

The Chinese consider the eighth century their golden age of classical poetry. Among the century's many great poets, three are universally recognized as China's preeminent poetic geniuses: the Buddhist Wang Wei (699-759), the Daoist Li Bo (701-762), and the Confucian Du Fu (712- 770). Despite their differences in personality and perspective, they knew deeply respected, and genuinely liked one another. Of the three, the Chinese most esteem Du Fu, primarily for the tone of compassion for the downtrodden that pervades his poetry.

Du Fu himself knew adversity. Despite his extraordinary erudition, he was denied a position of public responsibility and spent much of his adult life as an impoverished wanderer and farmer. He lived to see one of his children die of starvation and suffered through the destruction of General An Lushan's rebellion (755-763), a civil war from which the Tang regime never recovered. Despite these adversities, Du Fu never lost his love for humanity or his belief in the innate goodness of the common person.



## BALLAD OF THE WAR CHARIOTS

The jingle of war chariots,  
Horses neighing, men marching,  
Bows and arrows slung over hips;  
Beside them stumbling, running  
The mass of parents, wives and children  
Clogging up the road, their rising dust  
Obscuring the great bridge at Hsienyang;  
Stamping their feet, weeping  
In utter desperation with cries  
That seem to reach the clouds;

Ask a soldier: Why do you go?  
Would simply bring the answer:  
Today men are conscripted often;  
Fifteen-year-olds sent up the Yellow River  
To fight; men of forty marched away  
To colonize the western frontier;  
Village elders take young boys,  
Do up their hair like adults  
To get them off; if they return  
It will be white with age, but even then  
They may be sent off to the frontier again;

Frontiers on which enough blood has flowed  
To make a sea, yet our Emperor still would  
Expand his authority! Have you not heard

How east of Huashan many counties  
Are desolate with weeds and thorns?  
The strongest women till the fields,  
Yet crops come not as well as before;

Lads from around here are well known  
For their bravery, but hate to be driven  
Like dogs or chickens; only because  
You kindly ask me do I dare give vent  
To grievances; now for instance  
With the men from the western frontier  
Still not returned, the government  
Demands immediate payment of taxes,  
But how can we pay when so little  
Has been produced?

Now, we peasants have learnt one thing:  
To have a son is not so good as having  
A daughter who can marry a neighbor  
And still be near us, while a son  
Will be taken away to die in some  
Wild place, his bones joining those  
That lie bleached white on the shores  
Of Lake Kokonor, where voices of new spirits  
Join with the old, heard sadly through  
The murmur of falling rain.

## THINKING OF OTHER DAYS

In those prosperous times  
Of the period of Kai Yuan,  
Even a small county city  
Would be crowded with the rich;  
Rice flowed like oil and both  
Public and private granaries  
Were stuffed with grain; all  
Through the nine provinces  
There were no robbers on  
The roads; traveling from home  
Needless to pick an auspicious  
Day to start; everywhere carriages  
With folk wearing silk or brocade;  
Farmers ploughed, women picked  
Mulberries, nothing that did  
Not run smoothly; in court  
Was a good Emperor for whom  
The finest music was played;  
Friends were honest with each other  
And for long there had been  
No kind of disaster; great day with  
Rites and songs, the best of other times,

Laws the most just; who could  
Have dreamed that later a bolt  
Of silk would cost ten thousand  
Cash? Now the fields farmers  
Tilled have become covered  
With bloodshed; palaces at Luoyang  
Are burnt, and temples to  
The imperial ancestors are full  
Of foxes and rabbit burrows!  
Now I am too sad to ask  
Questions of the old people,  
Fearing to hear tales  
Of horror and strife;  
I am not able, but yet  
The Emperor has given me  
A post, I hoping that he  
Can make the country  
Rise again like King Xuan  
Of Zhou, though for myself  
I simply grieve that now age  
And sickness take their toll.

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## ON ASKING MR. WU FOR THE SECOND TIME

Do please let your neighbor  
Who lives to the west of you  
Pick up the dates in front of  
Your home; for she is a woman  
Without food or children; only  
Her condition brings her to  
This necessity; surely she  
Ought not to fear you, because

You are not a local man, yet  
It would be good of you to try  
And help her, and save her  
Feelings; so do not fence off  
Your fruit; heavy taxation is  
The cause of her misery; the  
Effect of war on the helpless  
Brings us unending sorrow.