Tu Mu's Poems on the Vermilion Slope:
Laments on a Meager Career

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It was commonplace for traditional Chinese poets to closely identify with their home regions, and Tu Mu[1] (803—852) was no exception. His family's country estate was at Chü-p'o[2], or the Vermillion Slope, located a short distance due south of Ch'ang-an in the Fan-ch'uan[3] area of the Southern Mountains[4]. On three occasions Tu Mu mentioned his home in the titles of poems: 1. "Vermilion Slope, three quatrains" (Chü-p'o chüeh-chu sanshou[5]); 2. "Thoughts of an Excursion to the Vermilion Slope, four rhymes" (I yu Chu-p'o ssu yüen[6]); 3. and "Vermilion Slope" (Chü-p'o). Each of these is ostensibly concerned with landscape when in fact the real subject is the life and career of the poet. The poems under the first two titles are the subject of this study.

"Vermilion Slope, three quatrains" consists of loosely related quatrains at the surface level, but they are intricately bound in a secondary narrative. In the first Tu Mu bluntly requests a position in the capital, and hidden in the poetic diction of the latter two are his views on the impact the Sweet Dew Incident and other political struggles of 835 had on his career. He explains that these events drove him from Ch'ang-an in 835, caused him to abandon his position in Lo-yang two years later, and had a negative effect on his career all the way up to early 848, when these quatrains were written. He also candidly admits that he had his faults prior to his arrival in Ch'ang-an, but that he was politically innocent in comparison to the people he found there.

The quatrains presage Tu Mu's return to Ch'ang-an late in 848 when he was given the low office of Auxiliary Secretary in the Bureau of Honorable Titles[8]. His salary was too little to support his own and his brother's families, and in 849 he began petitioning for perfectships outside the capital which would pay considerably more. In his "Thoughts of an Excursion to the Vermilion Slope, four rhymes", Tu Mu describes how he curried favor in 850 to win a post in the provinces. The narrative is an outpouring of his anguish at being forced out of the capital once again. Not only does he see his chances for a successful career at an end, but his pain is intensified by the fact he cannot afford to retire.

These poems combine to provide Tu Mu's perspective on his career from 835 to 850. They were written at times of significant change in his career, yet they show with some irony that little had changed, and only for the worse. The associations of the Vermilion Slope are also evident: it stands for his home and himself, and for his family's tradition of government service. These poems testify to the seriousness of Tu Mu's concern over his career.

The popular image of Tu Mu has women as the obsession of his life, and he admits his interest in them in the third quatrain and in the lengthy "Vermilion Slope", where he argues that the frustrations of his career led him to seek comfort from women[4]. But this does not summarize his life or his interests. He was raised in the household of his grandfather, Tu Yu, who was a chief minister and author of the T'ung tien, the highly respected compendium of government institutions[5]. His grandfather's influence can be seen in Tu Mu's education: he began to study the Shu ching, Shih ching, Tso chuan, and
Kuo yü during his twentieth year, and he had earlier studied the *Li chi*. In 825, at the age of twenty-three, he wrote the "Fu on the A-fang Palace" ([15], satirizing the excess of Ching-tsung ([14]) (r. 825–827) and demonstrating both his own moral posture and his knowledge of fu composition. He later completed a commentary on the *Sun-tzu* ([15]), which is indicative of his lifelong interest in military strategy. Tu Mu had his serious side and did express concern for his career and the welfare of the dynasty in his poetry.

In the first of his "three quatrains" Tu Mu is emphatic about the purpose of these poems. He refers directly to the *fu* of Chia II ([16]) (201–169 B.C.), which were paradigms of lament at being banished, and thus he frankly admits that the quatrains are his "fu" on what he feels is his own banishment from the capital. As recently defined by F. A. Bischoff, a *fu* can take any form or make use of any "vessel". What distinguishes a *fu* from other poetic works is the content: a *fu* has been written when the author reveals his innermost thoughts and does so in a creative, subtle manner. He need not and usually does not label his work a *fu*, for this would betray something of the privacy of his communication. But Tu Mu is angry, he is anxious to make his point—especially in the first quatrain—and so he does label these ch'ieh-chü as *fu*. In fact, all his poems on the Vermilion Slope prove to be *fu*.

This approach to Chinese poetry is rooted in the early literary tradition and stems from the lessons in allegory found in the texts of and commentaries to the *Shih ching*, *Ch' u tz'u*, and *Wen hsüan*. My methodology in this study is a return to the early tradition. The format I will follow is: 1. a translation of a poem; 2. discussion of the surface level content; 3. the characters and exegesis for each line; 4. the secondary narrative; 5. and discussion of the secondary narrative.

1. Vermilion Slope, three quatrains:

1 rhyme: yü ([20]): fish, signet of office

In my native region, pond banks lean on the Imperial Canal,
In river cities, three edicts, exchanges of the fish signet;
Chia Sheng wrote *fu* on the anguish of the exiled,
Sent in his youth to Ch'ang-sha, he stayed too many years.

The surface level provides information about the poet's concern and situation. From the first line comes the sense of a tradition of service to the state. Feng Chi-wu has identified the Huı ([21]) river as flowing from Fan-ch'uan to Ch'ang-an, and it could well correspond to the "canal" Tu Mu mentions. The second line places the poet in Mu-chou ([23]), where he was a prefect from late 846 to mid 848. The lines on Chia I suggest the poet's lament and his own sense of worth.

1. line ([24])

*Ku-kuo* also means old region or state. If the radicals are taken from the next two characters, *ch'ih t'ang*, the result is *yeh* ([25]) *T'ang* ([26]) "the T'ang"; for this practise in the *fu* and for *ch'ih* specifically, see F. A. Bischoff, chapters III & IV and p. 150. *I* also means to favor or to depend on. yü refers to things imperial, hence the emperor; and *ch'ü* can mean great or grand, as found in the *Shih ching* (B. Karlgren, *The Book of Odes*, Stockholm 1950, p. 87), where the context is of a house once great but declining, with the refrain that the end does not correspond to the beginning. This all combines to provide the narrative: "Our (old) state, the T'ang, relies on the emperor for its greatness,"
2. line[27]  
If the radicals are dropped from *chiang-ch'eng*[28] – in sequence with those dropped in line one – the result is *kung cheng*[29] or "work completed." The *san-chao* refer to three appointments the poet has held. The sense of the line follows: "My work on three appointments is done, I want a change of office." This indicates Tu Mu's completion of terms as a Prefect, starting in Huang-chou[30] (Hupei) in 842, then Ch'ih-chou[31] (Anhui) in late 844, and in Mu-chou[32] (Chekiang) in the fall of 846. It also suggests a date for the quatrains of early to mid 848 when he could claim to have finished his third assignment.

3. line[33]  
Chia I was given a lowly post far from the capital as a form of banishment and wrote *fu* lamenting his fate. Tu Mu mentions him because he identifies with this famous exile and by referring to the *fu* he also indicates that these quatrains contain his own lament. This constitutes his instructions to the reader on how to read the present and following quatrains. We are on notice that the poet has more serious and personal things on his mind than landscapes. The line converts to: "I am writing (in the *fu* manner) of my anguish at being kept from the court."

4. line[34]  
Feng Chi-wu identifies *sui-yü*, more than a year, as an allusion to the length of time between Chia I's writing of the "Owl Fu" and his return to the capital. The stress is on Chia I's youth and the years wasted. For Tu Mu this line implies: "Although I have matured/been respected (chi[35]) in the regions I have served in – the south and east – still I have been left here too many years."

**Interpretation:**  
Our state, the T'ang, relies on the emperor for its greatness:  
My work on three appointments completed, I want a change of office;  
(Like Chia I) I am writing of my anguish at being kept from the Court,  
I have been relegated to the provinces for too long.

With the first line of this first quatrain Tu Mu hints that it is in the interest of the state that he be given an important role in government. This is suggested by allusion to the decline of the mighty found in the *Shih ching*. He has done his work in the provinces, the number of positions (3) itself suggesting completion in its correspondences to the triad heaven, earth, and man, to the *yang* force, etc., and now it is time for another post. From the Chia I story comes Tu Mu's argument that he has been kept away from court for too long and that he wants to talk about his sorrows or about the reasons for his "banishment."

The primary and secondary levels of meaning here correspond fairly closely – the poet wants us to understand him. This quatrain also sets the stage or serves as a preface for those following it. We have been warned about the depth of language in the latter quatrains, where his communication is more personal.

2 rhyme: *wei*[36]: subtle, secret

In the deep mist of a moss lane, a woodsman sings  
Flowers fall cold and light, a tired traveler returns  
Cane shore and bamboo island, both hidden from light  
Full ponds in spring rain, a little grebe flies.

The aspects of nature catalogued here are probably meant to describe scenery in the vicinity of the Vermillion Slope. Yet there is a universal quality about the setting which
could place it anywhere. Both for this and for highly individualized landscape poems we must ask why the poet chose certain details rather than others, why, in any poem, he chose one character instead of another. Tu Mu does not speak directly of retirement but, as will be discussed below, it is implied to some extent by the "tired traveler". The neutrality of the landscape, the sense of retirement contrary to the theme of the first quatrain, and Tu Mu's admitted concern with *fu* all point to the need for a closer reading of these lines.

1. line[37]

*Yen*, usually smoke or mist, without its radical becomes *yin*[38], meaning to dam up; with either the earth or water radicals[39], it also means to block, stop up (all with the pronunciation *gien*, Karlsgren, *Grammata Serica*, no. 483). *Shen* can mean the *yang* force (D. 7-17687) or is an abbreviation of *shen-i*[40], the name for clothing worn by the great ministers during temple sacrifices (D. as cited, entry 6, and the *Li chi* 39: p. 177 SPTK). F. A. Bischoff (p. 144) has found *t'ai* as a lectio faciliior, which should read *ta*[41], vetch, vines winding in an irregular manner. In the commentary to Tu Mu's "Vermilion Slope", growing moss makes a path dangerous [16]. The connotations of devious and dangerous are all we need for this context. *Hsiang*, as in the *Shih ching* song "Hsiang po'*[42] (Master of the Passageways), refers to the winding passages of the inner court, where the eunuchs preside (Legge, *The Chinese Classics* vol. 4, pp. 346–349). *Ch'ang* can mean to call or lead (D. 2-3765); *chiao* to burn or scorch, in effect, to destroy; and *erh* can refer to oneself, or, not politely, to others. The sense of the line then is: "The *yang* force (or ministers) are blocked by dangerous eunuchs, this leads to the destruction of others" - or of the poet in regard to his career.

The narrative seems a well concealed reference to the Sweet Dew Incident of 835, in which an abortive attempt to destroy the power of the chief eunuchs led to the death of numerous high officials, both the involved and the innocent, and the massacre of the clans of eleven officials. This took place on the 21st of the eleventh month (December 14th), the time of the winter solstice, when the *yang* force was to assume an active posture. Li Shang-yin reviews the incident in "Being Troubled, two poems" [43] in the second poem is the line:[44] "The growth of the unique spirit of *yang* was checked and choked."[17] Tu Mu apparently saw trouble brewing in 835, not only because of the eunuchs but also due to the unscrupulous nature of the ministers Li Hsün[45] and Cheng Chu[46]. When his friend Li Kan[47] was banished for openly opposing the promotion of Cheng Chu, Tu Mu found it wise to transfer to Lo-yang. He was there when Li Hsün and Cheng Chu initiated the Incident which cost them and so many others their lives.

Another definition of *hsiang* gives the line a tertiary level of meaning. In the sense of a street or lane outside the gate, that is, a channel or procedure outside of the regular, *hsiang* is found in the *I-ching*, under the hexagram *K'uei*[48], Opposition. The Judgment is: "In small matters, good fortune. "The Image advises: "Thus amid all fellowship The superior man retains his individuality." And among the lines, "Nine in the second place means: One meets his lord in a narrow street. No Blame."[18] Opposition (k'uei) is something Tu Mu referred to bitterly in a later "Vermilion Slope" poem[19]. If we take *hsiang* to refer to clandestine meetings or some manner of irregular contacts made by Tu Mu in 835 prior to his transfer to Lo-yang, then this line of the poem could say: "To block the ministers (Li and Cheng) there were dangerous meetings, which did (or could) lead to my downfall." Events prior to the Sweet Dew Incident led Tu Mu to fear being impli-
cated by the eunuchs or opposed by officials, either of whom subsequently sabotaged his career.

2. line

Hua-lo is, a name for Lo-yang (D. 9-30734–537); with the radicals removed, the hua suggests a \(\text{yin}\) or negative change, and lo still refers to Lo-yang. Han suggests the \(\text{yin}\) of a situation, the coldness among people. Ching, in negative terms, means things of little importance, the shallow or superficial. The \(\text{chüan-k'ë}\) can be associated with a scholar-official at odds with those in power, if things were otherwise he would be at court \(\text{(P'ei wen yün fu 3914/1)}\). Thus the interpretation: "Although I moved to Lo-yang, I found myself in a negative situation (few friends, low position), and since I was at odds with those in power I went home."

Tu Mu, presumably with the sponsorship of his superior, Niu Seng-ju, was called to Ch'ang-an in 835 to be a Censor in the Office of Provincial Inquiry, at the eight degree, second class. He held the same post in Lo-yang until 837, when he abandoned it to join his younger brother, I, in Yang-chou. His brother had recently gone blind. Since his position was not important it could well be described as ching. He had served in Yang-chou previously and could use kuei to announce his return. And of course, his weathering the bloody events of late 835 in Lo-yang fits reality.

3. line

T'eng refers to stiff-stalked or to vine plants; without the radical, t'eng means to gush forth words – negatively, to be insincere. An refers to an elevated position, hence high office. The combination, t'eng-an is found reversed in Tu Mu's "Vermilion Slope", where vipers are found among the shore vines, or among the insincere in high office (line 15). The bamboo is closely identified with the literati, notably for its constancy in keeping its leaves and its upright shape. Chou, without the radical, refers to the provinces. Hsiang means mutually or suggests high ranking ministers. Yen-ying is found in Li Po's "Great Roc Fu" (Ta p'eng fu) where the wings of the roc hide the light of half the four seas. Li Po is referring to his own talent and Tu Mu does the same. Ying, itself, or split to jih and yang, can refer to the emperor, whose light or yang force is here dimmed. Thus the line might have both secondary and tertiary levels: "Among the insincere in high office or the literati in the provinces, in either case my talents are hidden;" and, "For both the insincere in high office and the upright in the provinces, the chief ministers cover/hide the Emperor's (positive) influence."

4. line

Man-ch'ih, minus the radical for the latter, provides the phrase, man-yeh ("I was satisfied.") The ch'un-yü should be approached from the yü: Tu Fu uses it to mean friends (D. 12-42210). Ch'un has a great many associations, but for this context the idea of lovers or the direction east are the most appropriate. P'i-t'i, without the radicals, leaves p't-t'i, nobles/patrons and younger brother, or noble younger brother. Fei adheres to the meaning to fly, and here could complete the line: "I was satisfied with my decision and flew to my lovers, friends, and noble brother." However, fei is sometimes used for fei (D. 12-44000) and may also have functioned as a pun, with both pronounced piwei (K. 579-580). The meaning of fei here would be to disapprove, be critical, blame. This leads to the reading: "I was satisfied, but my lovers and friends/friends in the east (Yang-chou?) and noble younger brother disapproved." I prefer the latter interpretation because it provides more information and avoids repetition of the fact the poet had left office, given earlier in the second line.
Interpretation:
The yang force was blocked by the eunuchs, and this led to the destruction of others/of my career.
I had moved to Lo-yang but found myself in a negative situation, suffering injustices I chose to return home.
Whether among hypocrites in high office or (upright) literati in the provinces, in both instances my talents were hidden.
I was satisfied (with my decision) but my friends in the east, patrons, and (noble) younger brother disapproved.

Alternatives to lines one and three:
Attempts to block the ministers (Li Hsün and Cheng Chu) led to dangerous meetings which later ruined my career.

As I have interpreted this poem, it represents Tu Mu's understanding of why his career had not progressed as he felt it should. The cause rests with the events of 835, when Tu Mu believes he managed to alienate either the eunuchs or perhaps the friends of the ministers Li Hsün and Cheng Chu. The eunuchs of course were victorious in the Sweet Dew Incident and executed many officials. Even though he had left Ch'ang-an prior to the massacre, Tu Mu's antipathy to the eunuchs may have won him guilt by association, or so he suggests. The alternative, that he conspired against the ministers, would place him in league with his friend Li Kan, who was so incensed at the thought of Cheng Chu becoming a chief minister that he tore up an imperial edict he thought contained the appointment only to find that he was mistaken, and consequently banished. Tu Mu wrote a long poem in memory of Li Kan, praising his friend's valor, but in the poem Tu Mu denies doing more than merely being a bystander, for which he was ashamed. The poem "Li Kan" was written in 839; perhaps it was meant to both honor the memory of his friend and clear himself of any involvement.

His departure from Lo-yang to comfort his brother Yi in Yang-chou seems a mixture of concern for his younger brother, which was genuine, and the feeling that he was getting nowhere in a lowly position in Lo-yang. He elsewhere referred to his position in Lo-yang as virtually that of a prisoner. Thus he rationalizes being locked in with hypocrites as no different from maintaining his integrity in isolation. The alternative to the third line would place the blame on those managing the Emperor, and could refer to eunuchs as well as to scholar-officials. His friends and patrons, certainly his younger brother, thought he was wrong to abandon his post, but his defense indicates he obviously felt differently about it.

3 rhyme: ma: hemp, used to make the paper edicts were written on -
From the rich milk of a spring cavern, goosequills grow,
Ponds shun twisted cliffs, set in dog-toothed shores;
Laughing to myself, rolled up in my breast, horns withdrawn,
I wind back up misty steps, just like a snail.
Tu Mu emphasizes the overt theme of retirement by visiting grottos and strange rock formations which signify the meanderings of an unencumbered traveler. He mentions a similar cavern in his "Vermilion Slope", for the same effect (line 23). The "dog-toothed" or interlocking shoreline of the second line can be found in a short landscape piece by Liu Tsung-yüan (773–819), who spent his adult years (from 805) in exile. To "roll up within one's breast", to close oneself off from the outer world, wax introspective, is something appropriate to the Confucian retiree. In the Lun yü (15.6) is the maxim: when the way (tao) prevails in a state one should serve it, when it does not prevail one should roll up one's talents and keep to himself. The "horns" suggest talent, again withdrawn until better times. Snails are a favorite metaphor of Tu Mu, in most instances referring to retirement as in his "Vermilion Slope" (line 21). All the imagery and allusions are to retirement at this level, again contrary to the secondary narrative of the earlier quatrains.

1. line

Ju means to nurture; here it refers to one who nurtures the poet. Ju also was pronounced the same as jü (K. 135 and 134). The latter was part of Niu Seng-ju's name, and Niu of course was Tu Mu's superior in Yang-chou during 833–835. It is probable that Niu was Tu Mu's sponsor for a position in the capital in 835, which Tu Mu received. Fei equates here with power, that his sponsor had influence; it also is close in pronunciation to fei, suggesting disapproval as in the last line of the second quatrain. (K. 582, b'jwei, and K. 579, pjwei). Ch'un-tung has explicit sexual connotations: throughout the traditional Chinese universe the spring season connotes creation, romance, and erotica; Yüan Chen's (779–831) "Dream of a Journey" (Meng yu ch'un) is a likely example. "Tung-fang" is listed among several names for the vagina in H. Maspero, "Les Procédés De "Nourrir Le Principe Vital dans La Religion Taoiste Ancienne", JA (1937), p. 392, note 2; corresponding names can be found in R. H. van Gulik, Erotic Color Prints of the Ming Period, vol. I, Tokyo, 1951, p. 231. If the radicals are taken from the last two characters, o-kuan, it leaves wo kuan. The meaning, with sheng, then is: "produced an office for me." Readings for the line are: "Niu Seng-ju disapproved of my womanizing, yet he provided me with an office;" or at a median level, "My sponsor/nurturer was powerful, in spite of my womanizing he provided me with an office."

2. line

Chao is closely related to chao, imperial will, and chao, to call or summon (in K. 1131, tiüu, tiüu and d'iüu; and F. A. Bischoff, p. 138). Pi minus the radicals leaves pi, as in line four of the second quatrain, meaning nobles, or the Emperor. Hui, to go back; yen, the peak, often a metaphor for the court, after the identity of the ruler with mountains (Kuan-tzu, 64:p. 112, SPTK ed.). Shih, to be placed, situation, force, and even testicles (Courvreur, Dict., sub voc). Ch'üan-ya, as an extension of the "mad dog" metaphor, suggests a situation fraught with danger, where one is placed among wild, vicious individuals. Liu Tsung-yüan, in his "Record of My Arrival at the small Stone Pond West of the Hillock", speaks of its shoreline being irregular and interlocking, so that its source – the spring which feeds it – cannot be known. From his use of an and shi ch'üan-ya, his meaning is: "vicious folk in high office all are closely interlocked, it is not possible to know how they got there." Tu Mu's line is similar: "Summoned by the Emperor, I returned to Court, only to be set among vicious officials; or, with due intensity, "... only to have my balls placed in dogs' teeth!!!"
3. line

"Tzu, since, because; hsiao, laughable, extends to lowly, hsiao[83] (K. 1150 and 1149, sjâu); chuan may refer to the dragon on ceremonial robes worn by the emperor, thus the emperor himself (Bischoff, p. 151, and D. 2-2860, 10-34121). Huai means to comfort, have compassion for. Tou-chüeh can refer to the excellence of one’s talent, as used by Han Yü in his "Tomb Inscription for Liu Tzu-hou"[84], where he says of Liu Tsung-yüan: "Although young in years, he had already become a man. He was able to attain the chin-shih degree, precipitously showing his excellence. Everyone said, 'The Liu clan has a (new) master'"[32]. Taken individually, t'ou means the first, the most important, and chüeh refers to fighting, a battle. Thus, the combined meaning could be "the most important battle." This would fit Han Yü's statement in that Liu Tsung-yüan "precipitously had entered his most important fight" quite young; Liu lost and was exiled in the expulsion of the Wang Shu-wen faction in 805. With reference to the events of 835, as Tu Mu has already suggested, he considered this year the most important of his career. The last character, shu, means to retire or to lose at something. Tu Mu either retires his excellent talents or he lost his most important fight. The line suggests: "Because I was lowly the Emperor was kind to me, he allowed me to withdrawn my talented self) from the capital;" or "... , but I had lost my most important fight."

An entirely different narrative suggests itself if the poet is not taken as the subject of his line. Then the emperor remains: "Because of the smallness (as in hsiao-jen) of the Emperor's spirit/sensibilities, he lost his most important battle." This corresponds to Emperor Wen's favoring the disreputable Li Hsün and Cheng Chu, thereby demonstrating his blindness to the quality of his officials. The outcome of the Sweet Dew Incident would easily fit as the battle he lost.

4. line

"Kuei can mean to converge at, to conform to; p'an is given in Couvreur as able to mean the whole of a matter or affair; yen, as seen in line one of the second quatrain, without its radical becomes yin, to block; and teng without its radical is teng[87], to rise, advance. Ch'ia means timely, opportunely, and implies here that at the right moment the poet withdrew as would a snail. Thus the quatrain ends: "As a result of this affair my advancement was blocked, so it was timely to retire.""

Interpretation:

Niu Seng-ju disapproved of my womanizing, yet he provided me with an office, Summoned by the Emperor, I returned to Court, only to be placed among vicious officials, Because I was lowly the Emperor was kind to me, yet I had lost my most important fight, Consequently, after this affair my advancement was blocked, and I found it timely to retire.

Alternate to line three:

Because of the smallness of the Emperor's spirit, he lost his most important battle. This last quatrain presents an overview of the events more immediately related in the second. It also provides perspective on how Tu Mu got to the capital in the first place, who his sponsor was, the faults that were overlooked, and the situation he found in Ch'ang-an. In the third line, he either argues his talent was not up to the situation, or more pointedly, that he was on the losing side, perhaps a two-time loser: once to the Li Hsün and Cheng Chu faction, and then to the eunuchs. The immediate result was ap-
parently no chance for advancement from the low post he held in Lo-yang and again the statement that he chose to retire rather than be ignored while in office. The retirement would be his leaing in 837 to help his younger brother: Tu Mu seems to insist on the political motive of the otherwise compassionate gesture. Of course, contrary to the theme of the surface level, the point of all this is that Tu Mu is tired of the provinces and wants a job in the capital.

Tu Mu's "Vermilion Slope, three quatrains" presents his version of how and why he ended up in the provinces and his arguments for being given another position in the capital. In the first place, he has done his job in his last three provincial posts, and like Chia I, he has been ignored for too long. He then relates the events of his year at the capital early in his career, when in fact much drama and ugliness made it a disastrous time for him and many others. His defense is that he had a bad start, and now, some thirteen years (and two emperors) later he deserves another chance. And lastly, he reiterates in broader perspective his arrival and departure, insisting on the suitability of his decision to give up his office in 837. He has served his time in "exile", has done his duty well, he is talented, and he strongly feels that he deserves another chance.

As if, Tu Mu's "three quatrains" speak of public events and private reactions, but they are all documented by the histories and by the poet. This allows us a substantial historical context and a high degree of accuracy in interpreting the poet's view of his time and his actions.

II. Thoughts of an Excursion to Vermilion Slope, four rhymes

Autumn grass along the Fan-ch'uan road
Slanting sun at Fu-ang gate
Hunting - meet Han Yen's riders
Planting - recognize Kuan-t'ao's garden
In heavy rain cross lotus ponds
In curling smoke descend to bamboo villages
Now it is impossible to return
I wear the heaven-viewing bowl.

From the title one would expect a description of travels through a richly detailed landscape. Instead, Tu Mu begins the poem with the end of the excursion: the first couplet has the poet on the road going away from his home region and entering the southeast gate of the capital. The physical and psychological entry of the poem is to Ch'ang-an. Both lines betoken lateness, of the year and the day, but also perhaps of the poet's life, especially when autumn is associated with Fan-ch'uan.

When it comes to thoughts of hunting, which are more likely than the poet actually doing it, then Han Yen and company appear. Han Yen was a favorite of Han Wu-ti; he was noted for his shooting ability and for the extravagances he nurtured and shared with the Emperor (Han shu 93:3, Po-na ed.). Thoughts of planting, or of trees, remind the poet of Princess Kuan-t'ao, an aunt of Han Wu-ti who sought his favour for her lover, Tung Yen[89]. She gave the Emperor the Long Gate Garden[89] as a bribe. Tung Yen was showered with imperial favor until Tung-fang Shuo scolded the Emperor by enumerating Tung Yen's crimes: he was a commoner intimate with a royal princess, he ignored the rites of matrimony, and he had other vices
clearly in opposition to Confucian norms (*Han shu* 65:8b–12a). Perspective is added by the fact Tung Yen was in his early teens and Princess Kuan-t’ao a widow in her fifties when she initiated their relationship. On the road to the capital, Tu Mu thus met with corrupting friends and immoral relatives of the Han ruler, suggesting a similar set of figures around an emperor contemporary with himself. The first two couplets are directed at the court except for mention of where the poet is coming from, Fan-ch’uan—with its implications of both a place and a tradition. The time sense of these lines also fits together: the poet is on his way back to the court and is thinking of the nefarious characters who had been or are operating there.

The third couplet seems to indicate a switch of both place and time. No longer is the poet at the gate of Ch’ang-an but he has retracted his steps to scenes which might be found in the Fan-ch’uan region, or on the way there. He is at an earlier point in his travels, as though, to get away from the thoughts of what he was coming back to, he averted his gaze to happier, more traditionally rural travels. Contrast is made between the disease of the court and the health of the landscape. Yet the environs are not totally positive. The rain is heavy, pelting, more than one wants for comfortable travel, and the "curling smoke", positive as a symbol of domestic tranquillity, may or may not be excessive in the descent to a village. Still the contrast remains and sets the stage for the concluding couplet.

It seems now that the poet has reached Ch’ang-an and knows he cannot go back to Fan-ch’uan, to the Vermillion Slope. He breaks here with the previous couplet to present his current state of mind. He has either been sent elsewhere or is committed to a post in Ch’ang-an; in either case, he has obligations which preclude a return home. He concludes with a contradiction: a bowl worn on one’s head denies one a view of the heavens—the bowl cannot be worn and the heavens viewed at the same time. This comes from Ssu-ma Ch’ien, when he asks why he should be expected to do both at once (*Han shu* 62:16b). By wearing the "heaven-viewing bowl", Tu Mu is saying that he is in an impossible situation. From the contrast of the court and the countryside given earlier, it is likely that his dilemma is between wanting to retire but needing a position in the government.

When the poem and title are compared it is clear that they do not fit very well. With the exception of the third couplet, the poet does not talk about an excursion at all. His subject is the dilemma of desires and needs, and to this end he is willing to allow a fairly fragmented surface narrative. He recedes in time through the first three couplets and then jumps to the moment of the poem in the last couplet. Nor is there much of a transition between any of the couplets, especially between the second and third. The first two hold together by sharing thoughts of the Court, but the third and fourth are suspended in his consciousness. Disorientation serves well to reflect his state of mind, and is appropriately contrasted with the rigid parallelism of the first three couplets. Tu Mu seems to be going in several directions simultaneously, suggesting there is more here than can be accounted for by the surface level alone.

1. line[91]  

*Ch’iu-ts’ao* is not an uncommon image; its particular meaning here is probably from the *Wen-hsin tiao-lung*, from the couplet: "A cool wind ripples the autumn grass, Border horses have hearts longing for home"[92] (40: p. 45, SPTK ed.). The line might read: "In my later years, all I want is to return home." Yet Fan-ch’uan also brings to
mind Tu Yu and the Tu family tradition of service to the state: Tu Mu is also saying that although he is getting old he still wants a decent career.

2. line

Yang refers to the emperor who, as the embodiment of the yang force, is also readily identified with the sun (Po hu t'ung te lun[94] 8: p. 66, SPTK ed.) 44. Here he slants, is partial, declining, or not upright (hsieh in Couvreur, sub voc). The Fu-ang gate was the escape route of Prince Li, heir-apparent and eldest son of Han Wu-ti, when his troops were defeated in the revolt of 91 B.C. 35 The prince took rebellion as his only recourse against the false charges of sorcery lodged against him by Chiang Ch'ung[96] and other ministers who had the confidence of his father. The message of this allusion is that the fault lay with the Emperor because he did not know the worth of his ministers. Tu Mu enters the gate Prince Li exited: in a graphic manner he says he must face the same situation the Prince desperately ran away from. Thus the reading: "The Emperor is partial to unscrupulous ministers."

3. line

The line is dominated by reference to a particular favorite or to the category of sycophants surrounding the ruler. It coincides with the concept of the previous line, that the emperor is relying on unscrupulous ministers before all others. Lien, the hunt, also means alarm, presumably the poet’s, at the flattery (feng)[98] of Yen-like figures and similar hypocrites (chi[99]), being on both sides of a road, Couvreur). Although the line is dominated by the allusion to Han Yen, still parallel to the use of Kuan-t‘ao in the following line, han[100] could refer to han[101] of the Han-lin Academy (both K. 140 yăn) and signify a member of the Academy named Yen or . . . -yen[36]. Tu Mu himself could have chased after and flattered "Yen" for a favour.

4. line

The allusion to Princess Kuan-t‘ao also carries over to the secondary narrative, yet more can be deciphered from this line, starting with her name. Kuan might stand for kuan[106], minister (both K. 157, kuăn), and t‘ao[107] refer to t‘ao[108] (both K. 1047, d‘au); this leaves a Minister T‘ao or -t‘ao. It happens that the chief ministers for Emperor Hsüan-tsung (846–859) were Po Min-chung[109] and Ling-hu T‘ao[110], both members of the Niu faction. Tu Mu had reinforced his membership in the faction by writing a tomb inscription for Niu Seng-ju in late 848 – as did Li Shang-yin37. Ling-hu T‘ao was one of Hsüan-tsung’s most trusted ministers, but there is little evidence to tie him to the negative figures suggested by the allusions. His presence prompts a re-reading of the line. Shu means trees and to plant, nurture; trees can refer to the literati who, when successful, join together to form a "forest of brushes", that is, the Han-lin Academy. This is more evident in the identity and associations of particular trees, such as the "Sweet Pear" (Kan t‘ang)[111] closely linked to a popular ruler (Shih ching, Legge p. 26, and Tso chuan, Ting 9, Legge p. 771); and "Praise for the Orange Tree" (Ch‘u tz‘u 4:29–32, SPPY ed.); also there is the use of the pine and bamboo discussed above in the second quatrain and used allegorically in Tu Mu’s "Vermilion Slope" (lines 25, 26, 28 and the cassia in 35). The tree in question would be the poet, who makes himself or his wishes known to Minister (Ling-hu) T‘ao38.

5. line

Tai can mean to guide, introduce; yü, as in the second quatrain, refers to friends; ho, the lotus, can mean gratitude; and chao has earlier been identified with chao[114].
edict/appointment. Taken together, the line expresses Tu Mu’s gratitude for the help of his friends in getting a desired appointment: "Due to the guidance of my friends, I do feel grateful for the appointment." This coincides with the summer of 850 when Tu Mu had three times petitioned to be given the Prefectship of Hu-chou (Chekiang), which paid considerably more than his low positions at Court.

6. line

Pan yen, from the second and third quatrains, suggests the end of the matter, after which he descends to the provinces. Once again he becomes a literatus in the countryside, as first described in the second of the quatrains. This places the poem in the fall of 850; it also makes it certain that the position is in the provinces, not the capital.

7. line

The question this line poses is where can the poet no longer return? Instead of his home he may be referring to the court, assuming either that he has used up all his favors to get away, or that time is against him and he fears another series of prefectships which will occupy the remainder of his career.

8. line

The quandary of this line also fits both levels of the poem. However, another reading is evident: wang, to hope; t’ien can refer to the Emperor (t’ien-tzu); and p’en can be the inverted bowl which hides the truth (Couvreur, sub voc). Thus: "I (posses the) hope the Emperor will see the truth of the situation."

Two narratives are possible apart from that of the surface level and could be construed as follows.

A. My Wish to Enjoy a Career in the Tradition of My Family

I am aging and still want a respectable career,
But the Emperor is partial to unscrupulous ministers;
To sycophants and hypocrites like Han Yen,
And to immoral relatives like Princess Kuan-t’ao.
Due to the help of my friends, I am grateful for the position I received;
The job-seeking overwith, I have returned to the role of literatus in the provinces.
As things now stand, I cannot return to the Court.
I hope the Emperor will discover the truth of his/my situation.

B. My Wish to Journey Home

In my later years what I really want is to go home,
After all, the Emperor is partial to unscrupulous ministers . . .
Yet I chased after and flattered Academician Yen (or .. -yen)
And made my wishes known to Minister (Ling-hu) T’ao.
Because of my friends’ help, I should feel gratitude for receiving the post . . .
The job-seeking overwith, I have returned to the role of literatus in the provinces.
As things now stand, I cannot go home,
One cannot have things both ways/a job and retirement at the same time.

Narrative A. indicates that Tu Mu felt himself being forced out of the capital by ministers and a ruler who were unwilling to give him a position with rank and salary enough to allow him to stay. On top of that, he had strenuously to argue and petition before he was granted the post in Hu-chou. After all his efforts to get the Hu-chou post, he felt he could not soon petition again to be returned to the capital. The unscrupulous figures around the Emperor may be an exaggeration, a warning to the Emperor, or the reality
for Tu Mu. There are no prominent indications that Hsüan-tsung was afflicted with evil ministers, and to some extent just the opposite picture is presented. In spite of the association of Tu Mu with the Niu faction through the years, he was still distrusted, taken lightly, and apparently kept from high office by the ranking officials. The last line expresses his hope that the Emperor himself will realize the true worth of his officials and redeem those deserving, such as the poet.

Narrative B. says emphatically that Tu Mu was tired of government service and that his greatest wish was to retire. Yet he was unable to because of financial responsibilities, and found himself doing the very opposite of what he wanted to do. Again, compounding his unhappy situation, not only did he have to seek a better paying position, but he had to go through the degrading pursuit of this goal. He had to ingratiating himself with various ministers and only succeeded with help from his friends. Thus he was obliged to feel grateful for receiving a position he needed but did not want.

My resolution of the two narratives is this: I understand the allusions to Han Yen and Kuan T'ao to be what F. A. Bischoff (p. 418) calls "brocades", that is, allusions which can fit meaningfully into a secondary narrative but are not directly related to the real concern of the poet. The brocade functions as a diversion, it obscures the true intent and provides an alibi for the poet. These allusions provide context enough to support narrative A., but the reason the poet uses them is to convey the names of participants in narrative B., and not for their own sake. Narrative B. expresses the real concern of Tu Mu, it closely fits his situation and probable feelings in 850. It also conveys the most personal and potentially the most dangerous message. One treads lightly when mentioning contemporaries who are not necessarily friends but are in positions of power.

No doubt the irony of his situation did not escape Tu Mu: in 848 he expressed his wish to get a position in the capital after long years in the provinces, and in 850 he fought for, and won, a post back in the provinces. His career followed a tight circle, perhaps encompassed by the rhyme, of his "four rhymes", yüan, the origin and the ultimate. This is a more personal poem, describing events and people who were important to the poet alone. Thus the secondary narrative is accessible, but not in every detail.

Notes

2 In addition to the Fan-ch'uan shih chi chu, pp. 156-158, 168-169, the Fan-ch'uan wen chi, 2:32-34, SPTK ed. and the Chu'iüan T'ang shih vol. 10, Taipei, 1961, pp. 3142-3143, have been consulted.
4 "Vermilion Slope" was probably written by mid 852, several months before Tu Mu's death. It contains a summary of the poet's life hidden beneath a surface level landscape notable for the frequency of its non sequiturs. Fan-ch'uan shih chi chu, pp. 156-158. A study of this poem will soon be completed.
5 Chiu T'ang shu 147:3b-7a and Hsin T'ang shu 166:2a-5a.
6 "Nien-p'ü," p. 131; Tu Mu puts this information in his "Preface to a Commentary on the Sun-tzu" [12], Fan-ch'uan wen chi 10:p. 89.
The *Chiu T'ang shu* biography mentions Tu Mu's most successful military advice to attack the enemy during the season they were least active — and the popularity of his commentary. It also notes his sorrow at not achieving high office (147:9a).

The reference is to the "Owl Fu" (Fu niao fu) found in his biography, *Shih chi* 84, or the *Wen hsian* 13, and to his "Lament for Ch'ü Yiiän" (Tiao Ch'ü Yiiän) [18], *Ch'i-shih chia fu* (in *Das lyrische Werk*, pp. 111-112, who takes the quatrain to be a bid for a better position with the theme of retirement use as a ploy. *Chiu T'ang shu* 15:10; 15:11-12, who takes the quatrain to be a bid for a better position with the theme of retirement use as a ploy.

The reference is dealt with below, in the *Shih chi* 56: v. 2, Shanghai, 1960, p. 473. The reference is dealt with below, in the *Chiu T'ang shu* biography mentions Tu Mu's most successful military advice to attack the enemy during the season they were least active — and the popularity of his commentary. It also notes his sorrow at not achieving high office (147:9a).
In the *Shih ching*, the allegorical interpretation of the "Cypress Boat" (Po chou), fifth stanza, has the sun waning instead of the moon, suggesting a reversal of the roles of ruler and minister; Legge p. 40.


Karlgren does not list *yen*[^102] but does have its root *yen*[^103] (200 年) and such homonyms as[^104].

[^102]: *Fan-ch’uan wen-chi* 7: pp. 68–72; and *James Liu, Li Shang-yin*, p. 23.

[^103]: Names are extremely difficult to identify, especially when all the players in a drama are not known. As for Han Yen and Kuan T’ao, the absence of corresponding figures at the court of Hsüan-tsung indicates that they were chosen for reasons other than the figures they represent.

[^104]: "Nien p’u", p. 170; the petitions were addressed to the chief minister(s) (tsai-hsiang), *Fan-ch’uan wen chi* 16: pp. 138–141. Kubin identifies Chou Ch’ih[^116] (795–851), Secretary of the Ministry of Justice, as the recipient of Tu Mu’s petitions (*Das lyrische Werk* pp. 15–16). In 849 Tu Mu had petitioned unsuccessfully for a position in Hang-chou, the present poem indicates that Tu Mu got help from some friends and explains in part why the later petitions were successful.

[^105]: See *James Liu, Li Shang-yin*, p. 5.

[^106]: Kung makes the point that Tu Mu enjoyed himself in Hu-chou (*Tu Mu: The Poet*, pp. 24–25), but this does not diminish the fact that he had been forced again to leave the capital, this time because his salary was too meager to support his family. If he had to be humiliated, then Hu-chou was the place of his choice for salving his wounds.

[^107]: Lines 1, 7, and 8 of narrative A. also serve as complements to the corresponding lines in narrative B., completing their range of potential meanings.