**Du Fu: China’s Greatest Poet**

1 China has the oldest living tradition of poetry in the world, more than 3,000 years old, older than Homer’s *Iliad* and *Odyssey*. For the Chinese, poets have always been the ones who most truthfully express the feelings of the people. And their greatest one is Du Fu.

2 Du Fu lived in the eighth century, the age of *Beowulf* in Britain. It was the Tang Dynasty, a time of extraordinary cultural accomplishment, that ended in horrendous warfare and the death of millions. Du Fu, better than anyone else at reflecting that history, created out of the suffering a poetic art, in which historical events are mirrored in his own life and spiritual journey.

3 The Du family were an old upper-middle class clan of officials and poets. In his late teens, Du Fu began his travelling across the empire, gathering stories, visiting the legendary sites of heroes and dragons, immersing himself in China’s ancient traditions. And the teachings of Confucius like virtue, benevolence, service to the state became Du Fu’s guiding principles all his life. So in his early twenties, he went to the capital, Chang’an, today’s Xi’an, expecting to become a government official and help continue the new age of wisdom. But he failed. One explanation is that Du Fu was probably too much of a poet and not enough of a bureaucrat. It was at this time that Du Fu was seized by a kind of existential panic brought about by a disturbing experience. The country went out of control and things fell apart, as described in “The mountains of the north began to dissolve, the Wei River disappeared. And then the imperial city itself vanished in a kind of haze. And the wild geese flew away.”

4 It was then a time when the empire went into crisis. With social unrest growing, the nation was paralyzed by rains and floods, then the harvest failed, and famine followed. “Behind the red lacquered gates, wine is left to sour, meat to rot. Outside the gates lie the bones of the frozen and the starved.” Worse still, in mid-December 755, a huge rebellion broke out, which lasted 8 years, and as many as 30 million people were displaced, killed in war or died of famine. Du Fu lost his infant child and was captured on the road by the rebels.

5 From this time on, Du Fu’s poetry conjures up images from later Chinese history when order breaks down and chaos rises like a storm. The war was the turning point in Du Fu’s life and the great divide in his poetry. His experience of war and suffering explains why his poetry became so heavy, or say, so realistic, as epitomized in Spring Scene, one of his most celebrated poems: “The state is destroyed, but the country remains. In the city in spring, grass and weeds grow everywhere. Grieving for the times, even the blossom sheds tears.”

6 Eventually, Du Fu escaped through the rebel lines and was reunited with his family. But in the middle winter of 759, they turned south, a terrible journey over the forbidding mountainous divide of central China down to Sichuan and the city of Cheng Du. There he built himself a thatched cottage on a plot of outskirts land an old friend gave him, and lived here as a poet farmer, finding beauty in nature and in the intimacy of everyday life, as praised in *Welcome Rain on a Spring Night:* “Good rain knows its time right; It will fall when comes spring. With wind it steals in night; Mute, it moistens each thing.”

7 In spring 762, the war was still raging. Du Fu took to the road again, now in an increasingly bad health. He headed down to the Yangtze, and sailed 400 miles down to Kuizhou, today’s Baidicheng, the entrance to the Yangtze Gorges, where he stopped, got himself a little farmstead up in hills, grew vegetables, kept chickens, wrote and wrote every day in an incredible outpouring of poetry, hundreds of poems.

8 In the Gorges, though at a great cost to himself, Du Fu’s gift was creative and imaginative freedom. Living among this kind of landscapes maybe gave the great nature poet another handle on the relationship between human beings, time and the cosmos. “In the evening of the year, yin and yang hurry the shortening daylight. On the sky’s edge, frost and snow clear in the cold of night. In the Three Gorges, the river of stars, reflections stirring, shaking, weeping in the wilderness.” Close now to Li Bai’s love of nature, Du Fu had come to terms with the limits of human action in the face of immensity of nature and time. His poems written in the Gorges have influenced Chinese poets ever since, and Western artists from the modernists to Pink Floyd. They are the greatest poems in the Chinese language, the summa of medieval Chinese thought and poetry.

9 Within a decade of his death, a selection was published to great acclaim. “Since the dawn of poetry,” one critic wrote, “there is no one like him. And over the next two centuries, Du Fu would be acknowledged by common consent as China’s greatest poet.” But in a way, to call him that is to underplay his importance in Chinese culture, because it limits his standing simply to that of a poet. His poetry reflects on experience and transforms it and so this becomes a part of the emotional vocabulary of the Chinese culture, said American Sinologist Stephen Owen. There’s no comparable figure in Western culture, someone who, by chance as it turned out, came to embody not only the feelings, but the moral sensibility of a whole civilization. In his ambition to serve the nation through a career in government, Du Fu was a complete failure. But through his poetry, he did more than any emperor to help shape the nation’s values, expressing what it means to be Chinese in the greatest words in the Chinese language.

10 Today, every child in China learns Du Fu’s poems in school. They are taught about the values we still cherish today: his sympathizing with the suffering common people, his embodiment of Confucian values, and his epitome of loyalty to the state.

**诗圣杜甫**

1 中国有着全世界最古老的诗歌传承，迄今已有3000年的历史，早于荷马创作的《伊利亚特》和《奥德赛》。对于中国人来说，诗人最能忠实地传达出人们的感情。而其中最伟大的诗人就是杜甫。

2 杜甫生活在公元8世纪，这也是《贝奥武夫》在英国被写就的时期。此时正处唐朝，一个文化成就臻于化境的时代，却被流血漂橹的恐怖战乱敲响了丧钟。杜甫的诗歌最能反映这段历史，那些历史事件桩桩件件映射于他的人生和心路历程。正是这诸多苦难凝就了杜甫的诗歌艺术。

3 杜甫出生于中上层社会的官宦世家，家学诗风深厚。十七八岁时，杜甫开始漫行九州，集奇闻轶事，访英杰神龙隐现之址，专心学习古代中国文化。孔子的教诲，如德、仁、忠，成为杜甫一生的行为准则。杜甫二十岁刚出头就去了首都长安，也就是如今的西安，渴望步入仕途，延续开明盛世。然而他失败了。一种解释是他诗才横溢，却不善为官。此时，国家战乱，政权分崩离析，杜甫本人也心神不安，由此开始了颠沛流离的人生。恰如杜甫诗歌里所描述的那样：“秦山忽破碎，泾渭不可求。俯视但一气，焉能辨皇州。……黄鹄去不息，哀鸣何所投。”

4 此时王朝陷入危机。社会动荡，国家水患严重，颗粒无收，饥荒接踵而至。真可谓“朱门酒肉臭，路有冻死骨”。更糟的是，公元755年12月中旬，一场大规模叛乱（安史之乱）爆发，持续8年之久，近3000万人流离失所，因战乱和饥荒殒命。杜甫不仅失去了幼子，又在旅途中被叛军俘获。

5 从那时起，杜甫的诗歌成为中国后世秩序破碎、混乱如暴风雨般降临时的象征。这场战争既是杜甫命运的转折点，也是他诗歌创作的分水岭。历经战乱苦楚，使得他的诗歌风格变得如此沉郁顿挫，或者说如此现实。他最家喻户晓的诗歌之一——《春望》便是这样一个缩影：“国破山河在，城春草木深。感时花溅泪，恨别鸟惊心。”

6 最终，杜甫逃离叛乱者控制区，与家人重聚。759年仲冬，他们辗转向南，穿越汉中崇山峻岭的分界线，南下进入四川，到达成都市。一位老朋友给了他一块城外的地，他自己动手盖了一间茅草屋，从此过着农民诗人的生活，追寻自然和亲密无间的日常生活中的美。正如《春夜喜雨》中抒发的那样：“好雨知时节，当春乃发生。随风潜入夜，润物细无声。”

7 762年春，战争仍然肆虐。杜甫再次远行，此时他身体状况日渐恶化。他取道长江，沿江而下400英里，到达了夔州，也就是今天的白帝城，长江三峡的入口。他在这里停下脚步，在山坡上自筑山舍，种菜，养鸡，每日笔耕不辍，诗兴泉涌，令人称奇，创作诗篇数百首。

8 在三峡的那段时期，杜甫体力衰竭，然而却是他诗歌创作最旺盛、激情最高涨的时期。在这种环境下这位伟大的田园诗人开启了理解人、时间与宇宙之关系的另一扇门。“岁暮阴阳催短景，天涯霜雪霁寒宵。五更鼓角声悲壮，三峡星河影动摇。”何等接近李白对自然的热爱，人类在浩瀚无垠的宇宙面前何等渺小，杜甫已然接受了这一现实。杜甫创作的“三峡诗”自此对中国的诗歌史影响深远，也影响了诸多西方艺术家们，无论是现代派，还是平克·弗洛伊德摇滚乐队。他创作了中国最伟大的诗歌，集中国中世纪思想与诗歌之大成。

9 杜甫辞世10年后，他的诗集出版，反响热烈。一位评论家写道，“自有诗以来，无人能胜过杜甫。在此后的两个世纪里，他是公认的中国最伟大的诗人。”但这样的称呼在某种程度上贬低了他在中国文化中的重要地位，因为这就把他的身份地位仅仅局限于诗人了。美国著名汉学家宇文所安说，杜甫的诗歌彻省切身经历并将之表达出来，使其成为中国文化中的一种情感词汇。他那杰出的诗篇不仅传达了人类的情感，而且象征整个文明在道德上的感悟能力。在西方文化中，哪怕在偶然的情形之下，也没有可以和他相媲美的人物。就其渴望跻身仕途拯救国家的雄心而言，杜甫彻底失败了。但他创作的诗歌蕴含了家国天下的伟大情怀，借此塑造了国家的价值观，在这一点上，他超越了中国任何一位帝王。

10 时至今日，中国的每一个孩子都会在学校里学习杜甫的诗歌。这些诗歌传递的是我们今天依然尊崇的价值观念：情牵百姓、笃行儒道、为国尽忠。