Editor's Note: Please see the essay review of Professor Fuller's book beginning on p.18.

An *EAA* Interview with the 2019 Franklin R. Buchanan Prizewinner Michael A. Fuller for *An Introduction to Chinese Poetry: From the Canon of Poetry to the Lyrics of the Song Dynasty*

This is our twenty-third consecutive interview with the recipient of the AAS Franklin R. Buchanan Prize. This year's winner is Michael A. Fuller, who is the author of *An Introduction to Chinese Poetry: From the Canon of Poetry to the Lyrics of the Song Dynasty*. The textbook for learning classical Chinese poetry moves beyond the traditional anthology of poems translated into English and instead brings readers—including those with no knowledge of Chinese—as close as possible to the texture of the poems in their original language. Designed for classroom use and for self-study, the textbook's goal is to help the reader appreciate both the distinctive voices of the major writers in the Chinese poetic tradition and the grand contours of the development of that tradition.

Fuller's PhD at Yale followed his study in Japan and Taiwan. Alternating between computers and teaching, he worked at the University of Chicago's Computation Center before teaching at Harvard and then programmed computers in Pennsylvania before joining the University of California, Irvine. Fuller also authored *The Road to Eastslope*, *An Introduction to Literary Chinese*, and *Drifting among Rivers and Lakes: Southern Song Dynasty Poetry and the Problem of Literary History.*

Lucien Ellington: *Michael, congratulations on winning the 2019 Franklin R. Buchanan Prize for* An Introduction to Chinese Poetry. *Please briefly share with readers a bit about your earlier life and what sparked your interest in, and I presume passion for, classic Chinese poetry*

Michael Fuller: I was from the suburbs of New Jersey and started my undergraduate career in the sciences as a biology major at Caltech in 1969. However, I grew interested in what might be called the biology of culture, how having this particular human body shapes the transformations of high culture (literature, philosophy, the fine arts, etc.) and how high culture affects our emotional life at the biological level. Influenced in part by my professors in Caltech's excellent English department, I saw the exploration of the intersection of literary and intellectual history as a way to approach one corner of the larger problem of the creaturely character of culture. By the time I transferred to Yale as an English major, I also had decided that I wanted to look at the history of poetry from a comparative perspective that would take me entirely outside of the Western traditions. I started learning Chinese since I knew, or at least had been told, that it had no tragic dramatic tradition like the Greeks, Elizabethans, or Jacobeans, or like the Japanese with *Nō*. This seeming absence intrigued me enough to point me to Chinese as a promising object of study, even though I knew nothing about Chinese history or culture and nothing at all about the Chinese poetic tradition except for a few translations by Ezra Pound. However, I was fortunate to be at Yale when Stephen Owen was just starting his career, and the subtlety and originality of his use of Western theory in approaching classical Chinese texts persuaded me, after just two years of studying Chinese language, that the classical Chinese literary tradition was indeed important and had much to tell us. I thus started the PhD program at Yale in classical Chinese literature. This somewhat-abstract interest in the Chinese poetic tradition deepened during a year and a half at Tōhoku University in Sendai, Japan, when I had the luxury, provided by a Japanese Ministry of Education scholarship, of devoting my time to reading through the poetic tradition from its beginning through the Song dynasty (960–1279). Interest turned to commitment as I worked on the writings of the great Northern Song polymath Su Shi (1037–1101) for my dissertation.

Lucien: *I get the sense from spending time with the text that substantial teaching experience led you to realize that you (and perhaps other teachers as well) could more effectively engage students in better understanding classical Chinese poetry if a different kind of introductory text to Chinese poetry could be created than what existed before your publication. Can you elaborate a bit on what pedagogical gaps, in your opinion, your book helps fill for instructors and students?*

Michael: *An Introduction to Chinese Poetry* evolved from materials that I developed over the past twenty years as I taught classical Chinese poetry. Since poetry is an art whose medium is language, I could never understand how teachers could simply use large anthologies of translations of poetry for their courses, because the translations inevitably omitted so much concerning crucial issues of form, language, and context. Thus, from the very beginning of my teaching, I always gave students the Chinese text, word-for-word glosses, and a finished translation. This set of three complementary modes of presentation allowed me to shift focus, when needed, to the details of language and form that are so important in poetry. The parallelism that is central to the crafting of regulated verse, for example, gets lost in translation or often can be preserved only through seriously contorting English syntax; it is far better to simply point to a word-for-word gloss for a couplet. Moreover, parallelism as a formal device allowed poets to create or discover complex and arresting categories by linking the words in corresponding positions in each line of a couplet, and great parallel couplets embody creative and compelling ways of seeing the world. This creativity in ordering the world gets lost if one cannot look closely at what the poet has devised. Similarly, in poetic diction, prosiness and elegance are awkward to convey in English translations. It is better to divide the task of English rendering in half, with the glosses paired with an intelligible translation. Since

skill with form and diction evolved over the span of China's poetic tradition, using the three-part format made it possible to compare poems from early and late in the tradition, and point out the developments in technique.

Poetry is connected to the world of experience, both the author's and the readers', but students usually know little about either the historical contexts in which poets wrote or the specific details of the poets' lives. Thus, over the years, I also began to add introductory historical information about historical periods and poets' biographies. Since skillful poets exploit the resources of the language in ways that are hard for students to appreciate if they have no sense of how the language works, I also developed an account of the classical Chinese language as part of the course material. Finally, students just beginning to study Chinese poetry typically have not developed an ear for poetry of any kind. They need to learn to attend to how writers exploit poetic form: how poems begin, how they develop their themes, and how they end. Students rarely can hear voice and tone, and they have not learned to see the internal resonances and tensions that the authors create. Thus, over time, I gradually accumulated a set of study notes and questions to help students attend to the dynamics within a poem and found that, while the questions needed to be fairly simple at the very beginning, they could grow more sophisticated as students gained more experience and the poems themselves grew more complex.

After several iterations of developing material, I realized that what I had accumulated looked a lot like the textbooks for teaching poetry in English and for introducing poetry in European languages to English-speaking students. This similarity is not surprising. Teaching poetry in English, French, Spanish, German, or Chinese shares similar problems of introducing students to the roles of form and language, and to historical and biographical contexts. Yet while textbooks for disparate Western literary traditions had developed similar solutions, there were no textbooks of a similar nature and structure for the classical Chinese tradition. Cai Zongqi's *How to Read Chinese Poetry, a Guided Anthology* has many great essays, but it is—as its title announces—an anthology of readings rather than a textbook in the normal sense that allows students to engage the texts and wrestle with issues of meaning and interpretation. Thus, I approached Harvard's Asia Center Press about producing a volume designed specifically as a textbook to teach the classical Chinese poetic tradition.

Lucien: *I could be mistaken, but my impression from reading portions of your text is that you feel the need to familiarize students with the conventions and traditions of not just Chinese poetry, but poetry as a literary genre. In what specific ways do you think your book achieves this objective?*

Michael: In recent years, students in my classes seem to have ever less experience with the close reading of literary texts and little familiarity with basic issues of meter, metaphor, voice, persona, and many other aspects of poetic form. Students have intuitions about how a text works and about the distinctive qualities that move them, but without a formal vocabulary, it is hard to sharpen those intuitions and dig deeper into the poems. Therefore, I wrote the second chapter of the textbook, "The Formal and Rhetorical Features of Chinese Poetry," to introduce the basic terminology of formal analysis. However, since these terms are usually as unfamiliar as the Chinese poetry itself, the textbook starts fairly slowly in the third chapter (on the earliest poetry) by focusing on issues of voice and what the discontinuities in poems tell the students about the narrators of the poems. The notes to the poems in later chapters gradually add more categories of analysis and attempt to show students how attending to what might seem a fairly abstract formal vocabulary in fact provides a way to articulate the qualities of the poems. Some formal features like the omission of subjects and verb tense are fairly distinctive to poetry in the Chinese tradition (because of the isolating, topic-prominent nature of the classical Chinese language), as is the particular use of parallel couplets, but most of the formal issues I explore in the textbook are applicable to all forms of poetry. For example, the textbook presents the uses of the octave and quatrain forms in Tang poetry, and while these uses are perhaps distinctive within the Chinese

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tradition, students grasp the more general literary principle of the importance of form and of the generic expectations that poets exploit when they use established forms.

Lucien: *As a history educator and a lover of literature, I really appreciate your first paragraph in chapter 6, where you remind readers that the political and cultural figures of the early Tang did not know what they were creating, and that rather than just accept the correct cliché about the Tang being the great age of Chinese poetry, the instructional challenge is to allow the poetry to speak for itself. Can you comment upon one or two poems in this particular chapter that you include that most "speak for themselves"?*

Michael: Poetry "speaking for itself" is a bit trickier than one might hope. Most certainly a poem that speaks for itself must address concerns, experiences, and emotions that we share today. However, poems, when they are written, draw on generic conventions of form, diction, and topical treatment that we discussed earlier. All this is a part of the poem for the author and for contemporary readers. To understand a poem that "speaks for itself" requires that we know its language. For this reason, old-style verse, with its loose form and prosy diction, speaks most easily to us. Even though modern readers bring to Li Bai's poetry a strong sense of an identity assigned to him as a "romantic" and "untrammeled" writer that tends to flatten the complexities of tone in his poems, nonetheless, the intensity and manic energy of his "Bring in the Ale," an old-style poem written on a folk ballad "carpe diem" theme, for example, allow it to break through all the framing of later interpretation to speak for itself. It begins by directly addressing the reader with a pair of seemingly abstract images of the inescapable temporality in which humans are caught, expressed in long, prosy lines:

君不見 *Don't you see,*
黃河之水天上來 *The Yellow River's waters that come from Heaven*
奔流到海不復回 *Rush to the sea and never return.*
君不見 *Don't you see,*
高堂明鏡悲白髮 *Before the bright mirror in the tall hall, grieving at white hair:*
朝如青絲暮成雪 *In the morning like dark silk, by dusk, changed to snow.*

The poem then calls for drink as the only appropriate response and indeed extravagantly claims:

古來聖賢皆寂寞 *The sages and worthies from ancient times all are silent.*
惟有飲者留其名 *Only the drinkers have left their name.*

The poem ends with a quality of excess that is both immediately accessible and stands by itself:

五花馬 *The dappled horse,*
千金裘 *the furs worth a thousand cash*
呼兒將出換美酒 *Call the boy: take them out to exchange for fine ale.*
與爾同銷萬古愁 *With you I'll dissolve the sorrows of all antiquity.*

This is a poem with complex shadings and, like all great poems, lives generation after generation through the unresolved tensions built into it. Yet we don't need to read this poem through the transmitted persona of Li Bai. If we attend to it, it speaks clearly.

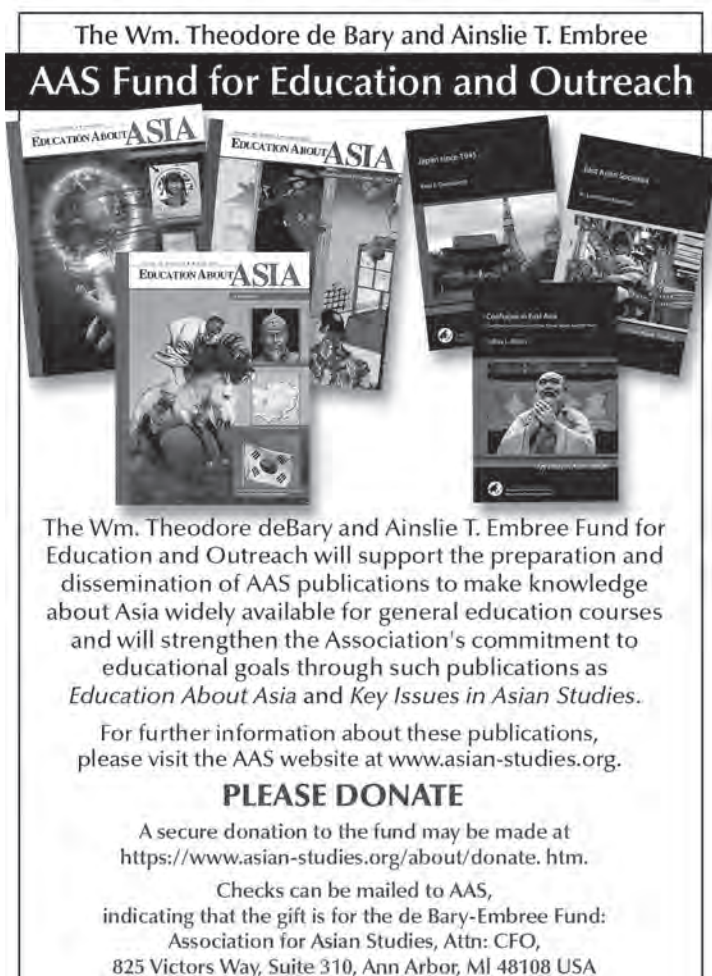
Lucien: *I am particularly grateful that this interview with you is appearing as part of the winter* EAA *special section "Asian Literature in the Humanities and Social Sciences." As you are most certainly aware, Li Bai and Du Fu are included in not only literature survey courses but in East Asia*

[Du Fu] has been called the "Poet Historian" for the poems he wrote on many different aspects of the rebellion.

history surveys, and with Li Bai, philosophy and religion texts as well. Can you recommend and briefly describe a couple of poems you include in your text that you believe can give readers a sense of each author's distinctness or help inform readers of topics ranging from Daoism to the tumultuous An Lushan Rebellion that both men experienced?

Michael: Li Bai and Du Fu are both poets with a great range of voices, though with very different qualities. Li Bai mastered old forms and created striking adaptations of them, from the female persona of the courtly quatrain to the moral remonstrator of protest ballads from the folk song repertoire. In contrast, there is a sense in which Du Fu was making it up as he needed to, using the poetic forms available to him in astonishingly new ways to convey aspects of experience previously considered beyond the scope of poetic composition. The textbook attempts to capture their range.

The seven poems by Li Bai that I include in the textbook all present distinctive aspects of his verse. Even though "Fighting South of the Wall" is generically similar to "Bring in the Wine" in that both are intensely imagined, prosy, old-style verse that use old folk-poetry titles, in "Fighting South of the Wall," Li Bai pushes the irregular old-style versification to the extreme and adopts the persona of the stalwart minister completely different from the obsessive carouser of "Bring in the Wine." (Both of these poems, I should note, were immensely influential in the later tradition.)



Li Bai again adopts a persona related to the stalwart minister in the first of his series, "Ancient Airs, 59 Poems," where he takes on the mantle of the morally committed Confucian poet trying to restore the normative values of the *Classic of Poetry* in the face of recent decadent practice. Yet, in the quatrain "Jade Staircase's Grievance," famously translated by Ezra Pound, Li Bai achieves a brilliant crystallization of the palace poetry he condemns in "Ancient Airs." And finally, Li Bai presents himself through various personae as a man of the way. "Decanting Alone, under the Moon" and "Question and Answer in the Mountains," although quite different, both suggest that Li Bai does not travel the usual course of the "dusty realm."

Trying to capture the different facets of Du Fu's distinctiveness proved such a challenge that I ended up devoting an entire chapter to him. Among the nineteen poems that I chose, if I can list just a few, I would start with "Lament for Riverbend," an old-style verse written when Du Fu was captive in Chang'an during the An Lushan Rebellion, in which he recalls a luminous but portentous moment before the rebellion when Emperor Xuanzong and Precious Consort Yang (Yang Guifei) visited the park at Riverbend. He writes like no one else in his poems about the An Lushan Rebellion, from "A Spring Vista" to "Grieving for Chentao" to "The Officer at Stone." They range in form, voice, and mood, but are all distinctly "Du Fu." However, what I particularly love about Du Fu that sets him apart is the capacious, intensely human generosity of his sensibility, filled with warmth and, at times, humor. The quiet delicacy of "Moonlit Night," written to his wife while he was captive in Chang'an, contrasts sharply with the anguished gratitude of "The Ballad of Pengya," in which he recounts how, after a difficult flight with his family away from the rebellion, a friend welcomed him, his wife, and children. And, as "A Guest Arrives" shows, Du Fu could also be mischievous.

The particular question you raise, however, is how the many sides of Li Bai and Du Fu that I seek to present in the textbook are important in Asian studies beyond the field of literature. I have to admit here that while Li Bai wrote poems deeply embedded in Tang dynasty Daoism, I did not include any of those in the textbook. I made the decision not to attempt to offer poems on religious topics—either Daoist or Buddhist—because doing justice to them would raise complications that, in the end, would be more distracting than useful for a beginning textbook on poetry.[1] From the perspective of a historian, Li Bai's poetry is not very useful except in its incidental details: he largely ignored the An Lushan Rebellion, except for the poems he wrote for the Prince of Yong's unsuccessful campaign to establish an independent state in the south. In contrast, as suggested above, Du Fu's poetry in the textbook offers much material for historical reflection. He has been called the "Poet Historian" for the poems he wrote on many different aspects of the rebellion. Aside from the poems with the rebellion as an explicit topic, however, Du Fu proved historically important in a more complex, deeper way that merits attention. Du Fu provided a model for how a literatus without official status could maintain his specifically Confucian moral authority. The concerns in his poems and the positions he asserted demonstrated to later members of the scholar-official elite in the Song dynasty how one could enact a broadly conceived Confucian individualism that defined one as part of a moral community even in isolation. Song dynasty writers found in Du Fu, acclaimed as the sage of poetry, a model for their own Confucian humanism, a model worthy of reflection for scholars today.

Lucien: *Michael, thank you for the interview!* ■

NOTES

1. I recommend Paul W. Kroll, "Studies in Medieval Taoism and the Poetry of Li Po," *Variorum Collected Studies* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2009) and Paul Rouzer, *On Cold Mountain: A Buddhist Reading of the Hanshan Poems* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2015) for readers interested in religious poetry.