can cure. As Du Fu laments: "Finished drinking, this body of mine has nowhere to go, I stand alone in a vast expanse, chanting a poem to myself."⁴⁴ Even in his drunken state, Du Fu was conscious that there was no shelter for his unfulfilled life in loneliness but to inscribe his pain in poems: "My name will never be

known from my writings, aging and sick, I should quit my post. Wind-tossed, what is my likeness?—between Heaven and Earth, a single sandgull.”⁴⁵ In a life where its value could not be obtained, Du Fu felt like an unsettled bird, drifting with the wind and having no landing place to rest. Some may think these poems are too cynical. Even so, Du Fu expressed his feelings and attitude in these poems. In the ancient philosophy of China, reflecting on words and establishing sincerity (*xiuci li qi cheng* 修辞立其诚) was emphasized.⁴⁶ Writing thus should be a faithful reflection of the internal and external worlds. In the face of tragedies in life, self-indulgent fabrication is nothing but a feeble disguise.

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Notes

- ¹ 横看成岭侧成峰，远近高低各不同。See Shi Su (1980, vol. 23, p. 1219). All translations are mine except indicated.
- ² 天以阳生万物，以阴成万物。生，仁也。义，成也。故圣人在上，以仁育万物，以义正万民。Dunyi Zhou (1990), 周敦颐 (1017–1073), vol. 2, p. 23.
- ³ 万物之生意最可观，此元者善之长也。斯所谓仁也。See Cheng Hao 程颢 (1032–1085) and Cheng Yi 程颐 (1033–1107) (Cheng and Cheng 1981, p. 120).
- ⁴ 天地生物，自是温暖和煦，这个便是仁。In Jingde Li (1988), 黎靖德 (fl.13th century), vol. 53, p. 1280.
- ⁵ 道生之，德畜之，物形之，势成之。Qianzhi Zhu (2000), 朱谦之 (1899–1972), p. 204.
- ⁶ 生，道之别体也。See Zongyi Rao 饶宗颐 (1991, p. 33).
- ⁷ 出于生存的本能，人类对生命的最敏感的体验，恐怕就是对生命这一流动过程的体验。Furui Zhan 詹福瑞 (1997).
- ⁸ 感到了时间的推移，也就知晓了人类生命的推移。Obi Kōichi (1989, p. 56).
- ⁹ Translated by James Legge (1960a, p. 120). See also Yingda Kong (1980b), 孔颖达 (574–648), vol. 4, p. 65.
- ¹⁰ Translation adopted from Stephen Owen (2016, vol. 4, p. 9). See also Difei Xiao (2014), 萧涤非 (1906–1991), vol. 11, p. 3273.
- ¹¹ Translation adopted from Stephen Owen (2016, vol. 4, pp. 195, 197). See also Difei Xiao (2014, vol. 14, p. 3930).
- ¹² Translation adopted from Stephen Owen (2016, vol. 3, p. 52). See also Difei Xiao (2014, vol. 8, p. 2353).
- ¹³ See Stephen Owen (2016, vol. 3, p. 52). See also Difei Xiao (2014, vol. 8, p. 2353).
- ¹⁴ See Stephen Owen (2016, vol. 1, p. 43). See also Difei Xiao (2014, vol. 1, p. 149).
- ¹⁵ See Stephen Owen (2016, vol. 1, p. 49). See also Difei Xiao (2014, vol. 1, p. 209).
- ¹⁶ 朝扣富儿门，暮随肥马尘。残杯与冷炙，到处潜悲辛。See Stephen Owen (2016, vol. 1, p. 51). See also Difei Xiao (2014, vol. 2, p. 277).
- ¹⁷ See Stephen Owen (2016, vol. 1, p. 43). See also Difei Xiao (2014, vol. 1, p. 149).
- ¹⁸ See Stephen Owen (2016, vol. 1, p. 49). See also Difei Xiao (2014, vol. 1, p. 209).
- ¹⁹ See Stephen Owen (2016, vol. 1, p. 77). See also Difei Xiao (2014, vol. 2, p. 311).
- ²⁰ 多病所须唯药物，微躯此外更何求。See Difei Xiao (2014, vol. 7, p. 1965).
- ²¹ 万里悲秋常作客，百年多病独登台。See Stephen Owen (2016, vol. 5, p. 273). See also Difei Xiao (2014, vol. 17, p. 5092).
- ²² 亲朋无一字，老病有孤舟。See Stephen Owen (2016, vol. 6, p. 43). Difei Xiao (2014, vol. 19, p. 5673).
- ²³ See Stephen Owen (2016, vol. 2, p. 251). See also Difei Xiao (2014, vol. 7, p. 1760).
- ²⁴ 身体发肤，受之父母，不敢毁伤。Bing Xing (1980), 邢昺 (932–1010), vol. 1, p. 7.
- ²⁵ 再光中兴业，一洗苍生忧。See Stephen Owen (2016, vol. 2, pp. 251, 253). Difei Xiao (2014, vol. 7, p. 1760).
- ²⁶ 志士仁人，无求生以害仁，有杀身以成仁。See Bing Xing (1980, vol. 15, p. 61).
- ²⁷ 生，亦我所欲也；义，亦我所欲也。二者不可得兼，舍生而取义者也。See Bing Xing (1980, vol. 11, p. 88).
- ²⁸ 所贵王者瑞，敢辞微命休。See Stephen Owen (2016, vol. 2, pp. 251, 253). See also Difei Xiao (2014, vol. 7, p. 1760).
- ²⁹ 致君尧舜上，再使风俗淳。See Stephen Owen (2016, vol. 1, p. 51). See also Difei Xiao (2014, vol. 2, p. 277).
- ³⁰ 窃效贡公喜，难甘原宪贫。See Stephen Owen (2016, vol. 1, p. 52). See also Difei Xiao (2014, vol. 2, p. 277).
- ³¹ See Stephen Owen (2016, vol. 1, pp. 209, 211). See also Difei Xiao (2014, vol. 3, p. 668).
- ³² See Stephen Owen (2016, vol. 3, p. 43). See also Difei Xiao (2014, vol. 8, p. 2346).

- 33 See Stephen Owen (2016, vol. 3, p. 303). Difei Xiao (2014, vol. 10, p. 3016).
- 34 See Stephen Owen (2016, vol. 3, p. 149), Difei Xiao (2014, vol. 9, p. 2664).
- 35 See Stephen Owen (2016, vol. 3, p. 29). Difei Xiao (2014, vol. 8, p. 2295).
- 36 See Stephen Owen (2016, vol. 6, pp. 73–75). Difei Xiao (2014, vol. 5, p. 1325).
- 37 阮籍胸中垒块，故须酒浇之。Zhener Xu (2001), 徐震铎 (1901–1986).
- 38 See James Legge (1960b, p. 403). See also Yingda Kong (1980c), 孔颖达 (574–648), vol. 14, p. 94.
- 39 不堪祇老病，何得尚浮名。浅把涓涓酒，深凭送此生。See Stephen Owen (2016, vol. 3, p. 19). See also Difei Xiao (2014, vol. 8, p. 2183).
- 40 穿花蛱蝶深深见，点水蜻蜓款款飞。传语风光共流转，暂时相赏莫相违。See Stephen Owen (2016, vol. 2, p. 11). Difei Xiao (2014, vol. 4, p. 1048).
- 41 See Owen (2016, vol. 2, p. 345); Difei Xiao (2014, vol. 8, p. 2120).
- 42 See Stephen Owen (2016, vol. 2, p. 345); Difei Xiao (2014, vol. 8, p. 2120).
- 43 暂时相赏莫相违。See Stephen Owen (2016, vol. 2, p. 11; Difei Xiao (2014, vol. 4, p. 1048).
- 44 此身饮罢无归处，独立苍茫自咏诗。See Stephen Owen (2016, vol. 1, p. 69); Difei Xiao (2014, vol. 1, p. 215).
- 45 名岂文章著，官应老病休。飘飘何所似，天地一沙鸥。See Stephen Owen (2016, vol. 4, p. 77); Difei Xiao (2014, vol. 12, p. 3429).
- 46 See Yingda Kong (1980a, vol. 1, p. 3).

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