A Rose for Du Fu, Or How Not to Write a Hagiography for Him

Among Chinese poets and intellectuals, Du Fu has long been held up as the symbol of perfection in both an artistic and moral sense. His reputation embodies literary immortality and his influence permeates various cultural and social spheres. Although history has reshuffled many core values of Chinese culture in modern times, Du Fu still stands despite the dramatic ups and downs that other sagely grandfather figures have undergone, even Confucius himself. It is particularly hard for poets to express their reevaluation of Du Fu in their own poetry. Inasmuch as he is known as *shisheng* (“The Poetry Saint”) in Chinese literary history, a hagiographical mode seems to be inevitable, and his greatness can stifle the poetic voices that sing for him. Even some otherwise good poets have written clichéd eulogies to him. Such poems are often mixed with the poets’ self-congratulation as Du Fu’s suffering but persistent modern followers. For poets, making a pact with the great Du Fu and following in his giant footsteps may be the right thing to do, but poeticizing these noble ideals often bores the reader.

At the same time, poets generally refrain from trying the opposite tact, which is to deflate Du Fu’s canonical status. The only exception in the past century may be the poet critic Guo Moruo 郭沫若 (1892-1978), who denigrated Du Fu’s work as reflecting the class consciousness of a backward landlord in his book *Li Bai yu Du Fu* 李白與杜甫 (1971). But that is an anomaly widely regarded as ill-intended nonsense. To date, for poets of varied schools and styles, Du Fu is still the patron saint of both poetic maturity and moral integrity, whom only the immature would attempt to assail. In 2012, when a farcical meme called “Du Fu is busy” 杜甫很忙 surfaced on the internet, many poets voiced their worries
over it as a terrible and annoying phenomenon of youth culture. (See Picture 1.) Even Yi Sha 伊沙, the poet commonly associated with postmodern parodies, rushed to his defense, and proclaimed, “To mock Du Fu isn’t tolerated under heaven’s law!” 惡搞杜甫，天理難容！Yi Sha and some of his “anti-intellectual” fellow poets never shy away from shocking their readers, but when it comes to Du Fu they resort to received wisdom. For them, Du Fu is still foundational to poetry writing, and it would be self-contradictory to mock Du Fu in a poem. Indeed, it is not easy to write something new about Du Fu.

In this paper, I will first discuss some common problems in the hagiographic mode of writing about Du Fu, which lead to weak poems. Then I will introduce some alternative approaches in two recent poems by Sun Wenbo 孫文波 and Zang Di 臧棣. These poems not only respond to Du Fu and his legacy from new perspectives but also offer insights into the ever-present, problematic relationship between gushi (classical poetry) 古詩 and xinshi (modern Chinese poetry written in the vernacular) 新詩.

I have chosen four lines from Huang Canran’s 黃燦然 poem “Du Fu” as an example of the hagiographical mode. There are several reasons behind this choice. First, Huang is representative. He is one of the leading figures in the present Chinese poetry scene whose view of Du Fu is constantly heard on social media; second, these lines encapsulate some essential problems of the mode that we can see elsewhere in many other similar poems.

Heaven wanted him to be noble, therefore it made him ordinary,

His days were like white rice, every grain was hardship.

The soul of the Chinese language would find its proper body,
And this exiled man was its stable home.

上天要他高尚， 所以让他平凡，

他的日子像白米， 每粒都是艰难。

汉语的灵魂要寻找恰当的载体，

而这个流亡者正是它安穏的家。

The first couplet recycles the stock image of Du Fu as a moral paragon who lived in poverty but was redeemed by his noble cause. This image has been shared by both the traditional Confucian view of Du Fu and socialist propaganda in the modern era that has fashioned Du Fu as “the People’s poet.” As an experienced and wide-ranging poet, Huang is hardly unaware of this. Therefore, he uses the second couplet to give the cliché a new twist: Du Fu is great neither because he is a defender of traditional values nor because he is the poet of the suffering lower classes. Rather, he is an exile who carries on the soul of the Chinese language.

But this twist is far from convincing. Writing in the hagiographical mode, poets like Huang try to re-appropriate Du Fu in a specific contemporary context and reinterpret him as a saint for their new purposes. That is to say, they have to engage in the difficult task of de-historicizing Du Fu. It would be much easier to create a modern patriotic Qu Yuan or a romantic bohemian Li Bai. Du Fu’s moral authority is deeply rooted in his relationship with his own age. Much of his moral authority does not come from his own moral conduct, but from the ways his poetry remains true to his own historical experiences, which is the reason he is celebrated as the “poet historian.” Any modification and
circumscription of his historical image is not easily accessible and acceptable to his devoted readers.

As we can see in Huang’s case, Du Fu is transformed into an image that looks too much like that of a modern intellectual poet, or a politically suppressed liuwang zhe 流亡者 (an exile). Since the early 1990s, for Chinese poets and intellectuals liuwang zhe as a buzzword has carried a strong sense of a political exile under various socialist regimes. Model poets in this vein were Osip Mandelstam, Czeslaw Milosz, and Joseph Brodsky, in whom many Chinese poets such as Wang Jiaxin 王家新, Xi Chuan 西川, and Huang found their kindred spirits. As the translator of all of these exiled Russian and Polish poets, Huang collapses his ideal of a political dissident into his version of Du Fu. This modern image does not fit the historical Du Fu who was a lifelong supporter of the sovereign despite being politically marginalized. His loyalty, though a complex matter, is traditionally considered a major source of his moral power. Du Fu may be called a liuwang zhe in the sense that he suffered wartime migration during the An Lushan Rebellion, and indeed he shares with modern dissident poets some admirable moral qualities, but to paint him in an ahistorical broad stroke cannot bring Du Fu’s moral stance into the current cultural politics, nor can it establish a believable link between Du Fu’s poetry and contemporary poets’ anti-totalitarian agenda.

Another problem with the hagiographical mode is less obvious because it is associated with a deeply rooted irony. That is, most practicing Chinese poets have decidedly abandoned the classical forms commonly regarded as perfected by Du Fu. When they use the open form of xinshi to claim that Du Fu transcends history, we cannot forget
all the heated, ongoing debates over the legitimacy of *xinshi* as the modern representative of Chinese poetry. In the modern age, Du Fu still has a large number of followers who write in the classical form, although their work is generally not included in studies of modern literature. As Huang claims, the soul of the Chinese language chose Du Fu as its home. Perhaps poets should know more than most that this very soul has long been split into two halves that are difficult to reunite. The discontinuity between Du Fu’s poetry and his *xinshi*-writing admirers may be reconciled to some degree in allusions and stylistic echoing, but it cannot be simply set aside for the sake of an idealized conception of the Chinese language.

Like Huang, some other contemporary poets such as Xi Chuan, Xiao Kaiyu 肖開愚, and Liao Weitang 廖偉棠 also fall to similar dilemma. These poets can still imagine how Du Fu reincarnates into a modern intellectual, a protester for social justice, or a bohemian wanderer, but all these imagined afterlives are decidedly outweighed by Du Fu’s trinity of poet, sage, and historian, which has already hardened into a great symbol of ancient Chinese poetry, a poetry that *xinshi* poets have no right to automatically inherit.

Now let’s look at how Sun Wenbo and Zang Di, another two important contemporary poets, deviate from the hagiographical mode towards new ways of coming to term with Du Fu’s strong presence in contemporary culture. Sun’s poem “Twenty-Five Lines Composed on a Pilgrimage to Du Fu’s Thatched Cottage” 謹杜甫草堂得詩二十五句 develops an argument that the hagiographical mode represents a thinly veiled nostalgia for the past that both originates from and contributes to a harmful distortion of reality.
The poem is focused on the speaker’s experience at a modern site constructed to promulgate Du Fu’s legacy: “Du Fu’s Thatched Hut,” a public park in the city of Chengdu. A quick introduction to the place will give us the context in which Sun wrote the poem.

The park is a constructed as a place of literary pilgrimage. It receives thousands of visitors every day, including high-level foreign political leaders, cultural celebrities, and ordinary tourists. Yet it is not a favorable place for local poets to visit. The reason is simple. The park has neither much natural beauty nor attractive modern amusements. Its tourist value is outright symbolic: it is built around the ancient site of Du Fu’s small hut, which was long destroyed in the remote past. At the same time, commercialism and postcard sentimentalism become the real driving force of its daily activities. Therefore, few local poets tend to visit this park unless they have to go there to serve as the guides for visiting friends who wish to pay tribute to the saint. A quick personal anecdote: In 2007 when I visited Chengdu, Sun Wenbo drove me to the park and waited outside smoking.

Sun’s poem begins with a contrast between two kinds of poetics. In the past ten years, the speaker has rejected a modernist version of Du Fu’s hagiography, which sentimentalizes Du Fu’s suffering in mannered figurative language:

Burdened with disease, one gazes on death from afar.

For ten years or more, I’ve resisted this kind of poem,

flesh resisting the spirit—such

secrets, the distant galaxies turning in my head,

forming an enormous reality
背著病，一個人眺望死亡。

十幾年來，我反對這樣的詩句，
是用肉體反對靈魂——那些
秘密，猶如迢遙星雲，旋轉在我的頭腦裏，
組成偉大的現實

“Burdened with disease, one gazes on death from afar.” This line represents the high-minded modernism that has become a new cliché in contemporary poetry because it no longer speaks to the reader’s intimate experiences. “Gazing at death from afar,” we miss the actual complete picture of what is around us. Instead, we may hear echoes of T. S. Eliot’s “Death By Water” or Paul Celan’s “Death Fugue” because the translations of these poets have spawn endless imitations in contemporary Chinese poetry. What would follow “gazing at death from afar” in a hagiographical poem would very likely be a celebration of Du Fu’s timeless soul that has no problem transcending death.

The speaker’s preferred poetics is not new. His is focused on bodily experiences and raw realities that he exploits to reorganize and recreate his world. Now, as a local poet visiting the park, he realizes that this long practiced poetics does not work either. The reality surrounding him is too chaotic and destructive for him to handle on the page:
	his time, I won’t resist.

This time, I’ll give up describing what I see,
Me, or you and him; I won’t invite you onto the paper again

—why? The real city, which emanates chaos,

already commercializes our loss, invites clamor.

这一次，我不反对了。

这一次，我放弃对眼前事物的描写，

我或你和他；我不再把你们请上纸

——为什么？一座现实的城市，突出它的混乱，

早已把迷失市场化，引导着喧嚣

Reality has evolved to be more vicious than ever. It does not simply contain chaos; it emphasizes the chaos for its own purposes. Even the feeling of being lost in it is commercialized. Deeply perplexed, the speaker has to adopt the poetics that he has rejected. Instead of reorganizing his immediate lived reality in his own spoken language, he welcomes a modern abstraction on the page, and lets death prevail:

This time, I’ll invite death onto the page,

saying: look! look! It isn’t a river dying,

and it isn’t a mountain dying, but...a kind of recognition is dying.

No way to revive it—how can it be revived?

Here, revival is already a disease—

as today, in the thatched cottage, tourists everywhere, one proclaiming
his own greatness; it disturbs the dead—

这一次，我把死亡请到纸上，

我说：看哪！看哪！不是一条河死亡，

也不是一座山死亡，而是⋯⋯一种认识死亡；

方法却没有复活——怎么可能复活？

在这里，复活已经是疾病——

就像今天我步入草堂，看到游人如织，有人妄言

自己的伟大；那是对逝者惊扰

Any revival of the past becomes the new disease. Poets are like tourists. Whenever a poet wishes to establish his own greatness by resurrecting Du Fu, he disturbs the dead because “All awe is false, all cherished memories are just form.”一切敬畏都是假象，一切怀念都是形式。In the end, the speaker decides to return to rejection. Although modern followers of Du Fu believe that their language has the power to transform reality, they have failed to come up with something new because they are merely expressing nostalgia to the past, the lost great tradition:

I’ve always refused to give in. Now
I will resist even more—my words
can’t turn the ordinary into the sacred, plainness into beauty.
—As the older Du Fu realized “...ascending the terrace alone”
I realize: sacredness and beauty have turned into nostalgia.
我曾经拒绝加入。现在
我将更加拒绝——我的语言
仍然不把普通变成神圣，平淡变成美
——就像杜甫晚年看到“……独登台”，
而我看到：神圣和美已成为乡愁。

Towards the end of the poem, the partial quotation of Du Fu’s “with one hundred years of many illness, I ascend the terrace alone.” 百年多病獨登台 produces the effect of both a fragmented text and a choking voice. This special effect is balanced with the speaker’s plain and yet decisive voice in the last line. The juxtaposition of “…ascending the terrace alone” and “sacredness and beauty have turned into nostalgia” further shows how an ancient line, though fragmented, can work in concert with a modern line.

As a whole the poem offers a powerful argument about how to write poetry in the capitalist/totalitarian social and cultural realities in China. By fiercely rejecting the hagiographical mode, the poem returns to Du Fu in the sense that it painstakingly exposes the fundamental problems of the present age as Du Fu did in the mid-eighth century.

Zang Di’s poem “An Introduction to Du Fu’s Rose” 杜甫的玫瑰入門 adopts another new strategy. Unlike Sun, who focuses on a public space constructed for Du Fu’s legacy, Zang resituates Du Fu’s poetry in his daily life, ostensibly in a space between the morning market and his kitchen.

The poem begins with an interesting play with two traditional idioms. One is “huge waves wash away sand” 大浪淘沙, which means time or history can eliminate the incompetent. The other is “gold will appear after the wild sand is blown away” 吹盡狂沙
始到金, originally a line by the Tang poet Liu Yuxi, meaning that the truly valuable will eventually prove itself. Zang Di weaves these two idioms into his playful argument that roses, a romantic image in *xinshi*, are more useful than we think:

Now that the rose has come forward to defend nature, it might not only be huge waves that can wash away sand.

Moreover a rose is not simply pretty to look at,

A rose’s real function

Is that it saves us a lot of time;

so gold really may have another source.

既然是替自然出頭，就不一定

只有大浪，才能淘沙。

更何況玫瑰不僅僅看上去很美，

玫瑰真正的用途在於

它能幫我們節約大量時間：

如此，金子完全可以有另外的來源。

A rose is a stock image, so using it saves us a lot of time explaining our thoughts and feelings. In this sense, although a cliché, it is as valuable as gold. Here the speaker shows an interesting attitude towards modern poetry, which sharply contrasts with Sun’s rejection of it as distancing us from reality. Oversimplifying, poetic language has two kinds of value, one aesthetic (pretty) and one pragmatic (useful). It is true that the image of a rose cannot be equated with our intense romantic feelings, but it is the winner in the evolution of language, the gold appearing after all the sand has been blown away. Then, Zang proposes a new way to look at the split between *gushi* and *xinshi*: as long as they look good and do
their jobs, there is no problem:

Were Du Fu alive, the difference
Between xinshi and gushi would not be bigger
Than that between strawberries and pineapples at the morning market.

假如杜甫活著，新詩
和古詩的區別，不會大於
早市上草莓和菠蘿的區別。

The speaker admits that xinshi and gushi are indeed two different things. But their differences depend on the poets who write them. For great poets, the differences are both obvious and mutually acceptable, and the two poetic forms can stand together like two kinds of fresh fruit in the morning market. In other words, Du Fu might not have cared about the dispute at all and just kept writing poems, if he were still alive.

Given the numerous debates over xinshi vs. gushi, there must be objections to the speaker’s view. So he forewarns:

I’m not going to argue with you. Believe it or not
Ten leeks can make this poem lay an egg.
It might be small, but the wild pigeons will leave it alone;
At least, it need not feel guilty that within the meaning of life
There is always a fictional side.

才不和你賭氣呢。信不信，
十根韭菜就能讓這首詩下個雞蛋。
小是小了點，但也輪不著野鴿子犯渾；
The speaker asks “you,” the unconvinced reader, to think further about the nature of the debates about poetry. Like anything else in life, the meaning is not decided on the exclusive basis of what the facts really are. The fictional side gives us freedom to imagine and reimagine reality, history, and poetry. If Sun Wenbo’s poem takes an anti-hagiographical approach, this poem neither accepts nor rejects hagiographies of Du Fu, but rather operates on a different level where a playful swerve to fictionality releases the tensions between history and reality that are replete in contemporary poems about Du Fu. After all, a rose for Du Fu is fiction, and it seems more charming than a museum dedicated to the saint.
Pictures and Original Texts:

“Du Fu is busy,” graphic from huaxia.com

杜 甫 黃燦然

他多麼渺小，相對於他的詩歌；
他的生平捉襟見肘，像他的生活，
只給我們留下一個骯髒的形象， 叫
無憂者發愁，痛苦者堅強。

上天要他高尚，所以讓他平凡，
他的日子像白米，每粒都是艱難。
漢語的靈魂要尋找恰當的載體，
而這個流亡者正是它安穩的家。

歷史跟他相比，只是一段插曲；
戰爭若知道他，定會停止幹戈；
痛苦，也要在他身上尋找深度。

上天賦予他不起眼的軀殼，
裝著山川、風物、喪亂和愛，
讓他一個人活出一個時代。
背著病，一個人眺望死亡。

十幾年來，我反對這樣的詩句，

是用肉體反對靈魂——那些

秘密，猶如迢遙星雲，旋轉在我的頭腦裏，

組成偉大的現實——這一次，我不反對了。

這一次，我放棄對眼前事物的描寫，

我或你和他；我不再把你們請上紙

——為什麼？一座現實的城市，突出它的混亂，

早已把迷失市場化，引導著喧囂

——讓我背著病看到死亡——

這一次，我把死亡請到紙上，

我說：看哪！看哪！不是一條河死亡，

也不是一座山死亡，而是……一種認識死亡，

方法卻沒有復活——怎麼可能復活？
在這裡，復活已經是疾病——

就像今天我步入草堂，看到遊人如織，有人妄言

自己的偉大；那是對逝者驚擾——我不知道疼痛

將會以什麼樣的尖銳刺入記憶

的中心——或許，他們早已不要記憶。

一切敬畏都是假象，一切懷念都是形式

——我曾經拒絕加入。現在

我將更加拒絕——我的語言

仍然不把普通變成神聖，平淡變成美

——就像杜甫晚年看到“……獨登臺”，

而我看到：神聖和美已成為鄉愁。
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十根韭菜就能讓這首詩下個雞蛋。

小是小了點，但也輪不著野鴿子犯渾；

最起碼，它對得起生活的意義中

始終有虛構的那一面。