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Selected Poems Of Tu Fu



Synopsis

For over a millennium, Chinese literati have almost unanimously considered Tu Fu (712-770 A.D.) to be their greatest poet. Tu Fu radically altered poetry as he found it in the High T'ang period. In addition to making formal innovations in language and structure, he extended the range of acceptable subject matter to include all aspects of public and private experience, thus becoming in the words of translator David Hinton, "the first complete poetic sensibility in Chinese literature." This edition of *The Selected Poems of Tu Fu* is the only comprehensive selection of the poet's work currently available in English. While retaining a scholar's devotion to the text, Hinton has attempted "to recreate Tu Fu's poems as new systems of uncertainty." By reflecting all the ambiguity and density of the originals, he has created compelling English poems that significantly alter our conception of Chinese poetry. Included with the poems are the translator's introduction and translation principles, as well as a biography of Tu Fu; together these provide a fascinating portrait of a uniquely sensitive spirit during one of the most tumultuous periods in Chinese history. --This text refers to the Paperback edition.

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Customer Reviews

THE SELECTED POEMS OF TU FU. Translated by David Hinton. 173 pp. New York : New Directions, 1989, and Reissued. Tu Fu (712-790) was one of China's greatest poets, and the present book, after a brief 9-page Introduction, gives us a comprehensive selection of his poems, arranged chronologically, annotated, and in adequate translations of varying degrees of success. Here is an

example of Hinton's style, the first four lines of an eight-line poem, selected at random from the poem 'Skies Clear at Dusk' (and with my obliques added to indicate line breaks) : "Dusk's failing flare breaks out. Clouds / Thin and drift - none return. Distant, / Bright, a rainbow drinks at the river. / Rain in the gorge falls - remnants scatter" (p.78). Tu Fu is not an easy poet to translate, and readers with access to David Hawke's bilingual edition of Tu Fu, or to A. C. Graham's 'Poems of the Late T'ang, might find it interesting to compare Hinton's approach with theirs. His book, which also includes a useful 17-page Biography which is keyed to the poems, quite full Notes, a Finding List, a Bibliography, and an Index of Titles and First Lines, would make a handy introduction for anyone new to Tu Fu. But if, after reading it, you'd really like to discover what lies behind Tu Fu's poetry, and learn something of how his poetry works, you might take a look at the excellent bilingual anthology by Wai-lim Yip which contains a detailed treatment of a number of Tu Fu's poems. Details are as follows : CHINESE POETRY : An Anthology of Major Modes and Genres. Edited and translated by Wai-lim Yip. 358 pp. Durham NC and London : Duke University Press, 1997. ISBN 0-8223-1951-9 (pbk.)

Tu Fu was China's greatest poet in most people's estimation. His unconventional use of classic forms illuminates the deep, familial joys and simple pleasures as well as the almost inconceivable sorrows people suffered during the middle years of the tenth century as China plunged from the cultural height of the middle T'ang dynasty to the depths of disaster caused by invasion, civil war, flooding, famine and the break down of civilization in all its forms. Though many people speak of Asian poetry as being symbolic and impersonal, the poems of Tu Fu are often highly personal and reveal a man who struggles to hold his family together and maintain his awesome dignity while being battered from the unparalleled luxury of the imperial palace to the desperation of a refugee fleeing barbaric armies killing everything in their path. Few poets will ever experience the horrible history that Tu Fu saw and survived, and few have ever recounted the moments of their lives half as well. Many fine poets and translators have made excellent English versions of this master poet, but none has succeeded any better in terms of accuracy, clarity and lyricism than David Hinton. The Selected Poems of Tu Fu provides a wonderful sampling of the old gentleman's great diversity and adds the historical explanations that will prove invaluable to the new reader approaching this subject for the first time. I highly recommend this book and believe it belongs on every poet's book shelf.

This is a very fine exploration into the work of Tu Fu. The introduction, the translation, the biography and notes constitute a portrait of the man and the cultural world he inhabited. One always has to

wonder how valid a translation of 8th century Chinese poetry into 21st century American can be, and clearly any translator is creating a new being based on sympathies and guesswork, and T'ang Dynasty history homework. But there is a qualitative hierarchy of understanding that provides that the highest perceptions remain comprehensible through and despite changes of time. This comprehensible "something" is not easy to specify, and specification would kill it. Hence the need for poetry. But there is a certain emotional context to Tu Fu's poems about the hardships and momentary joys of his life that is missing from our cultural world, and that is always missing, for which there is always a remote nostalgia. A sense of the realness of life, the seriousness of it, the ultimate goodness of it, or maybe I should say that they, the poems, are explorations of the miracle of selfness in the world of sad events. The printing in the book is painfully black and inky, but apart from that, it's great. The translations were by David Hinton, who, by my somewhat limited experience of reading translations of the great Chinese poets, is the best. There is an element of mindfulness to these poems and to other poets Hinton has translated - re-construed - that most of the translators miss. In fact, the mindfulness, the watching, no matter what the personal favorability of the circumstances is the whole point. Transcendent emotions grounded in daily life.

Tu Fu is one of the greatest Chinese poets, reflecting a Buddhist sensibility and a down-to-earth perspective of life's suffering and joys. David Hinton's translation is eloquent, for those like myself who cannot read classical Chinese. These are poems to be savored one at a time, one day at a time.

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