

CHRONOLOGY

An abbreviated chronology showing Du Fu's movements, where he was and when. Based partly upon the *nianpu* 年譜 (chronological biography) in *Du Fu quanji jiaozhu* 杜甫全集校注 edited by Xiao Difei 蕭滌非 and others (Renmin wenxue chubanshe, 2013; vol. 12, 6511–77). Modern equivalents of Tang Dynasty place names are provided in parentheses.

Year	Events
712	- Probably born near Luoyang 洛陽 (Gongxian, Henan). - Spends childhood and youth in the Luoyang area, possibly also in the Chang'an 長安 area.
730	Travels to Jin 晉 (Linyi County), reaches Huanxia 郇瑕 (Shanxi).
731	Begins southeast travels in Wu 吳 (Jiangsu) and Yue 越 (Zhejiang).
735	Returns to Luoyang (or Chang'an) for civil service exams.
736	Fails exam, begins northeast travels in Qi 齊 (Shandong) and Zhao 趙 (Hebei).
741	Returns from Qi and Zhao, travels to Luoyang, establishes a residence.
744	Meets Li Bai 李白 in Luoyang (or possibly Chenliu 陳留 [Kaifeng]). They travel in the Liang-Song 梁宋 area (Kaifeng, Shangqiu, Henan) with Gao Shi 高適.
745	Goes with Li Bai to Lu 魯 (Yanzhou, Shandong) and parts by the end of year, returns to Luoyang.
746	Goes to Chang'an, struggles for office and career for the next decade.

747	■ In Chang'an, fails special exam controlled by Li Linfu 李林甫 (all candidates failed).
751	■ Presents writings (<i>fu</i> 賦) to the emperor.
754	■ In Chang'an, moves family to Fengxian 奉先 (Pucheng, Shaanxi) due to famine in autumn.
755	■ In Chang'an, appointed Sheriff of Hexi (<i>Hexi wei</i> 河西尉), refuses, accepts Adjutant in the Office of the Right Commander of the Heir Apparent's Palace Guard (<i>youwei shuaifu bingcao canjun</i> 右衛率府兵曹參軍) in winter. Visits family in Fengxian later. ■ An Lushan rebellion breaks out.
756	■ Possibly returns to Chang'an in early 756. When Fengxian is threatened (fifth month), moves family to Baishuixian 白水縣 and then further north to Qiangcun 羌村, Fuzhou 鄜州 (Shaanxi). ■ Goes to join Emperor Suzong 肅宗 in Lingwu 靈武 (Ningxia) (eighth month), is captured, brought to Chang'an.
757	■ Captive in Chang'an, escapes (fourth month), joins court in Fengxiang 鳳翔 (Shaanxi). ■ Appointed Reminder of the Left (<i>zuo shiyi</i> 左拾遺; fifth month), defends Minister Fang Guan 房琯, is investigated but avoids punishment. ■ Visits family in Fuzhou (late autumn). ■ Returns to Fengxiang, accompanies Emperor Suzong to Chang'an (early winter).
758	■ In Chang'an, serving in office. Fang Guan demoted and exiled (sixth month); Du Fu demoted to Huazhou 華州 (Shaanxi). ■ Goes to Luoyang on business (end of winter).
759	■ Returns to Huazhou (spring). ■ Gives up position (seventh month), heads to Qinzhou 秦州 (Tianshui, Gansu). ■ Heads south to Tonggu 同谷 (Chengxian, Gansu; tenth month). ■ Heads for Chengdu, arrives (end of year).
760	■ Builds the <i>caotang</i> 草堂 (thatched hut) in western suburbs of Chengdu (spring).
761	■ In Chengdu.
762	■ Local rebellion (seventh month), heads east to Zizhou 梓州 (Santai, Sichuan).
763	■ In Zizhou and eastern Sichuan. Plans to head east or south.

764	▪ Offered a position in Chang'an, but returns to Chengdu. Joins Yan Wu 嚴武. ▪ Joins Yan Wu's staff (sixth month).
765	▪ Gives up position with Yan Wu, retires to <i>caotang</i> (first month). ▪ Yan Wu passes away (fourth month). ▪ Leaves Chengdu, travels down the Min River 岷江 and Yangzi River 揚子江 (fifth month), various stops along the way. ▪ Reaches Yun'an 雲安 (Yunyang, Sichuan, ninth month), becomes ill, stays until spring 766.
766	▪ In Yun'an (spring), reaches Kuizhou 夔州 (Fengjie, Sichuan, end of spring). Resides in Kuizhou for two years.
767	▪ In Kuizhou.
768	▪ Leaves Kuizhou, goes east down the Yangzi (first month). ▪ Reaches Jiangling 江陵 (Jingzhou, Hubei; third month). ▪ Goes to Gong'an 公安 (Hubei; autumn). ▪ Reaches Yuezhou 岳州 (Yueyang, Hunan; winter).
769	▪ Heads south, crosses Lake Dongting 洞庭湖, reaches Tanzhou 潭州 (Changsha, Hunan; second month). Continues to Hengzhou 衡州 (Hengyang, Hunan), passes Hengshan 衡山. ▪ Reaches Hengzhou, turns back north (end of spring). ▪ Back in Tanzhou (summer, autumn, winter).
770	▪ In Tanzhou (spring). Local rebellion, flees south to Hengzhou, plans to reach Chenzhou 郴州 to visit his uncle (Hunan; fourth month). Blocked by floods at Leiyang 耒陽 (Hunan). ▪ Rebellion suppressed, returns to Tanzhou (late summer). ▪ Heads north from Tanzhou (late autumn). Passes away between autumn and winter on the way to Yuezhou.
Post-770	▪ At some point, Du Fu's casket is brought to Yueyang 岳陽.
813	▪ Du Fu's casket is returned to the Luoyang area and buried in the ancestral graveyard at the foot of Mount Shouyang 首陽山.

CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION: RETREAT, GOING FORWARD

In the fall of 759, Du Fu 杜甫 (712–70) gave up his official position and, together with his family, headed west toward the border region of Qinzhou 秦州 (modern Tianshui, Gansu). It was a drastic, fateful decision. For nearly ten years (746–55), Du Fu had struggled in Chang'an 長安, the great Tang capital, to gain an official post, the crucial step to serving his dynasty and finally realizing his Confucian ideals and ambitions. Now, after finally gaining office and serving less than three years, he abandoned his dream. Instead, he was to lead his family into an uncertain future as they began a difficult, wandering journey that would take them along the outskirts of the Tang and only end with Du Fu's death in 770 in the region of Lake Dongting 洞庭湖 (Hunan) in the far south.

Du Fu's decision and its consequences have never been fully appreciated or understood, perhaps not even by Du Fu himself. And the filters of history and traditions of Du Fu's reception have only made his actions increasingly puzzling and obscure. Du Fu, whose reputation was slight in his own lifetime, gradually came to be recognized as one of China's two greatest poets, not only because of the magnificence of his poetry but also because of his Confucian virtues: his patriotism, his loyalty to the Tang, and his concerns for the welfare of the people. The portrayal of Du Fu as a Confucian hero continues to this day. Eventually he would become known as the poet-sage (*shisheng* 詩聖) in contrast to his illustrious contemporaries, Li Bai 李白 (701–62) and Wang Wei 王維 (ca. 699–761), known respectively as the poet-immortal (*shixian* 詩仙; reflecting his Daoist nature) and poet-buddha (*shifo* 詩佛). Yet why would a Confucian poet and sage,

who once professed his ambition was to “... bring my ruler to surpass even Yao and Shun/And once more make manners pure” 致君堯舜上／再使風俗淳, give up his post, the only possible path towards realizing such ambitions?¹ And why would later readers essentially overlook this seemingly un-Confucian decision and embrace him with accolades such as the well-known remarks of Su Shi 蘇軾 (1037–101)?

Since ancient times there have been a great many poets, but Tu Fu alone is preeminent among them. Is this not because all through his wanderings, through poverty and hunger, despite his unsatisfied desire to serve the state, through all his vicissitudes, he never for the space of a meal forgot his sovereign?²

This study began by wondering about such questions and a desire to understand a poet who evolved into a person far richer and more complex than I could have imagined. It is not that centuries of readers have been wrong about Du Fu; there is no truer or more insightful observation about Du Fu than Su Shi’s above statement. Nevertheless, the tendency has been to simplify him, focusing on aspects of Du Fu that the tradition has encouraged readers to see while ignoring or distorting those sides of him they were less prepared to accept.³ But Du Fu, and for that matter his friend Li Bai, the other “greatest” Chinese poet, lived during the mid-eighth century, the peak of the Tang Dynasty (one could

1 “Respectfully Presented to Assistant Director of the Left, Senior Wei, Twenty-Two Rhymes” (“Feng zeng Wei zuocheng zhang ershier yun” 奉贈韋左丞丈二十二韻; ca. 748), in *Du Fu quanji jiaozhu* 杜甫全集校注, vol. 1, ed. Xiao Difei 蕭滌非 et al. (Renmin wuxue, 2013), 2.277. Unless noted, I follow the texts as given in *Du Fu quanji jiaozhu*. All translations of Du Fu are my own; for alternative translations, I will always reference the work of Stephen Owen. See *The Poetry of Du Fu*, trans. Stephen Owen (Walter de Gruyter, 2016), 1.50. Henceforth, “Xiao et al., ed.” and “Owen, trans.,” respectively. These are the long-awaited twelve-volume variorum edition with extensive commentary and Owen’s masterful complete translation of Du Fu’s poetic works. Du Fu scholars are fortunate to live in an age when these resources are now available. Readers of this work ideally will have them by their side for additional commentary, variants, alternative readings, and interpretations.

2 Su Shi, “Wang Dingguo shi ji xu” 王定國詩集敘, in *Du Fu juan: shangbian* 杜甫卷上編, ed. Hua Wenxuan 華文軒 (Zhonghua shuju, 2001), 99, quoted in Eva Shan Chou, *Reconsidering Tu Fu: Literary Greatness and Cultural Context* (Cambridge University Press, 1995), 23.

3 For a recent account of Du Fu’s reception, see Ji Hao, *The Reception of Du Fu (712–770) and His Poetry in Imperial China* (Brill, 2017).

argue of Chinese civilization), thus experiencing a civilization at its very height as well as witnessing the beginnings of its downturn and decline. Li Bai and Du Fu absorbed it all—the richness, the triumphs, and the tragedy—and this pressed them to question and explore their world and their place in it, coming to its parameters and limits, and veering from established paths. They did new things or old things to extremes that would never be repeated, be it questioning, protesting, drinking, recalling the past, treading the paths of the Three Teachings (*sanjiao* 三教; Confucianism, Daoism, Buddhism), or, as we see with Du Fu, abandoning a post to wander the outskirts of the land. At moments, spiritually and intellectually, they seem to reach the fringes of the tradition as they knew it, longing to break through, but towards what even they were not sure. We might first recall Li Bai's wanderings and imagined celestial ascents, but Du Fu, too, felt the limits of the world. In a poem composed in 766, he declares:

My poems have exhausted the inspirations of the human world,	詩盡人間興
Now I must also go beyond the sea to search. ⁴	兼須入海求

Later generations should be grateful that for these men their medium of thought and expression was poetry, that all they saw and felt was recorded in words, and that Du Fu in particular was immensely prolific, his poems amounting to an autobiography but also a chronicle of his times, so much so that he also became known as the poet-historian (*shishi* 詩史).

We begin to understand Du Fu's "retreat" from the world by reviewing the events leading up to his decision. In the tenth month of 755, after many years of struggle, Du Fu finally received an official appointment. The office of Adjutant in the Office of the Right Commander of the Heir Apparent's Palace Guard (*youwei shuaifu bingcao canjun* 右衛率府兵曹參軍) was a lowly one, but slightly higher than the first position he was offered and then refused, as was his prerogative. Though not the kind of position he was hoping for, Du Fu must have felt some relief, and he could write with some humor about his appointment:

4 "West Tower, Two Poems" ("Xige er shou" 西閣二首; 766), no. 2, in Xiao et al., ed., vol. 7, 13.3875; Owen, trans., vol. 4, 17.340.

To indulge in wine one needs a bit of salary,	耽酒須微祿
And now my wild songs are under the auspices of our sage dynasty;	狂歌託聖朝
Thoughts of returning to the hills and home are now gone,	故山歸興盡
I turn my head to face the gusting winds. ⁵	回首向風颿

Throughout his life, Du Fu was poised on the line between advancement, service, and Confucian duty versus paths of withdrawal and freedom. Discouraged in Chang'an, he had often threatened to abandon the struggle, but his appointment finally allowed him to go forward and give up thoughts of retreat. Interesting is the poem's final mix of tones. After the humor of the first part of the poem (he now has the money to drink), Du Fu, as is so common in his verse, suddenly shifts the tone and turns serious. The decision has been made, his path is set; there is relief, but also an unnamed trepidation in the image of the stormy winds. Du Fu seems to sense troubles to come, but whether they are inherent worries about the nature of politics or he is aware of the upcoming dangers threatening the Tang is not clear.⁶

These were troubled times. There was famine in the capital region because of recent floods, and the previous year Du Fu had moved his family from the capital to Fengxian County 奉先, about eighty miles north of Chang'an. Soon after his appointment in the eleventh month of 755, Du Fu went to see his family only to learn that one of his sons had died of starvation. It was during this time that the An Lushan rebellion broke out, almost toppling the dynasty; at this moment Du Fu would compose one of his most famous poems, an account of his journey to Fengxian. On his way to his family, he passed by the winter palace at Mount Li 驪山 (the Huaqing Palace 華清宮), where Emperor Xuanzong 唐玄宗 (r. 712–56)

5 "After My Position is Confirmed, Playfully Presented" ("Guan ding hou xi zeng" 官定後戲贈; 755), in Xiao et al., ed., vol. 2, 3.634; Owen, trans., vol. 1, 3.190.

6 Compare Li Bai's very different, excited reaction when summoned to court in 742: "Raising my head, I laugh and pass through the gate/How could one like me remain buried amongst the weeds?" 仰天大笑出門去／我輩豈是蓬蒿人. "Going to the Capital, Parting from My Children at Nanling" ("Nanling bie ertong ru jing" 南陵別兒童入京), in *Li Bai quanji jiaozhu huishi jiping* 李白全集彙釋集評, ed. Zhan Ying 詹鍈 (Baihua wenyi chubanshe, 1996), vol. 4, 13.2240.

and his chief consort, Yang Guifei 楊貴妃 (719–56), wintered each year, enjoying the local hot springs. Du Fu’s descriptions of the palace revels are among his most famous lines:

Camel-pad soup is urged upon the guests,	勸客駝蹄羹
While frosty oranges are heaped upon fragrant tangerines;	霜橙壓香橘
Within the crimson gates the stench of meat and wine,	朱門酒肉臭
Outside on the road, the bones of the frozen dead. ⁷	路有凍死骨

Earlier in the poem, Du Fu described his approach to the winter palace:

In the early dawn I passed Mount Li,	凌晨過驪山
The royal couch upon its towering heights.	御榻在嵒崑

Du Fu is pointing to the location of the throne, but coming back to these lines after finishing the poem (always important when reading Du Fu), the image has added resonance, conveying the precarious state of the dynasty with the image of a couch balanced upon the tip of a peak. The use of “royal couch” (*yu ta* 御榻) perhaps also hints at the royal bed and the affair of Xuanzong and Yang Guifei, in which case the image is even more wobbly, precarious, and accusing. Clearly Du Fu sees a world in peril, as evidenced by both his personal grief and the state of the nation.

The immediate dangers seem to have strengthened Du Fu’s resolve and sense of duty. After moving his family further north, it is assumed that he attempted to join the new Emperor, Suzong 唐肅宗 (r. 756–62), in Lingwu 靈武 (far to the north in Ningxia), but was captured by the rebels who had taken Chang’an as Emperor Xuanzong fled to Sichuan. In 756 we find Du Fu in occupied Chang’an. Unlike other higher officials, he was not imprisoned or forced to serve the rebel government, and seems to have enjoyed relative freedom of movement. Through his poems we can follow him wandering the city, composing verses that are memorized by schoolchildren in China to this day. In the spring of 757, Du

7 “Going from the Capital to Fengxian County, Expressing My Feelings in Five Hundred Words” (“Zi jing fu Fengxianxian yonghuai wubai zi” 自京赴奉先縣詠懷五百字; 755), in Xiao et al., ed., vol. 2, 3.669; Owen, trans., vol. 1, 4.214.

Fu escaped and made his way to Fengxiang 鳳翔 (about a hundred miles west of Chang'an) and Emperor Suzong's court. With this demonstration of his loyalty and no doubt an urgent need for qualified officials, Du Fu was given a still low but more important position, Reminder of the Left (*zuo shiyi* 左拾遺), which brought him closer to the throne. Du Fu promptly got into trouble. Earlier, Fang Guan 房琯 (697–763), a chief minister during the early years of the An Lushan Rebellion, had asked to lead the Tang armies in the recovery of the capital only to suffer several crushing defeats in 756. He lost the favor of Emperor Suzong and was demoted the next year. In his new capacity as Reminder of the Left, Du Fu spoke out on his behalf and was seriously reprimanded. He was fortunate to escape punishment and was allowed to keep his position. In 758, with Chang'an having been recovered, there were a number of purges, and Fang Guan was further demoted and exiled from the capital. A number of officials linked to him, including Du Fu, suffered similar fates, with Du Fu assigned the extremely low position of Administrator in Personnel Evaluation (*sigong canjun* 司功參軍) in Huazhou 華州 (about sixty miles east of the capital).

Du Fu was, of course, upset. In a poem from autumn of this year, “Early Autumn, Suffering the Heat, as Papers Keep Piling on My Desk” 早秋苦熱堆案相仍, he complains of the tediousness of his job:

Tightening my belt, I go crazy, I want to scream,	束帶發狂欲大叫
How is it these documents come so quickly one after	簿書何急來相仍
the other? ⁸	

Other poems show him thinking back at what had happened and how quickly his fate had changed. In a poem to his official friends in the capital, he writes (758):

Last year at this time I was serving before the throne,	去歲茲辰捧御床
At the third hour of the fifth watch, I would join the	五更三點入鵷行
mandarin duck ranks at dawn;	

8 “Early Autumn, Suffering the Heat, as Papers Keep Piling on My Desk” (“Zao qiu ku re dui an xiang reng” 早秋苦熱堆案相仍; 758), in Xiao et al., ed., vol. 3, 5.1152; Owen, trans., vol. 2, 6.46.

To understand me here as I rush about with a wounded heart, 欲知趨走傷心地
Know that I am thinking of the fragrant incense that billowed before my eyes.⁹ 正想氛氲滿眼香

We see Du Fu recalling with some nostalgia his service at the imperial court. Remember that he served less than a year at court in Chang'an, but the memories and images would remain with him the rest of his life. When we look at poems actually from that period, however, the picture is more complex. At moments he is excited and optimistic; he is back in the capital with the defeat of the rebellion and restoration of the dynasty appearing imminent. At court, awed by the imperial trappings and aura, Du Fu is anxious to serve, aware of the weight of his duties. In a poem from the spring of 758, Du Fu cannot sleep—he is so nervous about his coming presentation at court. He lies awake and observes the progress of the night:

Flowers darken as evening falls across the palace walls, 花隱掖垣暮
Twittering birds pass by returning to their roosts; 啾啾棲鳥過
Looming over ten thousand homes, the stars begin their shift, 星臨萬戶動
The moon's glow growing in the nine-layered skies. 月傍九霄多
I cannot sleep, listening for the rattle of metal keys, 不寢聽金鑰
The jade tinkling of approaching horses? It's just the sounds of the wind. 因風想玉珂
I have a document to present at the morning court, 明朝有封事
And ask again and again, how much longer will the nighttime last?¹⁰ 數問夜如何

Yet during this same period, we also find Du Fu in a very different temper. He is moody, drinking, roaming the Serpentine (Qujiang 曲江), the park in the

9 Mandarin duck ranks is a figure for the rows of officials serving at court. Incense was burned at court. "Venting My Feelings During the Winter Solstice, Respectfully Sent to My Friends and Colleagues at the Two Ministries of the Secretariat and Chancellery, Two Poems" ("Zhiri qian xing, feng ji beisheng jiu gelao, liang yuan guren er shou" 至日遣興奉寄北省舊閣老兩院故人二首; 758), no. 1, in Xiao et al., ed., vol. 3, 5.1204; Owen, trans., vol. 2, 6.56.

10 "Spending the Night at the Chancellery in Spring" ("Chun su zuosheng" 春宿左省; 758), in Xiao et al., ed., vol. 2, 4.1021; Owen, trans., vol. 2, 6.4.