

The Images of Artists in Du Fu's Poems

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Abstract

Du Fu has written about different types of artists in his poems. Such poems not only document the life and achievement of the artists but also serve as a mirror of the ups and downs of the poet himself and those of Tang Dynasty. This paper will focus on “Song of a Painting Presented to General Cao Ba” (丹青引赠曹将军霸), “On Seeing a Student of Mistress Gongsun Dance the 'Sword Dance'”(观公孙大娘弟子舞剑器行), and “Meeting Li Guinian in Jiangnan” (江南逢李龟年), exploring the correlation between the artists, the poet and the country, how Du Fu's attitudes towards hardship and pain change with the passage of time as well as how the poet finally reaches transcendence by the time he met Li Guinian.

Keywords: Du Fu, artists in poetry, painting and dance in verse, rise and fall of Tang

Introduction

Du Fu's poems about artists—a painter, a dancer, and a musician—are significant not merely for their documentary value but for the way they weave together three strands of experience: the lives of the artists, the trajectory of the poet himself, and the fate of Tang Dynasty. In each poem, the artist serves as both a biographical subject and a reflection of Du Fu's own predicament. Yet the poems differ markedly in their emotional register and in the poet's stance towards suffering. “Song of a Painting Presented to General Cao Ba” (hereafter

Received 30 April 2026; revised 17 May 2026; accepted 28 May 2026.

Citation: Lu, W., & Lao, B. (2026). The Images of Artists in Du Fu's Poems. *Verse Version*, 15(1), 90–107.
<https://doi.org/10.64699/26OGPR1575>

referred to as “Song of a Painting”) and “On Seeing a Student of Mistress Gongsun Dance the 'Sword Dance’” (hereafter referred to as “Dance the 'Sword Dance’”) dwell on the inescapable pattern of rise and fall, but the former focuses on the sorrow about the intertwined fate of Cao Ba and that of himself, and further extending to mourning about the fate of artists in general, while the latter plunges deeper into lamenting over the destiny of the country. Both poems end with a sad note and neither provided any resolution. “Meeting Li Guinian in Jiangnan”, by contrast, achieves something different: a quiet transcendence in which the poet accepts both the beauty and the transience of the world. Drawing on classical Chinese commentaries as well as modern scholarship, this paper traces this arc from entanglement in grief to a state of composed acceptance, arguing that the progression across these three poems reveals a profound shift in Du Fu’s late-life sensibility.

A considerable body of scholarship has examined Du Fu’s poems on artists. Chinese critics such as Pu Qilong (浦起龙, 1679–1762) have long noted the fusion of personal lament and historical reflection in these works. In English-language studies, Stephen Owen’s (2016) monumental complete translation and commentary—*The Poetry of Du Fu*—provides the most comprehensive treatment, attending closely to the interplay between the poet’s self-representation and his portrayal of other figures. More recent research, such as the essays collected in *Reading Du Fu: Nine Views* (2020), has opened new perspectives on Du Fu’s Kuizhou-period and late poems, offering historically nuanced close readings that illuminate the poet’s evolving relationship with empire, memory, and art. The present paper builds on these foundations, but focuses specifically on how Du Fu’s treatment of three artists—Cao Ba, Mistress Gongsun (and her disciple), and Li Guinian—charts a trajectory of emotional and spiritual change.

1. “Song of a Painting Presented to General Cao Ba”: The Parallel Between Poet and Painter

“Song of a Painting Presented to General Cao Ba” was written around 764, when An Lushan Rebellion had just ended (755-763), and Du Fu was wandering in the Southwest of China where encountered Cao Ba. Unlike the other two poems, in which Du Fu explicitly narrates the circumstances of his encounter with the artist, “Song of a Painting” dispenses with such preliminaries and begins instead with Cao Ba's biography. This structural choice is significant: it signals that the poem will explore the convergence of two lives through the indirect medium of art criticism and biographical narration. Du Fu knows Cao Ba better than the other artists², and their experiences most closely parallel each other. Although Du Fu himself does not appear as a character in the poem, his presence is everywhere felt beneath the surface of his description of the painter. I shall examine this parallelism through four interconnected dimensions: family heritage, artistic ambition, imperial recognition, and the shared experience of decline.

The poem's opening lines establish the first dimension of parallelism: both Cao Ba and Du Fu descend from families distinguished by both martial and literary accomplishments. Cao Ba is the descendant of Cao Cao (155–220 AD), the warrior-emperor whose poems—along with those of his sons—occupy a significant place in Chinese literary history. For Du Fu, his lineage can be traced back to the renowned general Du Yu (杜预, 222–285 AD) of the Jin Dynasty, while his grandfather Du Shenyan (杜审言, 645–708 AD) was one of the most prominent officials and poets in the reign of Empress Wu. Both families thus embody a dual legacy of statecraft and cultural achievement, a heritage that would have shaped the self-understanding of both men as they navigated the tumultuous world of mid-Tang China.

² Du Fu has written two more poems about Cao Ba include “Viewing General Cao's Painting of Horses at Clerk Wei Feng's Residence” (韦讽录事宅观曹将军画马图) and “Quatrains on the Living and the Deceased” (存殁口号); in the former poem, especially, Du Fu gave a personal narrative about watching Cao Ba painting horses at a friend's place.

Yet family background alone does not determine a person's fate; what Du Fu emphasizes in the poem about Cao Ba is not merely the latter's inheritance but also his significant achievement in artist pursuit. The word *wencai* (文采) in the second line serves as the pivot from heritage to personal ambition. In classical usage, *wencai* (Li, 1990, p.199) can refer to rich and bright colors in the visual arts (as in Zhuangzi: "if the five colors were not confused, who would need vibrant colors?" [五色不乱，孰为文采]) and also to the brilliance of literary writing, as in *The History of South Dynasty* 南史: "the writing is especially flowery"(文采犹艳)(Li, 2000. P.462). Du Fu applies this word to Cao Ba, who continues the cultural legacy of his family and is highly commended for his paintings. Notably, Du Fu uses the same word *wencai* to describe his own literary achievement in "Do Not Suspect Me: A Ballad" (莫相疑行): "my writing's flourish in days gone by stirred the ruler of men"³ (往时文采动人主)(Owen, 2016, p.58-61). The shared term signals a shared identity, and on top of their distinguished family background and remarkable achievement, both men are defined by their keen dedication to art.

In the second half of the third line, Du Fu writes: "your only regret was never surpassing Wang Xizhi" (但恨无过王右军). The phrase "only regret" 但恨 reveals both Cao Ba's achievement and his aspiration. The word "only" 但 implies that he is already a master calligrapher; his "regret" (恨) signals an ambition that remains unfulfilled—the desire to be the very best. In the next line, "in painting you took no note of old age coming upon you, wealth and rank seemed to *me* no more than drifting clouds" (丹青不知老将至，富贵于我如浮云), Du Fu captures the artist's complete absorption in his work, and the phrase "take no note of" (不知) is crucial. It suggests not mere diligence but a kind of self-

³ All quotations from Du Fu's poems selected in this paper are translated by Steven Owen.

forgetfulness, describing an artist who is so devoted to art that the passage of time becomes irrelevant. For Du Fu, this quality of absorption finds a clear parallel in his own life as a poet. In “By the River I Came on Waters that Looked like a Sea: A Short Account” (江上值水如海势聊短述), he writes: “As a person I'm one-sided by nature, addicted to lovely lines, if my words don't startle others, in death I will not quit” (为人性僻耽佳句，语不惊人死不休)(Owen, 2016, p.16-17). His determination to produce startling verse is comparable to Cao Ba's ambition in art, and the word “addiction” (耽) conveys a single-minded devotion that mirrors Cao Ba's obliviousness to aging. Such parallel extends to the language Du Fu uses to describe Cao Ba's artistic creation. The phrase “planning and execution” (惨淡经营)—which Du Fu applies to Cao Ba's painstaking craftsmanship—was later borrowed by the Qing critic Ye Xie (叶燮, 1627–1703) to praise Du Fu's own poetic method, as Ye Xie remarks in *Yuanshi* (原詩) that the poem “is magical in its change, and the poet pushes the wonder of craftsmanship in planning and execution to the extreme” (变化神妙，极惨淡经营之奇).⁴ The circulation of this phrase between painter and poet underscores their shared artistic ethos. Perhaps the most striking evidence of the parallel between Cao Ba and Du Fu is a grammatical peculiarity in the second half of the line: the “misuse” of pronoun in the second half of the line, namely, “wealth and rank seemed to *me* no more than drifting clouds”. Du Fu uses the first-person pronoun *me* (我) rather than the expected second-person form. The line is a direct quotation of Confucius in the *Analects*: “wealth and nobility without goodness are to me like floating clouds” (不义而富且贵，于我如浮云). By preserving the first-person pronoun from the original, Du Fu interrupts the consistency of his narrative voice—he has referred to Cao Ba as

⁴ Ye Xie, 叶燮, *Yuanshi* 原詩. Cited in Huang B. H. (2008). 唐诗学史述论[*A Historical Overview of Tang Poetry Studies*]. p. 256.

“general” (将军) throughout the poem except in this line. This grammatical shift serves as a moment in which Du Fu momentarily merges his own voice with that of his subject, implying that when he speaks of Cao Ba's ardent dedication and indifference to wealth, he is also speaking of his own.

Remarkable heritage paired with their own artistic dedication and achievement have won both Cao Ba and Du Fu recognition from the emperor. For Cao Ba, imperial favor is conveyed through specific details in “Song of a Painting”. The word “multiple times” (数) in “in royal favor often you mounted the hall of Southern Fragrance” (承恩数上南薰殿) indicates frequent summons to the palace, and the line “His Royal Majesty smiled: he hastened to have gold given you” (至尊含笑催赐金) captures the emperor's personal delight. For Du Fu, a similar moment of recognition is recorded in the *New History of Tang Dynasty* (新唐书), which notes that his “Three Great Odes of Etiquette” (三大礼赋) surprised the emperor, who summoned Du Fu to “wait at Jixianyuan, and ordered the minister to test his writing abilities” (帝奇之，使待制集贤院，命宰相试文章)(Ouyang & Song, 1975, p.5763). Du Fu himself refers to this event multiple times in his poetry. For instance, in “Do Not Suspect Me: A Ballad”[莫相疑行], Du Fu writes, “my writing's flourish in days gone by stirred the ruler of men”[往时文采动人主]; in “Respectively Left to be Presented to the Two Academicians of the Academy of Scholarly Worthies, Cui Guofu and Yuxiulie(奉留赠集贤院崔、于二学士)(国辅，休烈),” he boasts, “my lines stirred [moved] our exalted emperor”(词感帝王尊)(Owen, 2016, p.92-95); and in the last poem of the series “Autumn Meditations”(秋兴八首), he writes, “this brush of many colors once forced the elements.”(彩笔昔曾干气象)(Graham, 1988, p.65) The words “动” stirred, “感” moved and “干”forced in these poems all indicate that just like Cao Ba, Du Fu managed to impress Tang Xuanzong with his works.

Yet, it did not take long before the smoothness of both artists' trajectories was interrupted.

The most painful dimension of parallelism, however, is the shared experience of decline. Both Cao Ba and Du Fu won admiration from the emperor, but neither admiration lasted. The fame they once enjoyed forms a stark contrast with the contempt and poverty they suffered in the later part of their lives. For Cao Ba, this decline is traced through the changing subjects of his paintings—from “fine scholars” (佳士) to “ordinary travelers” (寻常行路人)—and through the transformation in how his art is received: from the smile of the emperor to the scorn of commoners. His household, once celebrated, has become “a household pure in poverty” (于今为庶为清门). And Du Fu's own situation is no better. In “Do Not Suspect Me: A Ballad” 莫相疑行, he juxtaposes past glory— “my writing's flourish in days gone by stirred the ruler of men” (往時文采动人主)—with present destitution: “but these days, cold and starving, I scurry by the road” (此日饥寒趋路旁). He describes in painful detail the mockery he endures from young men: “they express genuine feelings to my face, behind my back they mock at me” (当面输心背面笑). The trajectory of Du Fu's life coincides with that of Cao Ba in its fundamental shape: early promise, fleeting recognition, and prolonged obscurity. Reading “Song of a Painting” alongside with Du Fu's personal narrative in his other works, one can find the palimpsestic image of the poet beneath that of Cao Ba. Gu Shuguang (2020) points out that it is Du Fu's poem that helps retain the spirit of Cao's art works, which have long been lost (p.43-46); but it is also via the account of the life story of Cao Ba that Du Fu's own story is preserved.

Yet, this poem does not end with personal lament alone. The poem's conclusion expands the parallel trajectory to encompass all those who have achieved greatness: “just look from ancient times till now at the greatest names of all, how all their days hardships and troubles entangled them” (但看古來盛名下，終日坎壈纏其身). The phrase “from ancient times till

now” (古來) universalizes the pattern, while the words “entangled” (纏) and “all their days” (終日) emphasize both the inescapability and the relentlessness of suffering. The Qing critic Shi Buhua (施补华), in *Xianyan's Commentary on Poetry* (峴佣说诗), observes that “the structure of this poem is complicated and delicate... yet the conclusion part is sad and desolate, and should not be learned” (章法错综绝妙 ... 唯收处悲飒, 不可学).⁵ Although the author of this paper holds a different opinion regarding whether the conclusion should be imitated, the acknowledgment of its profound sadness is indeed telling. And the poem offers no resolution, only a somber recognition that decline is the universal fate of those who have once risen to eminence.

2. “On Seeing a Student of Mistress Gongsun Dance the 'Sword Dance’: The Convergence of Three Threads

If “Song of a Painting” laments upon the joint fate of Cao Ba and himself as well as the rise and fall of artists in general, then in “Dance the ‘Sword Dance’” (composed three years after “Song of a Painting”), Du Fu’s sorrow was deepened, and the keen concern about the fate of the country that had barely recovered from the trauma of war was unveiled. The poet walks directly onto the stage, and the three threads (the artists, the poet, and the country) are hinged upon his own experiences of watching sword dances—first as a child, then as an old man. The emotional intensity in “Dance the ‘Sword Dance’” is markedly greater than in “Song of a Painting,” and the poem brings the reader to a point of almost unbearable sorrow—and, crucially, it does not yet offer transcendence.

The poem opens with a preface in which Du Fu describes his encounter with Mistress Li at a party in Kuizhou. Her dance reminds him of a performance he witnessed more than fifty years earlier, when he was a young boy in Yancheng. The span of half a century, compressed

⁵ Cited in Ding Fubao, Wang Fuzhi & Guo Shaoyu (eds.), *Commentary on Qing Poetry* (清诗话), vol. 2., p. 99.

into the phrase “fifty years are like the turning of a palm” (五十年间似反掌), creates the temporal architecture within which the poem's three interwoven narratives unfold.

Du Fu's description of Mistress Gongsun's dance is among the most celebrated passages of ekphrastic poetry in the Chinese tradition. He draws on both mythological and natural imagery to convey its power. The image of Archer Yi shooting down the nine suns—“she flared as when Archer Yi shot the nine suns down” (燿如羿射九日落)—captures the blinding brilliance of her sword catching the light. The picture of “a host of gods circling with dragon teams” (矫如群帝骖龙翔) conveys the soaring momentum of her movement. The line “she came like a peal of thunder withdrawing its rumbling rage” (来如雷霆收震怒) emphasizes the gathering force of her entrance, while the conclusion—“then stopped like clear rays fixed on the river and sea” (罢如江海凝清光)—marks the sudden transition from motion to stillness. The word “fixed” (凝) is especially suggestive: it conveys not a mere cessation but a crystallization, as if the energy of the dance has been compressed into a single, luminous image.

This movement from turbulent motion to sudden stillness is, at one level, a description of the dance itself. At another level, however, it prefigures the arc of Mistress Gongsun's own life. In her prime, “she danced the sword dance, she stirred the world around; those who watched were like hills, their color drained away” (一舞剑器动四方，观者如山色沮丧); in her later years, “both the ruby lips and pearled sleeves are lone” (绛唇珠袖两寂寞). The sound and fury have quieted into silence. Stephen Owen translates *liangjimo* (两寂寞) as “both are still and silent now,” and although there is debate about whether this refers to Mistress Gongsun and Mistress Li or to the lips and sleeves of Mistress Gongsun herself, the sense of solitude is unmistakable in either reading. What is important is that this solitude is not suffered by Mistress Gongsun alone; it afflicts art itself.

The contrast between the two dancers—master and disciple—is central to the poem's meditation on artistic decline. Where Du Fu lavishes mythological grandeur on Mistress Gongsun's performance, his description of Mistress Li is notably plainer. He uses only the words “vigor” (壮), “dazzling” (蔚跂), and “fineness” (妙), and the imaginative flourish that characterized his account of the earlier dance is gone. The contrast is sharpened by the juxtaposition of two images of light: “flared as when Archer Yi shot the nine suns down” (燿如羿射九日落) for Mistress Gongsun, and “remnant grace shines in a cold winter sun” (女乐余姿映寒日) for Mistress Li. The “nine suns” radiate heat; the “cold winter sun” offers only a weak and fading glow. These two images encode not merely two different dancing styles but, more profoundly, the fate of art itself, which experienced its golden age during the enlightened reign of Xuanzong and now retains only a dwindling remnant of its former brilliance.

Pu Qilong, in *Reading and Interpreting Du Fu* (读杜心解), observes that “when Du Fu is talking about Mistress Gongsun, he indicates female musicians and dancers in general; when he talks about female musicians and dancers, deep feelings arouse in him towards the late emperor” (言公孙而统及女乐, 言女乐即是感深先帝). The observation is acute: the decline of the dancer's art is inseparable from the decline of the court that nurtured it. In its prime, the imperial household boasted “women who waited on the former emperor were eight thousand” (先帝侍女八千人), a number that conveys both the wealth of the court and the extravagance of Xuanzong's life, while also setting a foil for the preeminence of Mistress Gongsun's art— “Gongsun's sword dance was foremost of them all” (公孙剑器初第一). Yet within the span of fifty years, “a vast storm of windblown dust darkened the royal house” (风尘瀕洞昏王室). The dancers of the Pear Garden have “scattered like a mist” (梨园子弟散如烟), and the late emperor—whom Du Fu calls “Sage in Culture and

Divinely Inspired in War” (圣文神武皇帝), a title that evokes the most enlightened period of his reign—has passed away.

In this poem, the language of sorrow and pain appears three times, and its intensity escalates with each occurrence. When Du Fu converses with Mistress Li, “stirred by the times and reflecting increases my tender pain” (感时抚事增惋伤) ; here the word *wanshang* (惋伤)—in which *wan* (惋) carries the connotation of a sigh or a lament—suggests a sorrow that is poignant but still contained. By the time the party draws to a close, however, “the song is done, the slow string and quick pipe have ceased; at the height of joy, sorrow comes with the eastern moon rising” (玳筵急管曲复终，乐极哀来月东出). The word *ai* (哀), sorrow, is heavier and more final than *wanshang*. Finally, as the poet wanders into the desolate hills, “I, a poor old man, not knowing where to go, must harden my feet on the lone hills, toward sickness and despair” (老夫不知其所往，足茧荒山转愁疾). The word *chou* (愁), here translated as “despair” but carrying the primary sense of melancholy and care, deepens into something closer to existential disorientation. Pu Qilong describes the conclusion as one in which “the author and the readers are so stirred that they both have the impulse to cry” (作者读者，俱欲激然一哭). The poem ends at the peak of sorrow; no resolution is offered, and the poet is left walking, directionless, into the barren landscape.

3. “Meeting Li Guinian in Jiangnan”: The Achievement of Transcendence

江南逢李龟年 Meeting Li Guinian in Jiangnan⁶

岐王宅里寻常见， In the lodgings of the Prince of Qi I saw you commonly,
崔九堂前几度闻。 At the head of the hall of Cui Nine I heard you many times.

⁶ Translated by Stephen Owen in *The Poetry of Du Fu*. vol. 6., p. 192-3.

正是江南好风景， It's really true [It happens to be the time] that in Jiangnan the scenery is fine,
(落花时节又逢君)。 and in the season of falling flowers, I meet you once again.

“Meeting Li Guinian in Jiangnan” represents a dramatic departure from the rhetorical grandeur of the two earlier poems. Written in 770, the year of Du Fu's death, the poem is a mere four lines—a *jueju* (绝句)—and its language is so plain as to seem almost prosaic. Gone are the elaborate mythological allusions that animate the description of Mistress Gongsun's dance; gone, too, is the sustained biographical narrative of Cao Ba's rise and fall. The poem, at first glance, appears to be nothing more than a simple account of two encounters between the poet and the musician Li Guinian. Yet it is precisely through this austerity of means that the poem achieves its extraordinary emotional power. Behind the plain surface, a complex weave of feelings—surprise, nostalgia, a hint of joy, and a hint of sadness—is held in delicate equilibrium.

The first two lines evoke the world of Du Fu's youth, a world defined by the cultural patronage of the Tang elite. The first location he mentions, “the lodgings of the Prince of Qi” (岐王宅里), is carefully chosen. According to the *Old History of Tang Dynasty* (旧唐书), “Prince Qi enjoys learning and reading; he makes friends with those good at writing, and receives them politely regardless whether they are rich or poor” (岐王好学工书，雅爱文章之士，士无贵贱，皆尽礼接待。) The second location, “the hall of Cui Nine” (崔九堂前), refers to Cui Di (崔涤, ?–726), who was renowned both for his high rank and for his friendship with poets such as Wang Wei (王维, 706–761). Both hosts were leading figures in the cultural circles of the Kaiyuan era, and their residences embodied the flourishing of the arts under Xuanzong's enlightened rule. By selecting these two locations, Du Fu evokes not only his own past but the collective memory of an entire cultural epoch.

The temporal adverbs “commonly” (寻常) and “many times” (几) reinforce this evocation. On the surface, Du Fu is simply noting how often he encountered Li Guinian. But the frequency of their encounters also implies Du Fu’s own standing: he was a regular guest in the most illustrious households of the capital, a young poet welcomed by the cultural arbiters of his age. Without using a single word that directly denotes emotion, Du Fu infuses the first two lines with a sense of happiness recollected. The Qing critic Li Yang (李鐸), in *The Simple Guide to Poetics* (诗法易简录), refers to this technique as “stopping the blade” (止鋒) and “hiding the blade” (藏鋒), and praises the poem as “capturing the essence of *jueju*” (深得绝句之味). What is “hidden” in the first two lines is precisely the poet’s emotional investment in the world they describe—a world now irrevocably lost.

The second half of the poem shifts abruptly from past to present. Where the first two lines recall a time when Du Fu and Li Guinian occupied different roles—the poet as audience, the musician as performer—the last two lines bring them together as equals. They are now “both hapless outcasts at the farther end of the sky,” to borrow a phrase from Bai Juyi’s later “The Story of Pipa” (琵琶行). The two temporal adverbs in these lines, “really true” (正是) and “again” (又), carry the weight of this transformation.

The phrase “really true” (正是) conveys a sense of surprise and conjunction. The beautiful season returns year after year, indifferent to the fate of the empire, but the poet cannot return to the world of his youth. That the reunion should occur at precisely this time—when the scenery is fine, just as it was in the Kaiyuan era—heightens the awareness of what has changed. Without this temporal marker, the meeting would not resonate so deeply with the memory of earlier encounters. The word “again” (又) condenses decades of experience into a single syllable. It acknowledges both continuity and rupture: the poet and the musician meet once more, but everything else is different. Their situations, their relation, and the world they

inhabit have all been transformed. In the final line, Du Fu addresses Li Guinian directly with the second-person pronoun *jun* (君)—“I meet you once again” (又逢君)—a gesture of intimacy that collapses the distance between observer and observed, poet and subject. The pronoun *jun* is a form of address used between friends and equals; its appearance here signals that the hierarchical relationship of the Kaiyuan years has given way to a bond of shared experience and mutual understanding.

The poem’s final image—“the season of falling flowers” (落花时节)—has been the subject of extensive commentary. Falling flowers are an unmistakable symbol of decay and transience; they evoke the decline of the dynasty, the scattering of the court’s artists, and the poet’s own approaching death. But Du Fu does not dwell on these implications. He does not, as he might have in the earlier poems, elaborate on the pathos. Instead, he simply notes the season and records the meeting, letting the image resonate without explicit commentary. The falling flowers are acknowledged as part of the scenery, and the scenery, as Du Fu tells us, “is fine” (好風景).

This single word—“fine” (好)—is perhaps the most important in the poem, for it signals a fundamental change in the poet’s stance. The Du Fu of “Song of a Painting” concluded that suffering is the inescapable lot of the great; the Du Fu of “On Seeing a Student of Mistress Gongsun” wandered into the hills without direction, his sorrow still growing. But the Du Fu of “Meeting Li Guinian in Jiangnan” neither laments his fate nor rages against it. He acknowledges the beauty of the world even as he acknowledges its transience. The falling flowers are, after all, flowers—they are beautiful even in their falling. The poet who, in earlier years, might have seen in them only a symbol of loss, now accepts them as part of a larger pattern, inseparable from the fine scenery of which they are a part.

Scholarship on this poem has long debated the nature of its emotional register. Some

critics, following the Qing commentator Huang Sheng (黄生, 1622–1696), have emphasized the poem's subtlety and restraint; others have read it as a poem of pure lament. The contemporary scholar Li Jiayu (李嘉瑜, 2011) has traced the reception history of the poem, showing that its reputation grew steadily from the Ming-Qing period onward, precisely because readers recognized in it a uniquely distilled expression of Du Fu's late style—a style that achieves maximum intensity through maximum compression (105-131). Wu Huaidong has argued, from the perspective of poetic imagery and aesthetic response, that the poem is fundamentally one of “happy meeting” rather than political lament, and that the image of falling flowers represents the most beautiful spring scenery in accordance with the aesthetic conventions of the time (53-65).

I would suggest that both interpretations capture part of the truth, but that the poem's achievement lies precisely in its refusal to choose between joy and sorrow. The encounter between Du Fu and Li Guinian is a moment of genuine human connection between two survivors of a vanished world, and it contains within it both the happiness of reunion and the sadness of what has been lost. What distinguishes this poem from the earlier two is not the absence of pain but the poet's ability to hold pain and beauty in a single, unified perception. The transcendence achieved here is not a transcendence *of* suffering—the poet has not escaped his circumstances, nor has he ceased to feel the weight of the past—but rather a transcendence *within* suffering, a capacity to experience the world's beauty without being consumed by grief over its impermanence.

Conclusion

Taken together, the three poems examined in this paper trace a discernible arc in Du Fu's late-life sensibility. In “Song of a Painting Presented to General Cao Ba” (c. 764), the poet articulates a vision of life governed by an inexorable pattern of rise and fall, in which suffering is the unavoidable companion of greatness. The poem ends in fatalistic resignation, its

concluding lines expanding the painter's experience into a universal law. In "On Seeing a Student of Mistress Gongsun Dance the 'Sword Dance'" (767), the poet makes himself a character in the drama, and the interweaving of personal memory with national history produces a sorrow of far greater intensity—a sorrow that the poem, for all its power, cannot resolve. By the time Du Fu composes "Meeting Li Guinian in Jiangnan" (770), however, something has shifted. The poem's plainness of language and compression of form are themselves a kind of discipline, a refusal of rhetorical excess that reflects an inward composure. The poet no longer argues with fate or sinks beneath its weight; he simply records what is—the fine scenery, the falling flowers, the meeting of two old men—and in doing so, achieves a quiet transcendence that neither of the earlier poems attained.

The images of artists in Du Fu's poems are, ultimately, images of the poet himself. But they are also images of the world in which he lived—its brilliance and its ruin, its capacity to produce both extraordinary art and extraordinary suffering. By tracing the lives of Cao Ba, Mistress Gongsun, and Li Guinian, Du Fu traces, at the same time, the trajectory of his own consciousness across the long arc of the Tang dynasty's decline. And in the progression from fatalism to sorrow to acceptance, we see not only the evolution of a poetic craft but the deepening of a human response to the hardest truths of existence.

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