

# A Humble Scholar or a Minister in Plain Robes: A Glimpse into Du Fu's Construction of Self-Image in His Realist Poetry

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**Abstract:** Du Fu stands celebrated as the preeminent realist poet in the annals of ancient Chinese literature, noted for his profound allegiance to the emperor and his deep empathy for the populace. His poetry, often echoing the insights of a high-ranking official or minister, assumes the form of grand odes and admonitory chapters, reflecting a distinctive self-image. This paper aims to analyze Du Fu's construction of self-image through a textual examination of his works, endeavoring to illuminate the unique aesthetic values embedded in his poetry.

**Keywords:** Du Fu's Poetry; Self-image; Ministerial Image.

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## 1. Introduction

Du Fu is acclaimed as the foremost realist poet of ancient China. Wen Yiduo, in his *Miscellaneous Discussions on Tang Poetry*, extolled him as "the first great poet in Chinese history, embodying the most solemn, magnificent, and enduring brilliance across four thousand years of cultural history." Yuan Zhen, composing his epitaph, commended him for "mastering historical and contemporary styles, rendering them uniquely his own." From the publication of "Annotations on Du," scholars have consistently remarked on his loyalty to the emperor and his patriotic zeal, intertwined with a solemn and poignant poetic style. Yet, many have narrowly defined Du Fu's self-image in his realist poetry as merely that of a Confucian scholar and a diligent feudal official. The author argues that Du Fu's poetic expression is deeply intertwined with his philosophy of "serving the emperor" and his dedication to the nation's rejuvenation. In his verse, Du Fu frequently casts himself not just as a traditional scholar or commoner, but as a minister and adept administrator within the imperial court. This paper will explore the following dimensions:

## 2. The Basis and Rationale for Establishing a Ministerial Self-Image

Modern literary theory suggests that the impetus for creative work stems from both personal and societal influences, which directly shape the content, artistic methods, and stylistic decisions of literary compositions.

Du Fu's expression of ministerial concern, epitomized by the phrase "worrying for the people and the realm throughout the years, sighing with a heart heated from within," consistently mirrors his national concerns, rooted deeply in his familial background and the values instilled during his upbringing. Although not of noble or royal descent, Du Fu originated from a typical bureaucratic family, which elucidates his deep appreciation for his brief tenures in official capacities. For instance, in the tenth year of Tianbao, after presenting *Three Grand Odes* and winning Emperor Xuanzong's favor—who subsequently appointed him to the

Jixian Academy—Du Fu jubilantly wrote in *Lines on Mutual Suspicion*, "I recall presenting three odes at Penglai Palace, astonished at my sudden fame. The scholars at the academy, forming a wall, watched as I penned words in the central hall." This excerpt reflects the poet's pride and delight at that moment. Nevertheless, Du Fu continually sought to embody Confucius's principle of "governing with virtue." For example, in *Poem Written After My Official Appointment*, he writes, "I would not be the magistrate of Hexi, distressed as it makes one bow down," expressing his reluctance to become a harsh official like the one depicted by Gao Shi in *Magistrate of Fengqiu*, where the duties of the position compel one to oppress the populace.

Du Fu's revered ancestor, Du Yu, also left a significant maxim: to achieve through actions and words. As documented in the *Book of Jin: Biography of Du Yu*, "Yu was well-versed and understood the dynamics of rise and fall, often asserting, 'Virtue is unattainable, but one can strive to achieve through actions and words.'" Throughout his life, Du Fu often exemplified this ethos, as "at fourteen or fifteen ventured into the realms of writing... at seven, aspired to heroics, opening his mouth to chant of the phoenix. At nine, he wrote in large characters, already composing a bagful of works." This not only equipped him to establish his legacy through words but also provided a robust foundation for managing the realm and devising strategies for unparalleled achievements.

Influenced and nurtured by his family tradition, Du Fu adhered to Confucianism and occupied official posts like many officials of the prosperous Tang period who aspired to accomplish great deeds. However, he never forgot that "poetry is my family's business." Thus, he dedicated his life to poetic creation, producing works replete with historical vicissitudes and akin to advisory chapters, some extending to a thousand characters, others still hundreds.

The quest for self-actualization is acknowledged as a higher-order need among individuals who inhabit significant social roles. Undoubtedly, the historical figure whom Du Fu most revered throughout his life was Zhuge Liang. He yearned to serve a wise ruler, akin to the legendary partnership of Liu Bei and Zhuge Liang, aspiring to assist such a leader in restoring the nation to the prosperous era depicted in his poem *Recalling the Past*. Thus, upon

establishing his residence in his thatched cottage in Chengdu, he promptly visited the Temple of Marquis Wu to pay homage to his idol, shedding tears of admiration. Du Fu consistently lauded Zhuge Liang's achievements with great reverence and tirelessly extolled his virtuous character. He wrote, "Zhuge's great name spans the cosmos" and "A single feather in the eternal skies," elevating Zhuge Liang to an unparalleled pinnacle of wisdom unmatched by other ancient sages. The poet himself was resolved to follow the enlightened path of this sage, striving to "exert himself to the utmost until death," thereby sculpting in his poetry the self-image of a capable minister and steadfast pillar of the state. This undeniably confirms the foundation of Du Fu's poetic self-image, anchored in the portrayal of such esteemed and virtuous ministers and advisors.

In his poem *Phoenix Terrace*, Du Fu vividly expressed a loyal minister's heartfelt dedication with phrases such as "I can split open my heart," "My heart as firm as bamboo," and "My blood as sweet as the finest wine." Does this not depict the image of a minister willing to sacrifice everything for the welfare of the state? In this poem, the poet employs a fledgling phoenix to symbolize the nation's prosperity and its vulnerability during times of national crisis with the loss of the phoenix's mother. The poet declares his readiness to sacrifice his heart and blood for the nation, aiming to "restore the nation's glory and alleviate the common people's sorrows," vividly demonstrating his readiness to face life and death in the pursuit of national prosperity. This indeed portrays the glowing image of a compassionate, loyal, and conscientious minister.

Therefore, it becomes comprehensible why, even when destitute in Kuizhou and tasting the bitterness of locust leaves, Du Fu still contemplated "the emperor enjoying a moment of respite," clearly exhibiting the demeanor of a close royal advisor. Even in dire straits, he boldly criticized the complacency of other officials with, "The supreme sovereign alone bears the worries of the state; how do you, gentlemen, respond to this era of peace?"—a sentiment far removed from mere rhetoric or moral coercion, but genuinely heartfelt. He consistently linked his fate with the nation's fortunes, hence his personal joys and sorrows were deeply intertwined with the state's destiny. His renowned poem *Spring View* serves as a poignant elegy to the chaos of the An Lushan Rebellion, portraying a landscape devastated by war, suffering, and widespread desolation.

### 3. The Nature of a Remonstrating Official

Du Fu harbored a profound patriotic desire "to elevate the emperor to the stature of Yao and Shun and restore ancient virtues," coupled with sharp political acumen and a strong sense of social responsibility. Previous research has validated Du Fu's profound allegiance to the emperor, which should not be misconstrued as mere blind loyalty. Du Fu's loyalty was grounded in his commitment to providing sincere counsel and aiding the emperor in recognizing and amending faults, and it is particularly commendable that his poetry reflects the spirit of satirical allegory prevalent in the pre-Qin *Poetry and Elegies*, infused with an acute awareness of national peril.

As a poet who epitomized the culmination of great literary traditions, Du Fu highly valued Chen Zi'ang's approach to responsive poetry, thus he especially admired Chen's *Encounters* for its emotional depth and generously praised

Yuan Jie's *Chongling March* and *Thieves Retreat* for their expressive commendation, regarding the former as displaying "noble sentiments" and deducing from the latter that "Jie indeed was the backbone of the state." Consequently, in his preface to *March of Chongling by Lord Yuan*, Du Fu noted, "I did not anticipate encountering this use of metaphorical structure again, with its subtle yet potent expressions, which inspired poetry and enriched the scrolls." Here, his mention of "metaphorical structure" undoubtedly relates to the Confucian literary concept of allegorical criticism intended for admonition.

Through Du Fu's poetry, we not only traverse vast and complex social terrains but also hear the poignant entreaties of a remonstrating official. Poems such as *Lament for Chentao* and *Lament for Qingban* showcase Du Fu's perspective as a composed and objective statesman. These verses strikingly illuminate his impartial accounts of Fang Guan's tactical blunders that led to battlefield defeats: "In the tenth month of the first winter, sons of noble families drowned in the waters of Chentao. Under vast wilderness skies, clear and devoid of the sounds of conflict, forty thousand righteous troops perished in a single day." The gruesomeness of war, the enormity of the sacrifice, and the tragic valor of the soldiers are chillingly portrayed as "mountain snows and river ices, the desolate fields are but ashes and white bones." Following the twin defeats in the eleventh year of the Tianbao era, Du Fu astutely recognized Fang Guan's limitations—a scholar unversed in the nuances of military strategy, clinging to outdated chariot warfare tactics. Fang Guan was indeed "all talk and no action." Yet, Du Fu deeply appreciated the sentiment, "In times of dire emergency, daring to embrace life and death! Why have you not heard, the punishments are impending?" This declaration quintessentially captures the expected demeanor and vision of a remonstrating official.

In poems like *Chariots March* and *Ballad of Fair Ladies*, Du Fu not only marks significant milestones in his poetic journey but also metaphorically depicts the decline from the zenith of the Tang Dynasty. By this period, Du Fu's critique of societal maladies was deeper and more prescient than that of his contemporaries, Gao Shi and Li Bai. *Ballad of Fair Ladies* employs detailed and almost photorealistic imagery akin to classical Chinese bird-and-flower paintings to vividly bring to life the beauty and opulence of the Yang sisters—their exquisite appearances, luxurious garments, and meticulously prepared foods are rendered in meticulous detail. Yet, the underlying satirical message is unmistakable. "The overwhelming power can scorch hands; beware, lest the Prime Minister becomes enraged," incisively criticizes Yang Guozhong's unrivaled arrogance and domineering influence. Meanwhile, "Snow of Yang flowers falls over the white duckweed, a bluebird flies away with a red kerchief" mercilessly exposes and denounces the shameless and vile deeds of the Yang siblings, peeling back the veil on the deeply embarrassing political scandals of the Great Tang Empire, directing its critique at the empire's profound corruption. As Pu Qilong observed in *Understanding Du Fu's Heart*, "Not a single mocking word is penned that does not deride; not a single sigh is heard that does not lament." The poet mourns the impending calamities facing the Tang Empire, echoing the vocal protests of an official brave enough to offer forthright criticism.

Du Fu's poems serve as admonitions to the emperor, revealing his strategies for national revival and his deep concern for the state's welfare. His poetry, grandiose and

forceful like the great Han Dynasty fu poetry, was self-described as "rivaling Yang Xiong in fu, akin to Zijian in poetry" (from *Poems Presented to Wei Left Minister*). This underscores the vigor of Du Fu's realism in his poetic themes and series. Yan Yu, with his keen insight, noted, "Like Shaoling (Du Fu), his learning is profound, his poetry often resembling fu." Du Fu's epic *Northern Expedition* is considered by Guan Shiming to be "in the style of fu."

*Northern Expedition* was composed in the second year of the Zhide era. In May, after Du Fu presented a memorial in defense of Fang Guan, he incurred Emperor Suzong's displeasure. Consequently, in the intercalary eighth month, he departed Fengxiang to visit his family in Qiang Village, Fuzhou. Yet, he begins the poem with a reflection: "Ashamed of the grace I have received, by imperial decree I return to my humble abode." Though he had fallen out of favor, he still perceived this as a gracious act, reflecting both his political loyalty and a touch of irony. As a remonstrating official, Du Fu never shirked his duty, continually offering suggestions to the emperor: "With my leave taken to approach the throne, my heart trembles, having been away so long. Though I lack the boldness to admonish, I fear the emperor might overlook something." His earnest sincerity shines as brightly as the sun and moon. Despite feeling overlooked, he remained, "Wiping tears, reluctant to leave; the road ahead still seems hazy." Amidst ongoing wars and chaos, the emperor, in the eyes of the admonishing official, still held the potential to be a ruler who could revitalize the dynasty. Du Fu believed that the ongoing rebellion by the Eastern tribes was partly due to the emperor's oversight, a vivid demonstration of his character as a remonstrating official. Even when faced with cold indifference from the emperor, he stood firm in his role as a crucial advisor, deeply concerned about the nation: "With the cosmos marred by wounds, when will my worries cease?" With the nation in peril and the court engrossed in crisis, a loyal official should not abandon his post, as this would contradict his very nature. Therefore, he remained anxious and nostalgic, not preoccupied with personal advancement or disgrace but rather focused on national affairs and policy considerations, eager to rectify what the emperor had missed. The overarching theme of the poem revolves around concerns for the nation's future and the well-being of its people, portraying the poet as a loyal and patriotic minister.

Du Fu also managed to provide his constructive suggestions, driven by the tragic sights and harsh realities he witnessed on his journey home, which stirred intense emotions within him: "A chilling wind comes from the northwest, bleakness follows the retreating enemy." Standing steadfast in his role as a remonstrating official, Du Fu believed that the emperor should not overly depend on foreign troops for support, reflecting his deep foresight with the warning, "Inviting gods is easy, sending them away is hard." He was convinced that "the official army should penetrate deeper," believing that relying on existing troops to infiltrate behind enemy lines would lead to successfully breaking the rebels. He boldly proposed initiatives like "opening the regions of Qingzhou and Xuzhou, then swiftly planning to capture Hengshan and Jieshi Mountains," suggesting a direct strategy to reclaim the capitals and then striking at the heart of An Lushan's stronghold. He believed such actions would turn the tide of calamity to a time when "misfortune befalls the barbarians, and the situation leads to their capture within months." Most importantly, in Du Fu's view, it was essential to rectify the emperor's governance and clarify the roles of his

ministers. At the end of the lengthy poem, Du Fu reminded Emperor Suzong to remember the Incident at Mawei, crucial for truly adhering to "the imperial mandate that should not cease," and realizing "the glorious reign of Emperor Taizong, established on broad and ambitious ideals." Indeed, Du Fu harbored immense sympathy for Yang Guifei, who "died before the horses in twisting agony," as expressed in his poem *A Song of Sobbing by the River*, shedding tears of sympathy for a beauty lost to time. Yet here, the poet stands on the principle of national interest, concerned about the emperor being overly influenced by his courtiers, hence affirming Emperor Xuanzong's decision to put Yang Guifei to death, and regarding Chen Yuanli as a minister who "stemmed the raging tides after they had begun." We cannot help but be moved by the poet's deep concern and should also see how Du Fu cherished his role as an unheralded admonishing official, Left Assistant Collector of Literary Works. His poetry not only depicted the social panorama around the An Lushan Rebellion but also did not shy away from advising the emperor, offering counsel to support the state. His loyalty to the emperor and his patriotism were inseparable; he stood on the platform of national interest to practice the political integrity of a scholar-official. Under his powerful literary craftsmanship, he did not hesitate to criticize the lavishness and extreme desires of Yang Guifei and Emperor Xuanzong, "A hundred horses died in the valley, to this day the old grieve." He satirized Emperor Suzong's fear of his courtiers and ruthlessly unveiled the false benevolence of Emperor Daizong, "The Son of Heaven bestows grace, yet the common folk grow more desolate." Thus, he emerged more as an official who spoke truth to power, daring to say what others would not, far from being a sycophant who flatters those above.

#### 4. The Concerns of a Ministerial Advisor

From an early age, Du Fu's poetry was infused with a profound sense of foreboding, reflecting not only his empathy for the populace but also his grave concerns about the monarch's mismanagement and the uncertain fate of the nation.

The origins of Du Fu's foreboding can be traced to his admiration and emulation of Qu Yuan and Jia Yi. Du Fu esteemed Qu Yuan highly, a sentiment palpable in his verse, as noted in lines like "secretly I climb, fitting my carriage to that of Qu Yuan and Song Yu" (from *Six Quatrains V*) and "the poet laments his invisibility" (from *Casual Poem*). These phrases underscore the profound impact of Qu Yuan's patriotic concerns on Du Fu. Through works such as *Journey from the Capital to Fengxian County: Reflecting in Five Hundred Characters* and "Three Officials and Three Farewells (i.e. *Xin'an Official*, *Shihao Official*, *Tongguan Official*, *Newlywed Farewell*, *No Family Farewell*, and *Farewell to Old Age*)," it becomes evident that Du Fu's emulation of Qu Yuan was not merely stylistic but a full embrace of his spirit and acute crisis consciousness. Consequently, the astute scholar Huang Sheng has suggested that Du Fu's poetry "thus takes the *Elegies* and *Odes* as its framework," indicating that Du Fu's foreboding derived from the foundational elements of the *Elegies* and *Odes*, liberating it from the constraints of traditional forms and endowing it with expansive and profound dimensions.

Du Fu's concerns also stemmed from his extraordinary

political insight. He possessed an exceptional ability to foresee political upheavals before they became manifest. For instance, in *Journey from the Capital to Fengxian County: Reflecting in Five Hundred Characters* and *Chariots March*, even as the An Lushan Rebellion had yet to erupt and the Tang Empire was basking in a period of splendor, peace, and celebratory news of border victories, many interpreted these temporary military successes as signs of a robust and powerful nation. However, Du Fu discerned the excessive indulgence of the Yang siblings and the backdrop of Emperor Xuanzong's pride and decadence. He perceived the seeds of decline amidst prosperity and foresaw the impending storms and the withering of blossoms amid the resplendent flora—a truly remarkable foresight. In *Journey from the Capital to Fengxian County: Reflecting in Five Hundred Characters*, Du Fu continued in his almost prosaic epic style to depict the hedonistic indulgences of the Tang dynasty's ruling elite at Li Mountain, already predicting the impending political disaster. Clearly, Du Fu never perceived himself merely as a subordinate or an ordinary citizen. His awareness of political crises and his deep foreboding were consistently articulated from the standpoint of a high-ranking official or even as a close adviser to the emperor.

When we examine closely the "diagnostic report" Du Fu presents in *Reflecting in Five Hundred Characters*, the symptoms depicted are: "The air over the Imperial Pools is stagnant, the Imperial Guards clash shields. The emperor and his court linger in pleasure, the music stirs deep entanglements." With just a few strokes, he sketches a scene of steaming springs and bustling guards at the Li Palace at dawn, creating an atmosphere of thousands of facets, as described in *The Song of Everlasting Regret*: "From Li Palace high up in the clouds, celestial music is heard everywhere." The true malady, however, is: "Behind rich gates, food rots while bones of the frozen dead litter the roads." As the saying goes, "The concern is not scarcity but inequity; not poverty but instability." Historical facts also support what Du Fu articulated; during the fourteenth year of the Tianbao era (755 AD), between October and November. In October of that year, Emperor Xuanzong and Yang Guifei retreated to the Huaqing Palace at Li Mountain to escape the cold; by November, An Lushan had mobilized his rebellion. As Du Fu passed by Li Mountain, Emperor Xuanzong and his consort were lost in their heavenly palace pleasures, oblivious to the fact that An Lushan's forces were ready and poised to strike. Thus, it can be argued that Du Fu's political foresight matched that of any wise minister or sage counselor throughout history.

Du Fu's reservations about his role as a minister find a parallel in his apprehensions and critiques of the rampant militarism that prevailed since Emperor Xuanzong's era. In *Chariots March*, the poem unfolds with a broad sweeping vista of "wagons rumbling, horses whinnying," before narrowing to a poignant scene: "Mothers and wives walk to send them off," where the simple act of walking poignantly captures the tragic resignation of families bidding farewell to their loved ones, who march towards an almost certain demise. Beneath the veneer of this so-called golden age, cries that "pierced the clouds" still resonated. Could it be that the vitality of this "golden age" was as fraught and perilous as the existence of these soldiers? Isn't this precisely the kind of reflection befitting a loyal minister like the poet, who envisions himself as a high-ranking advisor? A similar sentiment is echoed in his poem *Leaving for the Frontier, Part VI*:

**Draw the bow with all your might, use arrows long and strong.**

**Aim for the horse first, then the rider; capture the leader to defeat the foe.**

**There is a limit to how many should be slain; each state has its own borders.**

**If we can control aggression, why should we indulge in excessive bloodshed?**

This poem, while ostensibly capturing a soldier's sentiments on a military campaign, reveals upon closer examination wisdom and advocacy for humane policy—"ceasing warfare as the true act of valor"—uncharacteristic of an ordinary soldier. Thus, Zhang Hui, in *The Essence of Du Fu's Poetry*, regards these lines as "profound economic words, uttered through the mouth of a guard." This statement underscores Du Fu's ministerial acumen and his broad, insightful vision. While Du Fu's lines may not be celebrated for their technical brilliance, diction, or imagery, his critique against perpetual bloodshed on the frontier, as in "the blood from the border wars has turned the sea red, yet the Emperor's desire to expand has not ceased," is unmistakable. His poetry serves as a caution against relentless military campaigns, "The empire is already vast; why expand it further?" and critiques misguided leadership, "How can the Emperor, a supposed hero, command his troops across vast skies?" These views should be interpreted as the poet's counsel to the emperor, advocating for peace, just as the repeated "Do you not see" in *Chariots March* seeks to elevate his genuine concerns to the divine, in hopes that the emperor might learn from past dynasties to "nurture domestic affairs and avoid the governance failures that lead to external military victories but internal political decay." The intended audience for these reflections is none other than the emperor himself.

Additionally, despite often referring to himself as a "simple countryman" or "decayed scholar," Du Fu's understanding of the political terrain was always sharp and discerning, laden with unique insights and an inherent foreboding; one cannot help but view him as bearing the stature of a "cabinet minister in the mountains." For instance, in *Washing the Army Horses*, penned at a time when the Tang army had just recaptured the two capitals and An Qingxu had retreated to Ye City, soon to be followed by Shi Siming's surrender, the poet discerned "those who curry favor and gain undeserved rewards create intolerable risks." In his eyes, the resurgence of corrupt officials could potentially reignite the An Lushan Rebellion. He then commends Zhang Hao and Fang Guan as figures who stand against this decay. At the time, both had been dismissed from their posts, and the poet aspired for their reinstatement, recognizing their contributions, much like his laudation for the generals of the revival. His plea "should be employed again beneath the banners" showcases a nuanced and profound political sagacity. Du Fu, undaunted by the potential dangers of "a new chief brings in new aids," bravely reiterated his political stance for the welfare of the state and its people, irrespective of personal peril or reproach. Does this not embody the spirit of a fiercely loyal minister, ready to risk everything in pursuit of truth?

## 5. The Thoughts of a Confucian Minister

Du Fu's ideological foundation is aptly captured by Liu Xizai in *The Overview of Arts*, who observes, "Throughout his life, Shaoling remained firmly within the confines of

Confucian thought." A central tenet of Confucian philosophy, the concept of "prioritizing the people," is articulated in the *Book of History: Songs of the Five Sons* by the maxim, "The people are the foundation of the state; if the foundation is stable, the state is peaceful." Mencius elaborated on this principle, declaring "the people are most precious, the sovereign is least," and even Xunzi, a heterodox thinker within Confucian circles and a proponent of Legalist ideas, advocated the political ethic of "the ruler is the boat, the people are the water." These elements were not only integrated into Du Fu's worldview but also permeated his poetry. However, the author believes that Du Fu's concern for the common people always stemmed from the perspective of a minister involved in policy planning and the literati class, managing to connect his personal misfortunes and family tragedies with the sufferings of the broader populace.

In Du Fu's renowned "Three Officials and Three Farewells," even as he witnessed the dire circumstances of the masses, he maintained a macroscopic perspective on current policies and the living conditions of the people. In *Xin'an Official*, the poem opens with the poet encountering the conscription of underage boys, termed "middle-boys," by officials on the roads of Xin'an County. Rather than avoiding the brusque and barbaric officials, the poet confronts them with the question, "I ask the Xin'an official: Is there really no one else in the county to enlist?" This response aligns more with the duties of a high-ranking imperial inspector overseeing local governance than those of a mere humble scholar. The poet appears to be conducting field research, meticulously examining and documenting how the central government's conscription policy was implemented locally. He challenges the local officials with, "The middle-boys are frail and small, how can they defend the royal city?" This question displays no timidity or deference but rather resembles a superior's critique of a subordinate's failure to fulfill duties. Though his challenge leads to no immediate change, he still witnesses the distressing scene of "fat boys having mothers to send them off, thin boys leaving alone and desolate." However, when he begins to console the elders, he says, "Moreover, the royal troops are just, their care and discipline clear. Do not cry tears of blood when sending them off; the commanders are like fathers and brothers." These words surely comforted the families of the conscripts, but Du Fu consistently speaks from the perspective of the court, persuading them to trust in the clear rewards and punishments of the royal army, urging them not to be overly sorrowful, emphasizing "the commanders are like fathers and brothers." Up to this point, Du Fu wants everyone to believe that the royal troops are benevolent and the generals paternal figures; this illustrates that the poet is amicably explaining the government's conscription policies to the people, undoubtedly stemming from his genuinely kind intentions. At this moment, his emotions are highly conflicted and pained: supporting the state's suppression of rebellion and empathizing with the people's hardships represent an agonizing dilemma for him. However, his internal balance still seems to lean towards the state's side.

Du Fu was by no means an adherent of the Legalist school; he bore no resemblance to the followers of Shang Yang or the rulers of the Qin dynasty, who regarded the populace with detached indifference. Although deeply moved by the suffering of the people amidst the ravages of war, he held that the sacrifices were still justified in a time when quelling the rebellion seemed within reach. Thus, in *Xin'an Official*, Du

Fu did not starkly oppose officials against commoners, nor did he portray the officials as entirely ruthless and malevolent; his anguish is profound, acknowledging that any decision made under the dilemma of balancing family and state interests was inevitably harsh and fraught with moral complexity. Yet, he still pinned his hopes on "Our army's capture of Xiangzhou, eagerly awaiting its pacification," signifying that his focus remained steadfast on the nation and the imperial court. He adhered to the belief that "Under a destroyed nest, no egg remains intact." Consequently, in the concluding poem of the "Three Officials" series, *Tongguan Official*, Du Fu shifts his focus from conscription to offering solace and praise to the soldiers defending the city, noting, "How hastily the soldiers build the fortifications at Tongguan," and once again casting himself in the role of an inspector, with the commander at Tongguan even "inviting me to dismount and showing me the landscape." The term "inviting" underscores the respect accorded to the poet. Before departing, he earnestly admonishes the commander, "Please instruct the guardians of the pass to be vigilant and not follow in the footsteps of Geshu!" as though he himself were a high-ranking official guiding border generals in their defense strategies. Therefore, the poet's perspective transcended the immediate suffering of individual households; he considered state and national interests, compiling what amounted to a substantial "research report" after weighing various factors, a perspective that also justifies his poetry being termed "history in verse."

Admittedly, Du Fu was a true advocate for the people. Even during his most impoverished times, his concern for the plight of the poor never waned, fundamentally distinguishing him from typical exploiters. *Another Letter Presenting to Wu Lang* is particularly poignant because, despite his own poverty, the poet still remembers a woman "without food or children," referring to Wu Lang, a younger relative, but using the formal term "present," which underscores his sincere advocacy for "the lives of the common people." The poet questions how this relative could deny an old woman, destitute and bereft of her children, the means to stave off hunger with some dates? Du Fu profoundly understands the plight of the impoverished, believing that this woman's actions were driven not by shamelessness but by dire necessity. In his view, the people are not contemptible beings who forsake their dignity for minor gains; thus, not only should we refrain from interfering with her gathering dates, but we must also show greater kindness. Ultimately, employing his broad and elevated ministerial perspective, Du Fu advises Wu Lang to embrace a concern for the wider world, reflecting on the long-term suffering caused by enduring wars that sap the life and drain the wealth of all, and to extend greater warmth to others. Thus, it is evident that the ministerial lens does not diminish the poet's compassionate heart towards the common folk; rather, it enables him to adopt a loftier vantage point of thought and emotion, extending as much benevolence as possible.

Moreover, Du Fu recognized that the calamities befalling the people were largely due to the rulers' excessive indulgence in pleasures, the inertia of administrative officials at all levels, and irrational policies—a recognition that is certainly commendable and an intrinsic aspect of his character that has led him to be revered as the "Poet Sage." For instance, in *Ganlin*, he observed that farmers, driven by "the awe of the royal authority," were compelled to "fly far in rebellion," though he, like a benevolent envoy, advised the people against rebellion, urging them to "die by the king's command." He

attributed the farmers' desperate actions to "royal authority," "heavy taxation," and "excessive levies"—is this not a case of officials provoking the people to revolt? Is this not a manifestation of the saying, "oppressive government is fiercer than a tiger"? Yet, his proposed solution was still to hope that "someone could knock on the emperor's door, to order a reduction in taxes" (as seen in *Staying at Huashi Fortress*), ultimately directing his criticism towards the highest ruler.

Hence, it is precisely because of his profound loyalty to the emperor and dedication to serving the country that Du Fu could extend his vast compassion to care for every unfortunate life amidst great turmoil. Even as he composed *Another Letter Presenting to Wu Lang* to advise his relative, Du Fu himself was a destitute man bereft of any support. Concurrently, in his poem *Journey from the Capital to Fengxian County: Reflecting in Five Hundred Characters*, he daringly compared himself to Ji and Qi, paragons of virtue, yet during a bountiful autumn, he faced the tragic death of his young son from starvation. Nevertheless, his fervor to "help the world when capable" never waned; commendably, Du Fu extended his benevolence despite his own dire circumstances. Mencius once said, "Yu thought of those in the world who were drowning as if he were drowning; Ji thought of those in the world who were starving as if he himself were starving. That is why they felt such urgency." Du Fu likened himself to Ji and Qi, which is why he stated, "Throughout the years, my concern for the people never ceased," embodying the self-positioning of a Confucian minister always striving to deeply empathize with the populace.

## 6. Conclusion

In summary, the image of Du Fu as a minister remains a consistently stable self-representation in his poetry. Although there are lines expressing frustration, such as "The Confucian cap often misleads," "The whole universe decays because of Confucian scholars," and "What use is fleeting fame to bind this life," these are merely sporadic expressions of discontent and do not reflect a permanent belief or the spiritual strength that sustained him through life's adversities. Therefore, his works like "Three Officials and Three Farewells," and even his most significant compositions such as *Northern Expedition* and *Journey from the Capital to Fengxian County: Reflecting in Five Hundred Characters*, may seem to lack literary flair or poetic intensity. However, the beauty of Du Fu's poetry lies precisely in its complete expression and its overwhelming emotional impact. He inadvertently embodies the perspective and stature of a capable minister and court advisor, coupled with profound loyalty to the emperor and love for the people, addressing the national calamities and the people's suffering during prosperous times.

His literary perspective always carried a utilitarian aspect aimed at serving the emperor, yet this utilitarianism was often overwhelmed and even dissolved by his profoundly moving and genuine emotions. He consistently used clear and strong moral sentiments to narrate current events, masterfully distilling the tears and bloodshed of the people during times of chaos into his narratives, blending narrative, lyrical expression, description, and discourse into a cohesive whole. Using vivid, fleshed-out, and authentic artistic representations, he painted a broad and clear tableau of the social life of his era, leaving behind a vivid, detailed, and epic poetic history. All of this was developed based on his consistent self-image as an unaffiliated minister. Even though

he lamented, "My life is filled with aimless wandering; when will it ever end?" he persisted, driven by the subconscious belief and instinct that "the sunflower tilts towards the sun; its nature cannot be stolen," always leaving behind in the history of Chinese poetry a lean but towering figure...

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