



A Little Primer of Tu Fu

David Hawkes

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The deepest and most varied of the Tang Dynasty poets, Tu Fu (Du Fu) is, in the words of David Hinton, the “first complete poetic sensibility in Chinese literature.” Tu Fu merged the public and the private, often in the same poem, as his subjects ranged from the horrors of war to the delights of friendship, from closely observed landscapes to remembered dreams, from the evocation of historical moments to a wry lament over his own thinning hair.

Although Tu Fu has been translated often, and often brilliantly, David Hawkes’s classic study, first published in 1967, is the only book that demonstrates in depth how his poems were written. Hawkes presents thirty-five poems in the original Chinese, with a pinyin transliteration, a character-by-character translation, and a commentary on the subject, the form, the historical background, and the individual lines. There is no other book quite like it for any language: a nuts-and-bolts account of how Chinese poems in general, and specifically the poems of one of the world’s greatest poets, are constructed. It’s an irresistible challenge for readers to invent their own translations.

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