

# Du Fu

## The Tang Dynasty

China's Tang dynasty, existing between the 7th and 9th centuries, created a strong and centralized regime, with its capital at Chang'an (today's Xi'an city). From the dynasty's establishment in 618 until 755, the Tang enjoyed great social stability, economic prosperity, and cultural recovery. The Tang government, laws, literature, and religions became the models for China's neighbors, including Korea, Japan, Vietnam, Bohai, and Khitan. The Tang capital, Chang'an, a planned city with a population of one million, was undoubtedly the largest city in the world at the time, that embraced various cultures from around the world.



## Du Fu's Political Career



Du Fu was born during this era of prosperity in 712. He received a traditional Confucian education and was well-versed in the classics. Having failed the imperial examination in 735, he began travelling the empire. During the course of his travels, he

established his fame as a talented poet. He met and travelled with other great poets of the time, the most famous being Li Bai. Du Fu's encounter with Li Bai left an indelible imprint on his later literary career, as he authored poems years after the encounter, full of admiration for Li Bai.

Although from a well-regarded family of former officials, Du Fu's political career was not smooth. He failed the imperial examination a second time, and from 751 began to submit literary works full of ornamental flattery to the court in an attempt to attract imperial attention. These efforts resulted in Du's nominal appointment in the administration.

Known as a talented young poet, Du Fu's early poetry celebrated the beauty of the natural world and lamented the vicissitudes of history.



## The Growth of a Poet

The An Lushan rebellion, which broke out in 755, marked a rupture in the Tang empire's prosperity and one in Du Fu's personal life. An Lushan, the chief military commander in today's Beijing area, launched a sudden strike



on the central government and shook the entire empire for eight years. During the civil war, like many others, Du Fu experienced extreme personal hardship. As a refugee, he escaped in search of the court in exile. Although he had been given a lower-ranking position, he never gained the favor of the court and was removed from his post. Most of the time he struggled with poverty, hunger, and insecurity,



while also worrying about how to feed and protect his family. In 768, he began travelling southward. Upon reaching the Xiang River, he died of overindulgence in beef and wine after a long fast.

## The Features of Du's Poetry



Du Fu's later poetry describes the bitterness of war, an example of which is his "Ballad of the Army", and the sufferings of ordinary people in warfare. After 755, his verse began to reflect a profound compassion for humanity caught in the grip of senseless war.

As is widely acknowledged, Du Fu was well-versed in all poetic genres popular in his time, but he was particularly famous for his "regulated verse", which requires a tremendous genius in refined language skills. A highly erudite man, greatly familiar with China's classical traditions and possessed of great compassion for the human condition, Du Fu occupies an important place in the history of Chinese literature.

While obscure in his lifetime, over 1,500 of Du Fu's poems have been preserved and read by later generations. Chinese critics have referred to him as the "poet-historian" or the "poet-sage", and have revered him as one of the most brilliant poets in Chinese history.

