

Reading Du Fu

Reading Du Fu

Nine Views

Edited by Xiaofei Tian

Hong Kong University Press
The University of Hong Kong
Pokfulam Road
Hong Kong
<https://hkupress.hku.hk>

© 2020 Hong Kong University Press

ISBN 978-988-8528-44-8 (*Hardback*)

All rights reserved. No portion of this publication may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopying, recording, or any information storage or retrieval system, without prior permission in writing from the publisher.

British Library Cataloguing-in-Publication Data
A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Printed and bound by XXXX, Hong Kong, China

Contents

List of Figures	vi
Acknowledgments	vii
Introduction Xiaofei Tian	1
Section I: Home, Locale, Empire	
1. Foundings of Home: On Du Fu and Poetic Success Jack W. Chen	15
2. Thinking through Poetry: Du Fu's "Getting Rid of the Blues" (<i>Jie men</i>) Stephen Owen	27
3. History Channels: Commemoration and Communication in Du Fu's Kuizhou Poems Gregory Patterson	41
4. Ironic Empires Lucas Rambo Bender	56
Section II: Poetry and Buddhism	
5. Refuges and Refugees: How Du Fu Writes Buddhism Paul Rouzer	75
6. Feeding the Phoenix: Du Fu's Qinzhou-Tonggu Series Xiaofei Tian	93
Section III: Reception and Re-creation	
7. Sources of Difficulty: Reading and Understanding Du Fu Christopher M. B. Nugent	111
8. Ming-Qing Paintings Inscribed with Du Fu's Poetic Lines Ronald Egan	129
9. Six Modernist Poets in Search of Du Fu David Der-wei Wang	143
Works Cited	165
List of Contributors	172
Index	174

Ironic Empires

Lucas Rambo Bender

Du Fu has for much of the last millennium been thought of as the poet who held together worlds that had otherwise broken apart. His morally exemplary verse, it has often been asserted, proved that poetry had not ultimately lost that primeval connection with ethics and politics that was promised in the “Great Preface” to the *Classic of Poetry* (*Shi jing* 詩經). His sympathy for the suffering people of his time proved that the individual could still speak for the larger empire, the affairs of the state “rooted in the experience of a single person.”¹ And his penetrating insight into the true significance of the An Lushan Rebellion proved that there was no unbridgeable divide between individual subjectivity and objective truth, that it remained possible for a poet to feel the world in a way appropriate to its true moral contours.² In all of these respects, Du Fu was China’s “poet sage” and also its “poet historian,” tasked with maintaining poetry’s ultimate defensibility throughout a millennium in which the art was often in danger of being seen as shirking political and ethical responsibility in its indulgence in the experience of the individual and in the labyrinths of private subjectivity.

Du Fu has, however, sometimes been seen as almost the diametrical opposite of this synthesizing figure. Stephen Owen, for example, identifies Du Fu as the first poet to write into being a private sphere, constituted by subjective interpretations markedly distinct from the ideologies of the empire.³ In the mid-Tang, Owen writes, important poets imitated Du Fu in offering

playfully inflated interpretations of domestic spaces and leisure activities as a discourse of private valuation, articulated against commonsense values. Such values and meanings, offered in play, belong to the poet alone, and they create an effective private sphere distinct from the totalizing aspect of Chinese moral and social philosophy, in which even solitary and domestic behavior are part of a hierarchy of public values.⁴

1. See *Mao shi zhushu*, 1.18.

2. For examples of this tendency in traditional and modern Chinese criticism of Du Fu, see Bender, “Du Fu,” especially 213–20.

3. Owen, *The End of the Chinese “Middle Ages,”* 89.

4. Owen, *The End of the Chinese “Middle Ages,”* 4.

These sorts of poems were instrumental, Owen suggests, to a larger trend that comes to define much of later Chinese literary culture, whereby “in ways large and small, writers begin to assert their particular claim over a range of objects and activities: my land, my style, my interpretation, my garden, my particular beloved.” In these poems, therefore, the relationship between private subjectivity and public values becomes problematic, resulting in new divisions between literary writing and moral thought concerned with the fortunes of the empire. If many critics have seen Du Fu as the poet for whom no private moment failed to open out onto public concern, Owen thus reads him as providing one of the most important templates for escaping imperial responsibility and, ultimately, questioning imperial values.

It might be natural to assume that these two visions of Du Fu derive from different portions of his very large and diverse poetic corpus. In fact, however, the poems that might be most readily identified as laying the groundwork for a poetics of private subjectivity are often among those that provide the most convincing proofs for the traditional claim that Du Fu never forgot the problems of the empire “even for the space of a single meal.”⁵ These complex poems—written primarily in Kuizhou, on humble, domestic topics—seem to point in both directions at once, both affirming Du Fu’s public commitments by importing imperial values into the minutiae of his private life and simultaneously ironizing those values by highlighting the comic incongruity of their application to topics that would normally fall beneath the notice of high-cultural forms like poetry. The poems become jokes, mocking the futility of Du Fu’s attempts to apply imperial values to the mundanities of life on the far outskirts of the Tang imperium; at the same time, however, they often cut this humor with melancholy reflections upon his own continued dependence on an empire he begins to see in all its violence. By probing the applicability of public-minded concern within his domestic life, these poems thus break the world apart in Du Fu’s desperate attempts to hold it together and reveal perverse interconnections in the ironies of his attempts to escape.⁶

Early Poems on Humble Topics

Du Fu’s collection contains a number of poems on humble, domestic topics that are thought to predate his time in Kuizhou. In several cases, these poems offer reasonably solid support for traditional claims that imperial values filter down into even those areas of his life wherein the less virtuous among us might forget them. In poems like “Sick Horse” (“Bing ma” 病馬) and “Palm Whisk” (“Zongfuzi” 桴拂子),⁷ for example—generally dated to Du Fu’s sojourns in Qinzhou and Chengdu, respectively—Du Fu valorizes the support he has received from the accoutrements of his exile in terms that are clearly meant to parallel ideals of official service to the emperor. Traditional commentators, accordingly, generally understand these poems to be fundamentally about the poet’s disappointed loyalty and about the government that has disappointed it, reading his claims to be “moved by the deeper significance” of his loyal horse and to always “carefully wrap up and put away” his palm whisk as suggesting that his own commitment to

5. This famous cliché derives from Su Shi 蘇軾 (1037–1101); see *Su Shi wenji*, 318.

6. These poems have also been recently studied by Gregory M. Patterson, both in his dissertation, “Elegies for Empire,” 126–48, and in a recent paper presented at the 2016 meeting of the Tang Studies Society.

7. Xiao Difei, *Du Fu quanji*, vol. 3, 6.1575; vol. 5, 10.2886; Owen, *The Poetry of Du Fu*, vol. 2, 182–83 and vol. 3, 256–59.

the empire has not been rewarded with the same sort of appreciation.⁸ There is nothing particularly humorous about these poems: it might, perhaps, be somewhat absurd to speak of the loyalty of a flywhisk, but less so of a horse—and at any rate commentators are nearly unanimous that these topics are mere pretexts for bringing up more serious issues.

It is not until 764 that Owen begins to document real recalcitrance to Du Fu's attempts to elevate his domestic affairs to imperial significance. Owen focuses his discussion on "Deck by the Water" ("Shui jian" 水檻),⁹ a poem that describes Du Fu's vacillations as to whether he should repair his ruined hermitage's broken porch. On Owen's reading, "whether to repair a sagging deck had never been a question that was felt to merit serious poetic treatment," and so the basic drama of the poem lies in Du Fu's attempt to justify "why this matters to him and why the serious genre of poetry should concern itself with something so trivial and commonplace"¹⁰ through "an outrageous application of a passage in the *Analects* (XVI.6), in which Confucius enjoins us to 'support what totters,' *fudian* 扶顛."¹¹ Since Confucius in this passage was speaking about governance, not porches, Du Fu's attempt to apply the precept to his domestic sphere becomes ridiculous, highlighting the disconnect rather than the continuity between his Chengdu hermitage and imperial politics. The poem thus produces an ironic fracturing of the world, demonstrating that the values that pertain to the state do not transfer easily to the domain of domestic life. "No matter how much Du Fu strains to allegorize his domestic structure, it remains stubbornly no more than a deck, ironizing his attempts at interpretation and foregrounding their excess"¹² and leading the poet himself in the end to recognize that his attachment to the porch is not an instance of the sophisticated cultural values he invokes but merely a case of humble familiarity. The porch is simply his, and he cares for it, quite apart from what the empire might value: herein lie the rudiments of a private sphere.

Most of Du Fu's Chinese commentators, however, have read the poem rather differently. Where Owen interprets Du Fu's "fear that he will be laughed at by those who know" as suggesting the poet's discomfort with his overweening application of the *Analects* to his porch, traditional commentators like Zhou Zhuan 周篆 (1642–1706) argue the opposite, that Du Fu fears being laughed at precisely if he *fails* to follow Confucius's injunction even in the domestic sphere, where he could easily succeed.¹³ For these commentators, the poem thus represents Du Fu's thoroughgoing commitment to those normative, imperial values that Owen takes him as ironizing. And this ambiguity, I suggest, is not an accident. When we come to the poetry on domestic affairs that Du Fu wrote during the two years he lived in Kuizhou, from 766 to 768, the possibility

8. For comments of this sort about "Sick Horse," see, for example, Zhao Cigong, *Du shi*, 350; and the comment attributed to Shi 師 in Huang Xi and Huang He, *Bu zhu Du shi*, 20.23a. For similar comments on "Palm Whisk," see Shan Fu, *Du Du shi* 9.17, and Qiu Zhaoao, *Du shi xiangzhu*, 1031.

9. Owen, *The Poetry of Du Fu*, vol. 3, 360–61; Xiao Difei, *Du Fu quanji*, vol. 6, 11.3155–58.

10. Owen, *The End of the Chinese "Middle Ages"*, 91.

11. Owen, *The End of the Chinese "Middle Ages"*, 92.

12. Owen, *The End of the Chinese "Middle Ages"*, 92.

13. For Zhou Zhuan's comment, see Xiao Difei, *Du Fu quanji*, vol. 6, 11.3156. Note that Shan Fu argues that the poem is an allegory for the empire, with wind and rain standing for the disorder of the rebellion and the porch standing for the state. Shan Fu, *Du Du shi*, 10.17b–18a. Similarly, Weng Fanggang 翁方綱 (1733–1818) suggests that supporting his porch is a veiled reference to Du Fu's attempt to save Fang Guan 房琯 (696–763). See Xiao Difei, *Du Fu quanji*, vol. 6, 11.3157. In these readings, the use of the *Analects* is not out of place at all.

of such alternate readings becomes structurally significant, part of a meditation upon Du Fu's liminal position on the border of the empire and on the edge of the imperial bureaucracy.¹⁴

Vegetable Allegories

There was, of course, significant classical precedent for writing poetry on the humble affairs of village life out in the provinces. Among all forms of Chinese literature, in fact, poetry might have seemed to Du Fu the most propitious for connecting potentially discontinuous realms of experience. Not only had the Mao Commentary's "Great Preface" to the *Classic of Poetry* promised that "the affairs of a single state" could be observed within the experience and feelings of a single individual; moreover, the same text established what might roughly be termed allegorizing treatment ("comparison," *bi* 比) as one of the Six Principles through which the *Classic* needed to be understood,¹⁵ making it possible, for example, for a "big rat" eating up a peasant family's grain to stand in for a greedy ruler.¹⁶ And according to the legendary origins of that same *Classic*, the poems it contains were collected from among the far-flung populations of the Zhou dynasty's vast domain in order to reveal to the central court the condition of local mores. There was thus nothing inherently unlikely, according to this Classicist vision, about great poetry deriving from a backwater like Kuizhou.

Du Fu, however, seems to have discerned the possibility for bathetic humor in the too-earnest application of these principles. In the following poem, for example, when he claims to be "drawing a comparison" between the bad vegetables that he has received from Kuizhou's public garden and the affairs of the age, he is both aligning his poetic practice with the most august source of the tradition and simultaneously mocking himself for using *Shi jing* poetics to complain about a substandard vegetable delivery.

園官送菜 The Garden Officer Sends Vegetables¹⁷

園官送菜把，本數日闕，矧苦芑馬齒，掩乎嘉蔬。傷時小人妬害君子，菜不足道也，比而作詩。

The garden officer sends me bundles of vegetables, but he has actually been remiss for several days. Worse, the bitter lettuce and horse-tooth amaranth overwhelm the finer vegetables. I am pained that in this age petty people do harm to gentlemen out of spite: the vegetables themselves are not worth bringing up, but I drew a comparison and wrote this poem.

清晨蒙菜把 In the clear morning, when I receive my bunch of vegetables,
常荷地主恩 I always bear the local master's grace.¹⁸
守者愆實數 But the one in charge of this cheats on the count,

14. For Du Fu's biographical sketch, see the introduction to this volume. For more focused discussions of Du Fu's situation in Kuizhou and Kuizhou's position within the Tang empire, see Patterson, "Elegies for Empire," especially 74–126; Fang Yu, *Du Fu Kuizhou shi*, 9–70; Jiang Xianwei, *Du Fu Kuizhou shi*, especially 60–71, 173–76, and 222–24; and Feng Ye, *Du Fu Kuizhou shi*.

15. *Mao shi zhushu*, 1.15.

16. *Mao shi zhushu*, 5.211.

17. Throughout this chapter, the Chinese texts reproduce as closely as Unicode allows the readings of *Song ben Du Gongbu ji* compiled by Wang Zhu 王洙 (997–1057). The translations are (generally slight) modifications of Owen's in *The Poetry of Du Fu*. This poem is in Owen, *The Poetry of Du Fu*, vol. 5, 116–19; Xiao Difei, *Du Fu quanji*, vol. 8, 16.4546ff.

18. Presumably, Bai Maolin 柏茂林, the local supervisor in chief and Du Fu's patron in Kuizhou.

- 4 略有其名存 so pretty much only the name remains.
 苦苣刺如針 The bitter lettuce has thorns like needles;
 馬齒葉亦繁 the leaves of horse-tooth amaranth are also many.
 青青嘉蔬色 Green, green, the colors of the better vegetables¹⁹
- 8 埋沒在中園 are buried away in the garden.
 園吏未足怪 This garden officer is not worth being upset about,
 世事因堪論 but the situation of the times can be discussed through this.
 嗚呼戰伐久 Alas! Warfare has gone on so long
- 12 荊棘暗長原 that thorns and brambles darken the long plain.²⁰
 乃知苦苣輩 For this reason we know that things like bitter lettuce
 傾奪蕙草根 will overwhelm the roots of sweet basil.
 小人塞道路 And petty men stuff the roads of power,
 16 為態何喧喧 how noisy and clamorous their manner!
- 又如馬齒盛 This too is like the horse-tooth amaranth, flourishing so
 氣擁葵荏昏 that its aura crowds and shades out mallow and perilla.
 點染不易虞 It's not easy to protect against contamination,
 20 絲麻雜羅紈 like strands of hemp mixing with gossamer and damask:
 一經器物內 And once these pass through the cookware
 永掛羶刺痕 they always leave marks of their coarseness and thorns.
 志士采紫芝 The man of high aims plucks the purple mushroom,
 24 放歌避戎軒 singing out while avoiding army carts;²¹
 畦丁負籠至 But I, when fieldworkers come shouldering baskets,
 感動百慮端 am stirred by a hundred sources of care.

Du Fu is anxious here to defray the imagined scorn of his readers, telling us twice that the bad vegetables he has received are too insignificant to write a poem about. These vegetables, he assures us, are not in fact the focus of the verse: instead, they serve merely as a means of discussing the larger political and cultural situation of the age. And for the most part, Du Fu's traditional commentators throughout the centuries have believed him on this point. Yang Lun 楊倫 (1747–1803), for example, writes that even though “the poem starts out with being angry at the garden officer for being greedy with his food, when it enters into a larger indignation, it gets the meaning of the poets of the *Shi jing* when they criticized abuses in the state” 本是憤園官侵剋食料，卻入此大感慨，得詩人諷誡之旨。²²

The poem's final couplet can, however, also be read to suggest that less exalted concerns may number among Du Fu's “hundred sources of care.” Something of the multiplicity implied by this phrase has, in fact, already been enacted by the poem, which jumps between claiming that the vegetable shipment is bad because the garden

19. This line may perhaps recall two famous early love poems containing the line “Green, green are the plants on the riverbank” 青青河畔草. See Lu Qinli, *Xian Qin Han Wei*, 192 and 329.

20. This passage alludes to a saying from the *Laozi* 老子: “Where an army camps, there will thorns and brambles grow. After a great war, there will always be years of poor harvest” 師之所處，荊棘生焉，大軍之後，必有凶年. *Laozi yizhu*, 72.

21. This couplet refers to the “Four Hoaryheads” 四皓, who famously retired to Mt. Lantian during the misgovernance of the Qin dynasty. Huangfu Mi's 皇甫謐 (215–282) *Gaoshizhuan* 高士傳 records a song attributed to these famous recluses, in which they speak about their hunger being satisfied by purple mushrooms. See *Taiping yulan*, 507.2442.

22. Yang Lun, *Du shi jingquan*, 16.761. Similarly, Wang Sishi 王嗣奭 (1566–1648) sees the poem as a criticism of the way that military officials are now lordling it over civil officers. See his *Du yi*, 7.246.

officer “cheats on the count” (line 3), to intuiting that the bad vegetables are the tangible results of bad governance (lines 11–14), to seeing them as metaphorical figures for a corrupt political culture (lines 15–18)—a sort of overdetermination that may reveal a poet who “doth protest too much” the canonical sanction of writing about bad vegetables. It seems telling, furthermore, that the poem’s mouthwatering imagination of the greenness of these better vegetables recalls a paradigmatic line of early five-syllable verse about springtime lust in separation. If the “Great Preface” offers one canonical source for understanding what the poem is about, that is, the echo of this famous line may present another, one more accepting of personal and even sensual interests.

Beyond these hints that Du Fu may not have succeeded at weeding out any concern about the vegetables themselves, moreover, the final couplets explicitly represent a self-conscious reinterpretation of the poem through another sort of poetic precedent: that of the legendary Four Hoaryheads, recluses who sang their “Song of Purple Mushrooms” as they left behind the misgoverned Qin Empire. The poetry of such lofty individuals, Du Fu reflects, contrasts distinctly with his own poem: where they sang happily of lightly picking numinous mushrooms that grew without human labor beyond the imperial world, he is complaining about coarse vegetables that bear down heavily on the backs of the muck-working peasants who are forced to deliver it to him. These vegetable-laden peasants, moreover, recall the language of the poem’s first couplet, the word used for their “shouldering” (*fu* 負) being a synonym for “bearing” (*he* 荷), which Du Fu had used to elegantly express his gratitude for his patron Bai Maolin’s generosity in providing him with food. The implication of this echo seems to be that, unlike the Four Hoaryheads, Du Fu is in fact “weighed down” by his concern with these vegetables, much as the peasants are physically encumbered in delivering them to him. This self-conscious twist may suggest, then, that Du Fu has failed to transcend the petty concerns that he repeatedly tries to disclaim by reference to canonical texts. It may, moreover, revalue his hopes of maintaining connection with imperial values, since he is a beneficiary of precisely the imperial system here, and at the expense of others less fortunate.

Despite its appearance of cantankerous roughness, then, this poem represents a careful condensation of many of the themes that animate Du Fu’s verse on humble topics during his Kuizhou years. Seen retrospectively from the poem’s conclusion, in fact, this cantankerous roughness would seem itself part of the point, dramatizing the poet as the type of old crank who would write pretentious allegorizing poetry to complain about free food. The poem thus turns back on itself and on its pretensions to import high-cultural significance into domestic affairs, a technique we can see replicated in another vegetable allegory Du Fu wrote in Kuizhou, this time in a register that is less seriously self-critical than humorously pathetic.

種蒿苣并序 Planting Lettuce²³

既雨已秋，堂下理小畦，隔種一兩席許蒔苣，向二旬矣，而苣不甲坼，伊人莧青青。傷時君子或晚得微祿，轆軻不進，因作此詩。

It is autumn now that the rains have come, and I have made a small plot by the main hall. There I planted a few beds of lettuce in separate plots.²⁴ It has been almost twenty days,

23. Owen, *The Poetry of Du Fu*, vol. 4, 218–21; Xiao Difei, *Du Fu quanji*, vol. 7, 13.3686–94.

24. The *Song ben* text (reproduced here) reads “withered lettuce,” which makes no sense. This translation follows Zhao Cigong’s emendation of 蒿/萎. See Zhao Cigong, *Du shi*, 1006.

yet the lettuce has not germinated, and other people's amaranth is growing green.²⁵ I lament the times, that a gentleman may late in life get a small salary, but the going is rough and he does not advance. Therefore I made this poem.

- 陰陽一錯亂 Yin and Yang were topsy-turvy,
 驕蹇不復理 domineering, recalcitrant, no longer in good order.
 枯旱於其中 Dryness and drought were in their midst,
 4 炎方慘如燬 and the hot regions were dismal, as if ablaze.²⁶
 植物半蹉跎 Half of all plants had missed their time,
 嘉生將已矣 and the possibility of a good harvest was almost gone.
 雲雷歟奔命 Clouds and thunder suddenly sped to command
 8 師伯集所使 as Rainmaster and Windbaron gathered their minions.
 指麾赤白日 They directed the reddish-white sun,
 瀕洞青光起 and in swirling masses blue light appeared.²⁷
 雨聲先已風 The rain sounds were preceded by wind,
 12 散足盡西靡 and the scattering drops all slanted west.
 山泉落滄江 Mountain streams fell into the gray river,
 霹靂猶在耳 and peals of thunder were still in my ears.
 終朝紆颯沓 All day long it whirled swirling,
 16 信宿罷灑酒 then after two nights it ceased its briskness.
 堂下可以畦 Beside the hall was a possible garden plot,
 呼童對經始 I called to my boys to start it out it with me.²⁸
 芑兮蔬之常 O lettuce! Common among vegetables,
 20 隨事藝其子 we went through the process to plant its seeds.
 破塊數席間 We broke up clods in several beds;
 荷鋤功易止 carrying hoes, the achievement was easy to complete.
 兩旬不甲坼 But after twenty days, you did not germinate,
 24 空惜埋泥滓 and I, helpless, pitied how you were buried in mire.
 野莧迷汝來 Wild amaranth comes, confusing itself for you;²⁹
 宗生實於此 teeming growth is truly right here.
 此輩豈無秋 Though this type of plant must also know autumn,
 28 亦蒙寒露委 bearing as well the accumulation of cold dew,
 翻然出地速 In a flash it comes forth from the ground,

25. Both Owen and Xiao follow the early texts that report a variant 獨野莧青青, "only the wild amaranthus is growing green." I have followed the *Song ben* reading not only because it is more prevalent in early texts (including texts wherein 獨野 is not given as a variant), but also because it is clearly the *lectio difficilior*, and because the presence of 野莧 in line 25 provides an obvious explanation for the introduction of the variant. It is, moreover, quite likely that Du Fu's neighbors might have planted amaranth (indeed, he received a variety of amaranth, "horse-tooth amaranth" 馬齒莧, as part of the vegetable shipment he complained about in the previous poem).
26. The language of this line recalls the *Shi jing*, "The Banks of the Ru" 汝墳: "The royal House is like a blazing fire" 王室如燬. *Mao shi zhushu*, 1.44. The "hot regions" or "fiery regions" (*yanfang* 炎方) refers to the South.
27. This passage is reminiscent of several poems in the *Chu ci* 楚辭, particularly the *Lisao*'s 離騷 description of its speaker's journey through heaven. See *Chu ci jijiao*, 411–50.
28. The language of this line recalls the *Shi jing* poem "Spirit Terrace" 靈臺: "We started out the Spirit Terrace" 經始靈臺. *Mao shi zhushu*, 16.579.
29. Owen translates this line differently: "You, wild amaranthus, I don't know where you came from." Although Owen's reading is favored by a number of premodern commentators, in the present context Du Fu is probably thinking of the harm of having virtue "confused" with vice. As Confucius had supposedly said, "I hate that which seems to be something, but is not" 惡似而非者. See *Mengzi zhushu*, 14.263.

- 滋蔓戶庭毀 and lushly spreading, my whole yard is ruined.
 因知邪干正 Thus I understand how evil overwhelms right,
 32 掩抑至沒齒 suppressing it until it perishes.
 賢良雖得祿 Even if the worthy and good get a salary,
 守道不封己 they keep to the Way, and do not enrich themselves.
 擁塞敗芝蘭 Crowding and blocking ruins holy mushroom and orchid;
 36 眾多盛荊杞 thorns and medlars flourish in multitudes.
 中園陷蕭艾 When a garden falls to mugwort and artemisia,
 老圃永為恥 an old gardener will always feel ashamed.³⁰
 登于白玉盤 Offered on plates of white jade,
 40 藉以如霞綺 spread on figured silks like clouds:
 莫也無所施 Yes, amaranth has no place there;
 胡顏入筐篚 how does it dare enter the baskets?

If “The Garden Officer Sends Vegetables” relates its allegorical procedures to the *Shi jing*, this poem looks to that other ancient source of the Chinese poetic tradition, the *Chu ci* 楚辭, and the *Lisao* in particular. In the *Lisao*, the speaker allegorizes his virtues as the aromatic herbs that contemporary religious practice seems to have used to entice deities, writing about his careful cultivation of basil and eupatorium in a world where lesser men stink like rotting weeds. Here Du Fu too is a gardener, working to promote the growth of fine plants against his neighbors’ cultivation of base amaranth. Yet as hard as this poem works to affiliate itself to the *Lisao*—invoking the figures of the gods that its speaker drove before him in his cosmic travels and even going so far as to use the *Lisao*’s characteristic empty syllable, *xi* 兮, in a crucial line—it can, ultimately, only represent a deflation of that august register. Du Fu is not here cultivating fragrant, god-pleasing plants like basil and eupatorium but rather lettuce, “common among vegetables.” The poem’s grandiose apostrophe to the plant, “O lettuce!” 荳兮, is thus immediately undercut by the patent inability of such hardy fare to stand in for the rare and fragile virtues of the “gentleman” that it is being tasked with representing. There is something vaguely ridiculous, we must sense, in transplanting the *Lisao* tradition into this sort of garden.

If lettuce has a hard time standing in for virtue here, Du Fu himself also finds it difficult to occupy the role of the “gentleman” that he has set himself at the outset. A failure to grow lettuce, for example, is far from what we would normally expect from the phrase “the going is rough and he does not advance,” especially given that this comment is prefaced with the notice that the poet had recently been awarded a “small salary” as a nominal official in the Ministry of Works 工部. As if recognizing this incongruity, Du Fu hints near the end of the poem that, in practice, in Kuizhou he is indistinguishable from an “old gardener” (*laopu* 老圃), the sort of common human vegetable that Confucius scorned in a famous passage drawing a distinction between the menial knowledge that characterizes the underclass and the virtues of the moral elite that should run the empire. Though a gentleman-official of his rank might ideally eat off plates of white jade, spread on figured silks like clouds, Du Fu’s tableware in

30. The phrase “old gardener” recalls the *Analec*s, wherein Confucius responds to being asked about gardening, rather than government, “In that, I am not as good as an old gardener” 請學為圃，曰：吾不如老圃。 *Lunyu zhushu*, 13.116.

exile was certainly humbler, and we can imagine there was little obvious incongruity in taking the amaranth grown by his neighbors into his basket.

The poem works, then, to undermine the pretensions it announces, exposing Du Fu's claims of moral superiority by showing that in his straitened circumstances, as a humble farmer planting lettuce, he now matches poorly with the (ultimately aristocratic) pattern of the "gentleman," *junzi* 君子. By the eighth century, of course, the term *junzi* was so thoroughly conventional that its original connection to aristocracy and government—it literally means "son of the lord"—is rarely salient in its use; one wonders here, however, whether Du Fu is not thinking back on the term's etymology. For if the preface labels him a *junzi*, the poem itself describes a series of ineffectual lords, *jun* 君: from the cosmic ruler who allows yin and yang to get confused; to the Tang emperor, who has allowed Du Fu to be confused for an old gardener; and finally to Du Fu himself, who has failed to prevent base amaranth from confusing itself for lettuce in the empire of his garden.³¹ Equally salient here is Confucius's conviction—announced in a passage Du Fu seems to have had in mind when he wrote this and similar Kuizhou-era poems—that, much like a lord, the gentleman is supposed to exert a civilizing influence upon his surroundings:

Confucius wanted to go off to live among the Yi tribes. Someone said, "How will you deal with their baseness?" The Master said, "If a gentleman lives among them, what baseness will remain?"

子欲居九夷。或曰：“陋，如之何？”子曰：“君子居之，何陋之有。”³²

Yet instead of bringing a civilizing influence down to the barbarous southlands, Du Fu has no choice but to eat his neighbors' coarse food.

Like "The Garden Officer Sends Vegetables," this poem is thus carefully constructed to frustrate the poet's ostensible desire to link his domestic affairs with the ideals of the imperial elite, effectively imposing a discontinuity between the two realms of significance that is unmistakably reminiscent of Owen's reading of "Deck by the Water." Humorous though this self-undermining of the poet's pretensions may be, the fracture that this poem introduces between garden and empire does not result in the carving out of a private sphere wherein the state's claims upon the individual might be attenuated. Instead, Du Fu enunciates his alienation from the empire precisely in his attachment to it, his failure as an "old gardener" manifesting both his debilitating dedication to Confucius' project and his inability to pursue it here in Kuizhou. The same double bind, moreover, is apparent in the poem's appeal to the canonical tradition of the *Lisao*, whose purported author, Qu Yuan 屈原, had lived roughly in the region in which Du Fu found himself.³³ On the one hand, this *Lisao* register is invoked to justify the poet's engagement with the humble task of gardening, serving in the poem as representative of Du Fu's continued investment in the Chinese imperial tradition; on the other, its

31. Such "confusion" would have been understood as a paradigmatic failure of government, since according to Confucius, the primary duty of government was to "correct names" 正名 (see *Lunyu zhushu*, 13.115) so that each thing was recognized as itself. And according to the *Yi jing*, it was the duty of a sagely ruler to "correctly observe and manifest the myriad things" 聖人作而萬物覩. For this quote, and a medieval interpretation of its significance, see *Zhouyi zhushu*, 1.15.

32. *Lunyu zhushu*, 9.79.

33. Technically, Qu Yuan was from a region considerably farther east (around modern-day Jingzhou in Hubei). For Du Fu, however, there is little difference between Kuizhou and Hubei, at least culturally: both are on the southern edge of the Chinese world.

adoption here can perhaps equally be read to symbolize the way that Du Fu himself is being colonized by the barbarous southern region in which he finds himself, rather than vice versa. In this way too, therefore, the poem's very language is a paradoxical sign simultaneously of Du Fu's adherence to the empire and also of his estrangement from it.

Poetry for Servants and Children

The paradox that Du Fu's poetry should both enact attachment to and alienation from the empire was, in a certain sense, already built into the institution of eighth-century verse. Poetry was (at least aspirationally) a means of advancement in high society, as it was tested on the *jinshi* exam and often functioned as an accoutrement of elite social life. Yet, however integrated poetry might have been in the lives of the official classes, the most famous poets were not always the highest officials, and successful officials both had less reason and less opportunity to write. From the time of the so-called four outstanding men of the Early Tang (*chu Tang sijie* 初唐四傑) in the late seventh century, the court had largely ceased to be the center of literary activity; instead, poetic talent often provided a way for men of frustrated ambition to claim an authority that had not (yet) been awarded them by the state.³⁴ As David McMullen has shown, Tang history is marked by a progressive estrangement between the court and the centers of elite cultural and literary production,³⁵ a process crucial to the early ninth-century development of private subjectivity and private space, which occurred largely in the works of "countercultural" writers on the margins of official power.³⁶ By that point, claims of adherence to the Chinese tradition could themselves be bold claims of disaffection from the empire as it actually was.

Du Fu, however, was not there yet: as we saw in the last two poems, physical estrangement from the imperial center tends strongly to be conflated in his verse with alienation from high-cultural ideals. Yet the voluminous productivity of his Kuizhou period exerts pressure on the already strained relationship between poetry and the vision of elite community toward which it still aspired, not only because Kuizhou was both culturally and ethnically on the margins of the Chinese imperium³⁷ but also because it is hard to imagine what audience Du Fu might have had in mind for poems complaining about vegetables. In some of this poetry, therefore, Du Fu comes to reflect almost explicitly upon the issue of audience, writing sometimes to people on or beyond the margins of elite sociality, such as his children and his domestic servants. In these poems, Du Fu generally takes on the posture of the imperial insider, bringing elite Chinese civilization down to the barbarous southlands, including within its ambit his (almost certainly illiterate, and in some cases non-Han) servants and slaves³⁸ and

34. See Owen, "The Cultural Tang," 300.

35. See McMullen, *State and Scholars*.

36. The idea that now-canonical ninth-century writers like Han Yu 韓愈 (768–824) were part of a "counterculture" can be found in Owen, "The Cultural Tang," 330.

37. For a discussion of Du Fu's poems on Kuizhou's culture, see Patterson, "Elegies for Empire," 74–126.

38. Du Fu's domestic arrangements are difficult to discern with any certainty. He certainly had at least one Liao 獠 (Rau) slave, whom the poet identifies as such in "To Be Shown to My Liao Slave Aduan" 示獠奴阿段 (Owen, *The Poetry of Du Fu*, vol. 4, 128–29; Xiao Difei, *Du Fu quanji*, vol. 6, 12.3546–50). Another slave girl he calls Aji 阿稽 was probably also Rau, given medieval notices on the naming conventions among these southern peoples (see *Wei shu*, 101.2248). The other servants that Du Fu mentions are of less certain

passing its lessons and values on to his sons, Zongwen 宗文 and Zongwu 宗武. And as was the case in “The Garden Officer Sends Vegetables” and “Planting Lettuce,” this attempt to maintain a connection between his domestic affairs in faraway Kuizhou and the values of the imperial center stretches those values past the breaking point.

課伐木 Assessing the Cutting of Trees³⁹

課隸人伯夷、幸秀、信行等入谷斬陰木，人日四根止，維條伊枚，正直挺然。晨征暮返，委積庭內。我有藩籬，是缺是補，載伐篠簞，伊仗支持，則旅次于小安。山有虎，知禁，若恃爪牙之利，必昏黑撐突。夔人屋壁，列樹白菊，鋤為牆，實以竹，示式遏。為與虎近，混淪乎無良，賓客憂害馬之徒，苟活為幸，可嘿息已。作詩付宗武誦。

I exhorted my servants Boyi, Xingxiu, Xinxing, and others to go into the valley and chop trees on the northern slope,⁴⁰ with each of them to cut just four each day, only those with branches and trunks⁴¹ that were straight and standing upright. They went off in the morning and returned at twilight, leaving a pile in the courtyard. I have a fence, and where there are openings there they shall mend. I had them cut bamboo, large and small,⁴² using them for supports, and my lodging became a bit more secure. There are tigers in the mountains, but they recognize prohibitions. If they are to depend on the sharpness of their claws and teeth, they must always attack in the murky dark. By the walls of their houses, therefore, the people of Kuizhou plant rows of white chrysanthemums;⁴³ they make their walls of plaster, and reinforce them with bamboo: by this they demonstrate “fending off.”⁴⁴ Because of being close to tigers, and mixed up with evil sorts, this sojourner worries about the kind that harms horses,⁴⁵ and merely to manage to survive is lucky: one can quietly sigh about this. I wrote this poem and gave it to Zongwu to read out.

ethnicity and less certain legal status. The Tang legal categories under which “debased” 賤 laborers were attached to the government or to private individuals are quite complicated, and since we have almost no information on Du Fu’s relationship to most of the servants he mentions, there is little reason to go into detail here. Instead of speculating on the ethnicity or legal status of slaves other than those Du Fu identifies outright, therefore, I use the terms “servants” and “slaves” in this paper without any claim to precision. The legal boundaries between different gradations of servitude seem to have been quite porous; what was not porous was the distinction between “debased” and “fine” 良 status. For the Tang system of slavery and servitude, see Li Jiping, *Tangdai nubi*. For the development of the legal categories that defined slaves and servants in the period leading up to the Tang, see Hori Toshikazu’s *Chūgoku kodai*. Chu Gansheng’s *Nubi shi* contains a number of interesting anecdotes from diverse periods. In English, the institution of non-Han slavery in the Tang is discussed briefly in Schafer, *The Golden Peaches*, 40–47; and in Abramson, *Ethnic Identity*, 133–38.

39. Owen, *The Poetry of Du Fu*, vol. 5, 120–25; Xiao Difei, *Du Fu quanji*, vol. 8, 4556ff.

40. According to the *Zhou li* 周禮, one was supposed to cut trees from the north side of mountains in the summer and from the south side in the winter. *Zhouli zhushu*, 16.248.

41. The language here echoes the *Shi jing* poem “Banks of the Ru” 汝墳: “Along the banks of the Ru / I cut down the branches and the slender trunks” 遵彼汝墳，伐其條枚。 *Mao shi zhushu*, 1.43. The *Song ben* text reads 校/枚 here, but this is clearly a copying error.

42. These two varieties of bamboo, *xiao* 篠 and *dang* 簞, are mentioned together in the “Tribute of Yu” chapter of the *Shangshu* 尚書. *Shangshu zhushu*, 6.82.

43. These white chrysanthemums, *baiju* 白菊, have occasioned a great deal of scholarly consternation, since it seems unlikely that the plant could be plastered up to make a wall; a number of variant characters have thus been suggested. The invocation of the Double Ninth Festival at the end of the poem, however, may perhaps suggest that chrysanthemums are indeed intended here. They may not, then, be plastered into the wall but may be planted in front of it.

44. “Fending off” derives from the *Shi jing*, “The People Are Heavily Burdened” 民勞, which also contains the phrase “evil sorts” from the next sentence: “Let us not indulge the wily and obsequious, / in order to restrain evil sorts. / And fend off robbers and bandits, / who act secretly and fear the light” 無縱詭隨，以謹無良，式遏寇虐，慴不畏明。 *Mao shi zhushu* 17.630–31.

45. The “kind that harms horses” derives from a *Zhuangzi* parable wherein a herdboy tells the Yellow Emperor that governing the world is just like taking care of horses: “Just get rid of those things that harm horses” 亦去其害馬者而已矣。 *Zhuangzi jishi*, 8.833.

- 長夏無所為 Through the long summer there is nothing to do,
 客居課奴僕 lodging here, I set a task for my bondservants.
 清晨飯其腹 In the cool morning I fed their bellies;
 4 持斧入白谷 then they took axes into White Valley.
 青冥曾巔後 After passing layered ridges into the dark blue sky,
 十里斬陰木 for ten leagues they chopped north-slope trees.
 人肩四根已 Each person shouldered four and then stopped,
 8 亭午下山麓 and at noon they started down to the mountain's foot.
 尚聞丁丁聲 Even now I still hear sounds of chopping,⁴⁶
 功課日各足 though each has fulfilled the task assigned him for the day.
 蒼皮成積委 The dark gray bark became a pile;
 12 素節相照燭 their blemishless integrity shone on each other.
 藉汝跨小籬 I rely on you to go beyond my little fence;
 當仗苦虛竹 as for support, I must trouble hollow bamboo.⁴⁷
 空荒咆熊羆 Bears roar in the deserted wilderness,
 16 乳獸待人肉 and nursing beasts wait for human flesh.
 不示知禁情 If you do not show them the prohibitions they recognize,
 豈唯干戈哭 you will weep not only because of the war.
 城中賢府主 In the city the worthy governor
 20 處貴如白屋 dwells in his high rank as if in a commoner's house.
 蕭蕭理體淨 He is strict, pure in the essentials of government,
 蜂蠆不敢毒 so that wasps and scorpions dare not sting.
 虎穴連里閭 But tiger lairs stretch right up to the villages,
 24 隄防舊風俗 and defending against them is an old custom here.
 泊舟滄江岸 And in mooring my boat by the gray river's bank,
 久客慎所觸 long a traveler, I am cautious about what I might encounter.
 舍西崖嶠壯 West of my cottage the slope is high and steep,
 28 雷雨蔚含蓄 thunder and rain have made dense cover there.
 牆宇資屢脩 Walls and roof need frequent repairs,
 衰年怯幽獨 and in my waning years I fear being alone.
 爾曹輕執熱 You all thought little of the persistent heat⁴⁸
 32 為我忍煩促 and on my behalf, endured vexation.
 秋光近青岑 Autumn light is approaching the green peaks:
 季月當泛菊 in fall's last month one should float chrysanthemums.⁴⁹
 報之以微寒 I will repay you then in the light chill
 36 共給酒一斛 by providing you all with a gallon of ale.

This is a difficult text, particularly the preface, with its affectation of an archaic imperial rhetoric modeled on the ancient *Classic of Documents*. This difficulty is worth keeping in mind when we consider the audiences Du Fu mentions here: his presumably illiterate servants and his young, likely undereducated son Zongwu, who is commissioned to

46. The phrase translated here as “chopping” comes from the *Shi jing* poem, “Felling Trees” 伐木: “We cut trees *dīng-dīng*; / the birds cry out *yīng-yīng*” 伐木丁丁，鳥鳴嚶嚶。 *Mao shi zhushu*, 9.327.

47. Lines 9–14 are obscure and have occasioned numerous different interpretations.

48. “Persistent heat,” *zhire* 執熱, is a phrase from the *Shi jing* poem, “Young Mulberry” 桑柔, but Du Fu frequently uses it in a sense different from its canonical interpretation in the *Mao-Zheng* edition of the Odes.

49. That is, on the Double Ninth Festival, the ninth day of the ninth month, when families and friends would climb to a high place, wear ailanthus, and float chrysanthemum petals in their ale.

read the poem out to these domestics in much the way that officials in the provinces declaimed imperial edicts to the local population.⁵⁰ The implication here is unmistakable: Du Fu is claiming for himself a kind of imperial centrality, as he orders the wilderness, assesses the contributions of his ministers, and disseminates Chinese civilization out to the barbarous southlands.⁵¹ Yet this proffered vision of the poet-as-colonizer fails to account for the actual activity described in the poem, less the expansion of Chinese civilization than the poet himself following the local customs of Kuizhou. Equally importantly, the language's over-the-top archaism threatens to become unintelligible to those for whom was ostensibly written, rendering Du Fu's enactment of imperial prerogative a strange, mute farce. We can perhaps imagine how comical the scene must have been if Zongwu actually lined up the Du family domestics and struggled to read this document aloud to them.

Intelligibility is a problem as well with the other attempt the poem makes to connect its unpropitious matter back to elite culture: the poet's offer at the end of the poem to provide his hard-toiling slaves with a gallon of ale several months later. For Du Fu, the offer has a definite symbolic meaning, inviting his servants into the elite Chinese community that customarily congregated to drink chrysanthemum ale in celebration of the Double Ninth Festival. In effect, Du Fu is inviting them to become the equivalent for him of his long-separated family and friends, with whom he would normally expect to share a drink on that date. We can, however, doubt that these servants would have understood or particularly appreciated the gesture, especially since they probably did not know the poetic cliché that it enacts—one of the few clichés through which slaves could figure at all in Tang poetry—that, as Wang Wei 王維 (ca. 699–ca. 761) puts it, “In a distant land, friends and companions cut off, / the lonely traveler grows close with his servants” 他鄉絕儔侶，孤客親僮僕.⁵² To them, the promise of a gallon of ale several months after the day they just spent toiling in the hot summer sun might have appeared rather meager.

Du Fu seems well aware of these problems, since the poem largely revolves around questions concerning the limitations of Chinese symbolic power. The archaizing preface, for example, is a winking attempt to cover up the poet's adaptation to the mores of an area he considers a cultural backwater, and his promise of fellowship and chrysanthemum ale attempts to mask the problems inherent in his position as an impoverished aristocrat and a merely nominal imperial officer, whose control over his slaves and servants was probably less easily assumed in Kuizhou than it had been in his youth. Du Fu's continued ability to keep and command slaves depended upon his connection to the empire, and thus most tangibly upon his patron in Kuizhou, Bai Maolin, whom the poem (perhaps with this problem in mind) praises here as being so virtuous that, within the area under his jurisdiction, even “wasps and scorpions dare not sting.” Yet despite Bai's virtues, Du Fu seems less than fully certain of his safety, “sighing secretly”

50. Zongwu was probably around thirteen or fourteen at this time. Most of his life had been spent fleeing the calamities of the age; at most, he had had only about a year or so of relative stability around the age of five, when Du Fu was an official in the capital region, and then about five years of intermittent poverty and flight in Sichuan, when he might have devoted himself to the learning required of literati.

51. Du Fu also places himself in roughly the position of the emperor, vis-à-vis his “ministers,” in “Xinxing Goes Far to Repair the Water-Tube” 信行遠修水管. Owen, *The Poetry of Du Fu*, vol. 4, 170–73; Xiao Difei, *Du Fu quanji*, vol. 7, 13.3664–69.

52. Wang Wei, “Staying Over in Zhengzhou” 宿鄭州. *Quan Tang shi*, 125.1250. The general sentiment appears in several places in Tang verse.

about his fear that he lives among “evil sorts” — “the kind that harms horses,” a phrase that can refer to tigers only through an ironic deflation of this traditional metaphor — and reinforcing his walls to protect against violent incursions. In this context, Du Fu’s description of Bai as “living in high position as if it were a commoner’s house” threatens to become ambiguous. The phrase’s primary meaning is certainly its suggestion of Bai’s humility and graciousness in his treatment of the poet. But given that Du Fu is working on reinforcing his own “commoner’s house” here, it might perhaps suggest in an underhanded way that Bai too could become food for tigers — or fodder for the kind of local or ethnic uprising Du Fu had witnessed several times since the rebellion — whatever Chinese cultural virtues he might possess.

Tonally, then, this is one of Du Fu’s most complex poems, alternately self-aggrandizing, self-mocking, self-pitying, generous, obtuse, confident in the beneficence of imperial patronage, and darkly foreboding about the possibility of revolt. Here we are far from the walled-off garden of the mid-Tang and from the comfortable or even transgressive humor of the private sphere — Du Fu is too aware of his dependence upon the empire, even in his physical distance from its center and his increasing recognition that imperial values may have little purchase on his Kuizhou existence. The poem’s absurd imperial rhetoric, therefore, is not only a joke about the disconnect between the values Du Fu studied as a young man and the life he has come to live; it is also a recognition that his sons depend for their very safety upon the cultural learning their father has almost certainly had a hard time passing on to them throughout their lifetime of flight, poverty, and domestic labor.

催宗文樹雞柵 Urging Zongwen to Make Haste Setting Up a Chicken Coop⁵³

- | | |
|----------|--|
| 吾衰怯行邁 | In my decline I fear long journeys, |
| 旅次展崩迫 | so stopping a while, I relax from my rushing on. |
| 愈風傳烏雞 | They say Silkie chickens are good for rheums, |
| 4 秋卵方漫喫 | but only in autumn can you indulge in eating their eggs. ⁵⁴ |
| 自春生成者 | Those that have been born since the spring, therefore, |
| 隨母向百翻 | are about a hundred wings following their mothers. |
| 驅趨制不禁 | We drove them off but couldn’t keep them away, |
| 8 喧呼山腰宅 | and it was all racket at my mountainside house. |
| 課奴殺青竹 | I thus gave my slave the task of drying green bamboo: |
| 終日憎赤幘 | all day long we’ve hated their red turbans; ⁵⁵ |
| 踏藉盤桡翻 | Stomping about, the plates and table overturned, |
| 12 塞蹊使之隔 | we’ll block their path and keep them away. |
| 牆東有隙地 | East of the wall there is fallow land: |
| 可以樹高柵 | there can we set up tall coops. |
| 避熱時來歸 | At the moment, I’ve come home to escape the heat, |
| 16 問兒所為跡 | and ask my son how the work is going. |

53. Owen, *The Poetry of Du Fu*, vol. 4, 172–77. Xiao Difei, *Du Fu quanji*, vol. 7, 13.3670–77.

54. This translation follows Zhao Cigong’s note, to the effect that you should not eat the spring eggs because they will grow into chickens, the meat of which is good for one’s health; you can eat the autumn eggs, though, because the chicks will not survive the winter. See Zhao Cigong, *Du shi*, 948.

55. The phrase “red turbans” derives from a Six Dynasties story, wherein a young scholar dreamed of seeing a man in a red turban, who turned out to be the human-like form of the rooster next door. See Gan Bao, *Sou shen ji*, 8.229–30.

- 織籠曹其內 Have a cage woven and put the flock inside,
 令入不得擲 making them get in so they can't get away;
 稀間可突過 If they can get through the openings,
 20 背爪還污席 they'll be back to soiling our mats with beaks and talons.
 我寬螻蟻遭 We'll thus be spared disaster to ants and mole-cricketts,
 彼免狐貉厄 while they avoid calamity from foxes and raccoon dogs.
 應宜各長幼 It would be right, moreover, if each, young and old,
 24 自此均勦敵 from now on were equal in meeting opponents.⁵⁶
 籠欄念有脩 For the coop, think on its construction;
 近身見損益 close at hand are examples of addition and subtraction.⁵⁷
 明明領處分 Clearly take the lead in giving orders,
 28 一一當剖析 and every aspect you should analyze.
 不昧風雨晨 We will henceforth not be in the dark on stormy mornings,⁵⁸
 亂離減憂感 which should reduce our worries in this world in turmoil;
 其流則凡鳥 And though their sort are but ordinary birds,
 32 其氣心匪石 as for their temper, their minds are not stones.⁵⁹
 倚賴窮歲晏 Relying on them we can get through the end of the year;
 撥煩去冰釋 dispelling bothers, which will disappear like ice melting.⁶⁰
 未似尸鄉翁 Yet I'm not yet quite like the old man of Shixiang,
 36 拘留蓋阡陌 keeping them detained in the fields here.⁶¹

Like "Assessing the Cutting of Trees," this poem is quite obscure in parts, to the point that the seventeenth-century commentator Huang Sheng 黃生 calls it "the strangest poem in all of Du Fu."⁶² The basic structure of the verse, however, is clarified by its similarity to the poems we have examined to this point. Again, Du Fu is creating a miniature empire down in his Kuizhou hermitage, trying to remediate the chaos and civil war that are plaguing his backyard. In his directions to Zongwen, who is to "take charge of" his

56. That is, the young should be put in a separate coop so they will not be picked on by the adults.

57. Commentators hear in this line an echo of the *Analec*s: "The Shang dynasty used Xia ritual, and what they added and subtracted can be known; the Zhou used Shang ritual, and what they added or subtracted can be known; thus whatever dynasty follows the Zhou, even if it is one hundred generations away, can be known in advance" 殷因於夏禮，所損益，可知也；周因於殷禮，所損益，可知也；其或繼周者，雖百世可知也。 *Lunyu zhushu*, 2.19. The humorous point would be that Zongwen can look at neighbors' coops to design his own "chicken empire."

58. This line alludes to the *Shi jing* poem "Wind and Rain" 風雨: "Although the wind and rain be dark, / the roosters do therefore not stop crowing for dawn" 風雨如晦，雞鳴不已。 *Mao shi zhushu*, 4.179.

59. This line alludes again to the *Shi jing*, this time to "Cypress Boat" 柏舟: "My heart is not a stone, / it cannot be rolled away" 我心匪石，不可轉也。 *Mao shi zhushu*, 2.74. The phrase "ordinary birds," *fan niao* 凡鳥, can also be understood as a visual pun on its opposite: *feng* 鳳, "phoenix," the least ordinary of birds.

60. This line is obscure; var. 及/去, attested in the *Song ben* and chosen by Owen, makes for easier sense. It is also possible that Du Fu is saying, in a highly compressed way, that his "long journeys" of line 1 will continue when the ice melts next year: "dispelling bothers until we leave when the ice melts."

61. The "old man of Shixiang" was an immortal mentioned in the *Liexian zhuan* 列仙傳 who had several thousand chickens. He let them all roost at night in the trees and let them wander freely in the daytime. But since he had given each one a name, they would come when he called. Liu Xiang, *Liexian zhuan*, 1.30.

62. See Xiao Difei, *Du Fu quanji*, vol. 7, 13.3675. Note, however, that the version of this poem printed in the *Huang Sheng quanji* edition of Huang's "Du shi shuo" 杜詩說 lacks this comment. Huang Sheng, *Huang Sheng quanji*, 82–83. Other traditional commentators were divided on the merits of the poem. Wang Sishi, who was often critical of Du Fu's poetry on domestic topics, thought that "one who is concerned with accomplishing great things should not be so petty" 蓋成大事者不宜小察。 Wang Sishi, *Du yi*, 7.249. Lu Yuanchang 盧元昌 (b. 1616), by contrast, says that the poem "manifests Du Fu's utmost benevolence and complete righteousness" 篇中亦見仁至義盡。 Lu Yuanchang, *Du shi chan* 22.13.

minor officials—the family’s servants and slaves—Du Fu envisions turning the destructive bug-eating predators of “Ballad of the Bound Chicken” (“Fu ji xing” 縛雞行) into virtuous subjects, possessed of the constancy and diligence predicated of gentlemen in the *Shi jing*.⁶³ Du Fu is thus preparing his son to take over from him the inheritance of Chinese culture and its civilizing responsibility, which he can perhaps be seen as inculcating in the boy by means of the poem’s elaborate classical allusions.

By now, however, we recognize easily how absurd these allusions are, applied to chickens, the reference to the *Shi jing* poem “Wind and Rain” (“Fengyu” 風雨) in line 29, for example, performing a characteristically droll deflation of high-cultural language by taking literally its use of chickens as a metaphor for higher virtues. Du Fu’s attempts to link coop construction with empire building seem, in fact, a bit too comic to take them as anything much more than a learned joke—that is, up until the final couplet, which performs the sort of reorienting twist we observed above in “The Garden Officer Sends Vegetables.” In this final couplet, Du Fu’s self-deprecating comparison of his care of chickens to that of the “old man of Shixiang”—who let his birds roam freely, confident they would come when called—is interesting enough in itself, insofar as it suggests that the construction of a “chicken empire,” with its cages and enforced hierarchies, is perhaps less optimal than the attainment of a state wherein such structures would be unnecessary. More distressing to Zongwen, however, would have been the other way in which his father does not match up to the old man of Shixiang: unlike the latter, Du Fu is mortal. This twist is prepared in the first four lines of the poem, which discuss both the rootlessness of his lodging here in Kuizhou and also his chronic illnesses, both of which bear particularly threatening implications for Zongwen, who probably could not expect continued patronage from imperial representatives once his father passed away. If Du Fu’s situation in Kuizhou was precarious, as we observed in “Assessing the Cutting of Trees,” that of his family was even more so, since little other than their patriarch’s ability to produce elegant poetry for Bai Maolin’s social occasions stood between them and destitution in an area of the empire where they had no property and few relatives. The poem’s injunction that Zongwen think of his domestic chores in terms of high-cultural precedents is thus simultaneously absurd and potentially quite serious. These domestic tasks are necessary to preserve the family’s lives now; the high-cultural precedents will be necessary later, when Du Fu is gone.

Lacking any tangible property to pass on to his children, Du Fu’s only significant patrimony is the cultural capital encoded in his verse. And yet, he is intensely aware that his precarious and impoverished situation makes his attempts to pass on this cultural capital problematic. Elite Chinese fathers did not normally write poetry to their children about the right way to build chicken coops; as is the case with cultural capital the world over, they generally could assume that the milieus in which they lived and operated did much of the training for them.⁶⁴ Du Fu, however, has only a limited opportunity in Kuizhou to demonstrate high-cultural values through his own activity, and his children

63. Owen, *The Poetry of Du Fu*, vol. 5, 28–31; Xiao Difei, *Du Fu quanji*, vol. 8, 15.4350.

64. On this topic, see Du Fu’s early poem, “Climbing the Wall-Tower at Yanzhou” 登兗州城樓, wherein Du Fu speaks of visiting his father at his official post in Yanzhou as “days of rushing through the yard.” Owen, *The Poetry of Du Fu*, vol. 1, 4–5. Xiao Difei, *Du Fu quanji*, vol. 1, 1.8–9. The line alludes to a story of Confucius’s relationship with his son, recorded in the *Lunyu*, with the moral that “the gentleman keeps his sons at a distance” 又聞君子之遠其子也. *Lunyu zhushu*, 16.150. Lacking an official post in Kuizhou, this was a cultural ideal to which he could hardly aspire in his own parenting.

probably have fewer resources, and more menial domestic responsibilities, than he did when he was a child. The decision to write to his children about these domestic matters is thus both a solution to the problem of the family's displacement from high-cultural society and inevitably a subversion of that solution.

Conclusion

Du Fu's sons were not the only heirs of his problematic legacy. Both the mid-Tang writers of private subjectivity and the millennium of commentators who have seen Du Fu as holding together worlds that in other poetry had come apart take something from his juxtapositions of high-cultural ideals to domestic affairs: the former picking up on his recognition of the incongruities between these two realms, the latter on his understanding of the depth to which empire reached down into realms of experience its rhetoric usually ignored. Yet the full complexity of his self-consciousness in these poems has not, I think, been generally recognized by either his poetic or critical heirs. In this respect, Du Fu's evident concern for his legacy in "Urging Zongwen" and other poems addressed to his sons seems to have been prescient. His engagement with the cultural tradition was both too hollowed out and too rich to be simply passed on.

In these poems, and in several other verses on domestic affairs that he wrote in Kuizhou, Du Fu's relationship to the empire has become inescapably ironic. As soon as he seeks to assert his continued connection with high-cultural values, he recognizes the absurdity of his overreach; and as soon as he recognizes the absurdity of his overreach, he acknowledges the subtler and often darker ways in which he remains dependent upon imperial hierarchies. A garden or a chicken coop can be only an ironic empire, but the ironies of laughing about the absurdity of these attempts to ennoble humble household economy rebound upon the insecurity of Du Fu's position in Kuizhou, leaving these poems endlessly shifting between tragedy and comedy. Du Fu can neither locate himself securely within the public world nor escape into a securely private sphere. And so he remains, for now, in an in-between space that mirrors the liminality of his position on the margins of the empire, both a slaveholder and an exile, on a journey ostensibly homeward that he in fact continually delayed.

Within Du Fu's corpus, these poems fit into a narrative of the poet's evolving thoughts about the empire over the course of his life. This narrative ends in 770, with his death from fever in Hunan, but it does not arrive at a final resolution of the complexities we have tracked here. If there is an inheritance we can value in these poems, then, beyond the enjoyment of their exquisite weirdness, it is most likely not to be found either in a final adherence to or rejection of the medieval Chinese empire's claims upon the individual. Instead, it will be found in Du Fu's ability to recognize, where his contemporaries generally did not, the gaps, absurdities, and injustices in ideologies to which he credited the relative peace and prosperity of his youth, upon which he remained dependent in his old age, and which were built into the elite, hegemonic art he had dedicated his life to practicing.