

Sources from the Past

The Poet Du Fu on Tang Dynasty Wars

The eighth century was a golden age of Chinese poetry. Among the foremost writers of the era was Du Fu (712–770 c.E.), often considered one of China's two greatest poets. Born into a prominent Confucian family, Du Fu wrote in his early years about the beauty of the natural world. After the rebellion of An Lushan, however, he fell into poverty and experienced difficulties. Not surprisingly, poetry of his later years lamented the chaos of the late eighth century. In the three following poems, Du Fu offered a bitter perspective on the wars that plagued China in the 750s and 760s.

The Recruiting Officers at the Village of the Stone Moat

I sought a lodging for the night, at sunset, in the Stone Moat village.

Recruiting officers, who seize people by night, were there.
A venerable old man climbed over the wall and fled.
An old woman came out of the door and peered.
What rage in the shouts of the Recruiting Officers.
What bitterness in the weeping of the old woman.
I heard the words of the woman as she pled her cause before them:

'My three sons are with the frontier guard at Yeh Cheng,
From one son I have received a letter.
A little while ago two sons died in battle.
He who remains has stolen a temporary lease of life;
The dead are finished forever.
In the house there is still no grown man;
Only my grandson at the breast.
The mother of my grandson has not gone;
Going out, coming in, she has not a single whole skirt.
I am an old, old woman, and my strength is failing,
But I beg to go with the Recruiting Officers when they return this night.

I will eagerly agree to act as a servant at Ho Yang;
I am still able to prepare the early morning meal'.
The sound of words ceased in the long night,
It was as though I heard the darkness choke with tears.

him emperor. During the next several years, he and his army subjected the warlords to their authority and consolidated Song control throughout China. He then persuaded his generals to retire honorably to a life of leisure so that they would not seek to displace him, and he set about organizing a centralized administration that placed military forces under tight supervision.

Song Taizu regarded all state officials, even minor functionaries in distant provinces, as servants of the imperial

At daybreak I went on my way.
Only the venerable old man was left.

Crossing the Frontier I

When bows are bent, they should be bent strongly;
When arrows are used, they should be long.
The bowmen should first shoot the horses.
In taking the enemy prisoner, the leader should be taken first.
There should be no limit to the killing of men.
In making a country, there should naturally be a border.
If it were possible to regulate rebellion,
Would so many be killed and wounded?

Crossing the Frontier II

At dawn, the conscripted soldiers enter the camp outside the Eastern Gate.
At sunset they cross the bridge at Ho Yang.
The setting sunlight is reflected on the great flags.
Horses neigh. The wind whines—whines
Ten thousand tents are spread across the level sand.
Officers instruct their companies.
The bright moon hangs in the middle of the sky.
The written orders are strict that the night shall be still and empty.
Sadness everywhere. A few sounds from the nomad flute fill the air.
The strong soldiers are no longer proud, they quiver with sadness.
May one ask who is their general?
Perhaps it is Ho Piao Yao.

For Further Reflection

- From your reading of these poems, what was the impact of the Tang wars on the poet Du Fu personally, and on Chinese society in general?

Source: Irving Y. Lo, trans. *Columbia Anthology of Traditional Chinese Literature*. New York, 1994, p. 214.

government. In exchange for their loyalty, Song rulers rewarded these officials handsomely. They vastly expanded the bureaucracy based on merit by creating more opportunities for individuals to seek a Confucian education and take civil service examinations. They accepted many more candidates into the bureaucracy than their Sui and Tang predecessors, and they provided generous salaries for those who qualified for government appointments. They even placed civil bureaucrats in charge of military forces.