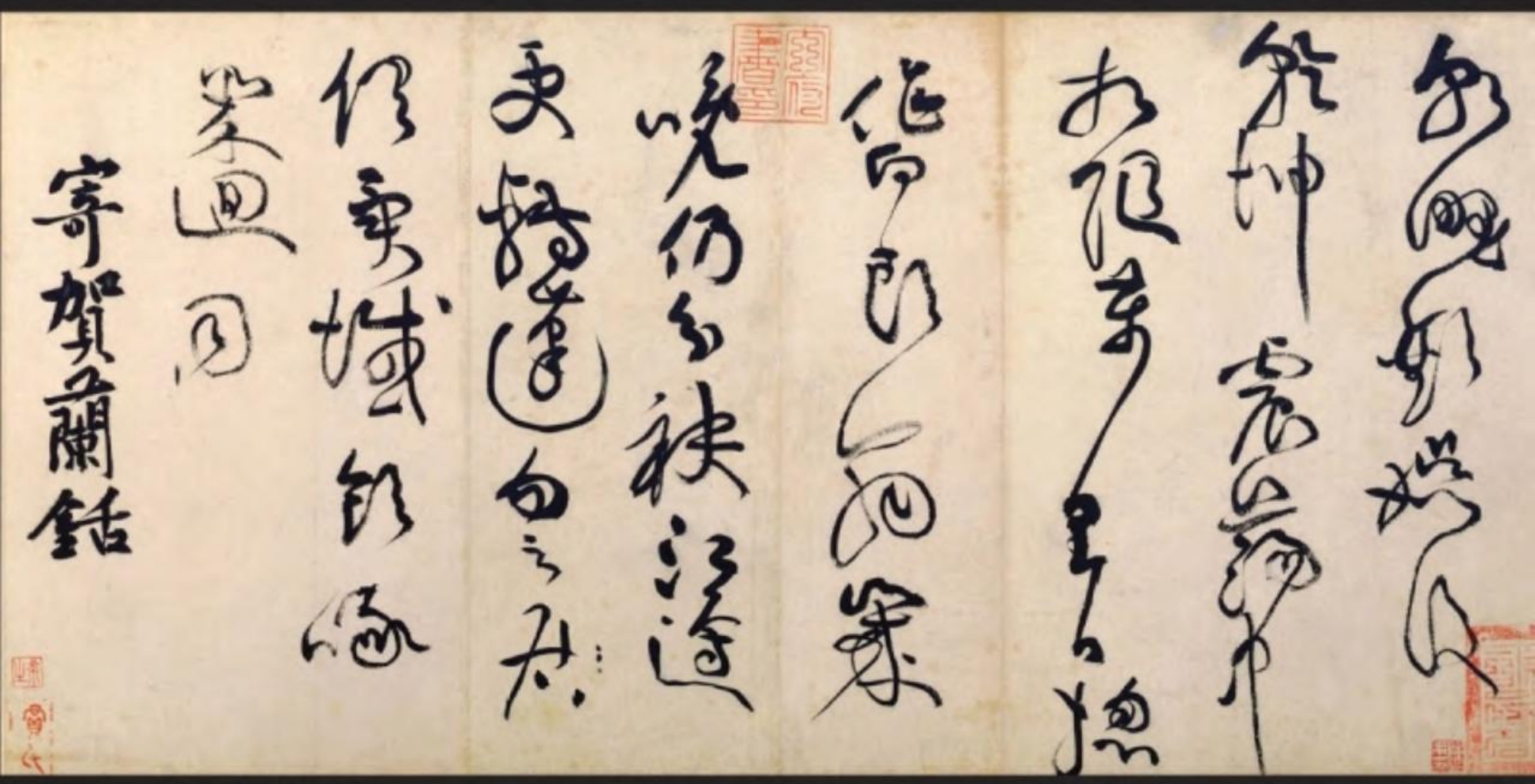
Awakened Cosmos

THE MIND OF CLASSICAL CHINESE POETRY



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Introduction

POETRY IS THE COSMOS AWAKENED TO ITSELF. Narrative, reportage, explanation, idea: language is the medium of self-identity, and we normally live within that clutch of identity, identity that seems to look out at and think about the Cosmos as if from some outside space. But poetry pares language down to a bare minimum, thereby opening it to silence. And it is there in the margins of silence that poetry finds its deepest possibilities—for there it can render dimensions of consciousness that are much more expansive than that identity-center, primal dimensions of consciousness as the Cosmos awakened to itself. At least this is true for classical Chinese poetry, shaped as it is by Taoist and Ch'an (Zen) Buddhist thought into a form of spiritual practice. In its deepest possibilities, its inner wilds, poetry is the Cosmos awakened to itself—and the history of that awakening begins where the Cosmos begins.

In that beginning, there was neither light nor space—and for consciousness, they are the essentials. During its first moments, the Cosmos was a primordial plasma of subatomic particles. This plasma expanded and cooled until the particles could

bond to form the lightest atoms, hydrogen and helium, whereupon the Cosmos became transparent to radiation such as light. Eventually, hydrogen and helium began condensing into protogalactic clouds under the gossamer influence of gravity, and chance fluctuations in the density of these clouds led some local areas to intensify their condensation until pressure and heat became so fierce that hydrogen atoms began fusing together. In that process, which can only be described as magical, stars were born. And with those stars came the elemental dimensions of consciousness: space and light and the visible.

Those dimensions began to evolve. The stars grew old, like anything else, and died. In the furnace of their old age and explosive deaths, they forged heavier elements and scattered them into space, forming nebular clouds that in turn condensed into new stars. It is the heartbeat of the Cosmos, this steady pulse of stellar birth and death, gravity's long swell and rhythm of absence and presence, presence and absence. And in the third star-generation, our planet was formed, rich in those heavy elements. It cooled and evolved until eventually water appeared: hydrogen, created during the original cosmic expansion, combining with oxygen, one of those heavier elements created in the cauldrons of dying stars. Water formed mirrored pools in hollows on the planet's rocky surface, and in these pools the Cosmos turned toward itself for the first time here. It became "aware" of itself in those mirrored openings deep as all space and light, deep as the visible itself.

Living organisms evolved and eventually developed receptors that allowed them to sense whether or not light was present. Those light receptors provided decisive selective advantages, and so developed into more and more sophisticated forms. The lens evolved as a means to concentrate light on receptor cells, thereby making creatures more sensitive to weak light.

This innovation eventually led to image-forming eyes, which combine a lens with highly specialized receptor cells. And with that, the Cosmos turned toward itself once again, eventually giving shape to consciousness, that spatiality the eye's mirrored transparency conjures inside animals. It was a miraculous development: the material universe, which had been-perfectly opaque, was now open to itself, awakened to itself!

Although ancient Chinese poets and philosophers didn't describe it in these scientific terms, this same sense of consciousness as the Cosmos open to itself was an operating assumption for them—though perhaps here *existence* is a better word than *Cosmos*, as it suggests the sense of all reality as a single tissue. This existence-tissue is the central concern of Lao Tzu's *Tao Te Ching* (sixth century B.C.E.)—the seminal work in Taoism, the spiritual branch of Chinese philosophy that eventually evolved into Ch'an Buddhism. Lao Tzu called that existence-tissue *Tao*, which originally meant "Way," as in a road or pathway. But Lao Tzu used it to describe the empirical Cosmos as a single living tissue that is inexplicably generative—and so, female in its very nature. As such, it is an ongoing cosmological process, an ontological path*Way* by which things emerge from the existence-tissue as distinct forms, evolve through their lives, and then vanish back into that tissue, only to be transformed and reemerge in new forms. It is a majestic and nurturing Cosmos, but also a refugee Cosmos: all change and transformation, each of the ten thousand things in perpetual flight, always on its way somewhere else.

The abiding aspiration of spiritual and artistic practice in ancient China was to cultivate consciousness as that existence-tissue Cosmos open to itself, awakened to itself: looking at itself, hearing and touching itself, tasting and smelling itself, and also thinking itself, feeling itself—all in the singular ways

made possible by the individuality of each particular person. This is consciousness in the open, wild and woven into the generative Cosmos: wholesale belonging. As we will see, it was recognized as our most essential nature in Taoist and Ch'an Buddhist thought, the foundational structure of consciousness for artist-intellectuals in ancient China: poets, painters, calligraphers, philosophers, Ch'an adepts. And it seems a beautiful, even essential alternative—both philosophical and ecological—to the disconnectedness that structures consciousness in the West.

A typical classical Chinese poem appears to be a plain-spoken utterance about a poet's immediate experience. This is the poem that has sounded so uncannily familiar to modern American readers and has had such a profound influence on the modern American tradition (see my book *The Wilds of Poetry*). But that is only the apparent content of the poem, much like a mountain landscape is only the apparent content of Chinese landscape paintings like those on the following page, in which there is no attempt to realistically portray an actual landscape. Instead, the paintings render the inner wilds of that Taoist/Ch'an cosmology.

At its deepest level, the tissue of Tao is described by that cosmology in terms of two fundamental elements: Absence (無) and Presence (有). *Presence* is simply the empirical universe, the ten thousand things in constant transformation, and *Absence* is the generative void from which this ever-changing realm of Presence perpetually emerges. And so, Tao is the generative process through which all things arise and pass away—Absence burgeoning forth into the great transformation of Presence.

In a Chinese landscape painting, all the empty space—mist and cloud, sky, lakewater—depicts Absence, the generative

FIG. 1 (ABOVE)

Hsia Kuei (twelfth–thirteenth centuries): *Streams and Mountains, Pure and Remote.*

National Palace Museum, Taipei

FIG. 2 (LEFT)

Ni Ts'an (1301–1374): *Wind Among Riverbank Trees.*

Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York

emptiness from which the landscape elements (Presence) are seemingly just emerging into existence or half vanished back into the emptiness. At the same time, those landscape elements seem infused with Absence, because they are drawn as outlines containing the same color that renders emptiness throughout the painting. This makes philosophical sense because the concepts of Absence and Presence are simply an approach to the fundamental nature of things. In the end, of course, they are the same: Presence grows out of and returns to Absence and is therefore always a manifestation of it. Or to state it more precisely, Absence and Presence are simply different ways of seeing Tao: either as a single formless tissue that is somehow always generative, or as that tissue in its ten thousand distinct and always changing forms.

So, the painting renders an ongoing cosmological origin-moment. It also renders consciousness at that moment—in the open, wild and woven into the existence-tissue—and it does this in a number of ways. The human element in these paintings is always small and well-integrated into the landscape's cosmology, or there is no trace of the human at all. The lack of perspective makes it feel as if the viewer is somehow inside the landscape's cosmology and able to wander there, rather than a center of identity looking at the landscape from a single viewpoint outside the painting. But the most important way paintings weave consciousness into the existence-tissue landscape depends on the way such paintings were viewed, and that was determined by Taoist/Ch'an meditation practice that was commonplace among ancient China's artist-intellectuals.

Ch'an means "meditation," which makes sense because meditation was the primary element of Ch'an practice; and as such, it appears repeatedly in the chapters below. In its barest outlines, meditation involved sitting quietly and watching

thoughts come and go in a field of emptiness. With experience, the stream of thought fell silent, and practitioners inhabited mind emptied of all content. Once the mind was silent, perception became a spiritual practice—the opening of consciousness become a bottomless mirror allowing no distinction between inside and outside. In looking at a painting, one mirrored the painting, making its space the space of consciousness. So, ancient artist-intellectuals gazed into paintings for long periods of time as a kind of spiritual practice. It was a discipline that returned consciousness to dwell at that cosmological origin-moment as a matter of immediate experience, a moment that filled mind with a particular form of emptiness. In the end, the painting is not simply about its apparent content—mountain landscape—but about the emptiness surrounding it, about how that emptiness is brought into focus and animated by the landscape elements.

Chinese poems render much the same thing, though in very different ways. As in a landscape painting, the apparent material of a poem (Presence in the form of the poet's immediate experience and thoughts) is not the entire poem, the way it is in an English poem. Instead, that apparent material exists for the way it articulates the emptiness surrounding the words. It is not just open to silence, it articulates silence. That is the essential experience of a poem as spiritual practice, the inner wilds of the poem that are lost in translation.

It begins with the wide-open minimal grammar that is immediately apparent when looking at a Chinese poem in the original (see the first page of any chapter below). All of that empty grammatical space functions much like the empty space in paintings—as the generative emptiness (Absence) from which the words and thoughts (Presence) seem to be just emerging into existence. And as in the paintings, that

emptiness infuses the world created by the words: Presence belonging finally to Absence. The poem therefore infuses everyday experience with that generative tissue of emptiness. Like a painting, a poem is not simply about its apparent content—the particular life-experience described in the poem—as it seems from the perspective of our own cultural assumptions, which is the view we see in a translation of such a poem. It is, instead, about the emptiness surrounding it, each poem revealing that emptiness in a singular way. And what is that emptiness? It is, finally, the wild existence-tissue Cosmos open to itself, awakened to itself in the form of human consciousness.

• • •

All of this suggests new possibilities for biography not as the usual narrative of events that define an identity-center, but as a story of the existence-tissue Cosmos open to itself through an individual lifetime—that untranslatable dimension of experience in the inner wilds of a Chinese poem. One aspect of this book is the attempt to trace that kind of biography, using classical Chinese poetry as a way in to a life—specifically, the life of Tu Fu, widely considered to be China's greatest poet. And so, this book might be described as a biography of the existence-tissue Cosmos awakened to itself in his particular form.

Tu lived from 712 to 770 C.E., at the height of the T'ang Dynasty, which is legendary as a time of peace, prosperity, and unrivaled cultural achievement. The legend was largely true until Tu's middle age. But in 755, when Tu was forty-three, a civil war broke out and continued sporadically until his death—a war so devastating that by the end of Tu's life, two-thirds of China's people were either dead or displaced and impossible for census-takers to count. Tu himself lived those

years as an impoverished refugee, forced to flee home after home and travel exhausting distances in search of safety and financial support amidst the fighting. This made his life emblematic of the refugee nature of things—the existence-tissue Cosmos all change and transformation, a perpetual state of departure.

However difficult these years were, they were also the years during which he wrote nearly all of his major poetry. Tu Fu's great predecessors tended to focus on the more spiritually sustaining aspects of experience—moments of meditative depth among rivers and mountains. But Tu's poetry is known for its social engagement, its openness to all aspects of the dire socio-political situation and his refugee life. This is what sets Tu apart in Chinese poetry: he allowed everything into his poems. In the Western context, this might be described as an impressive range, as exploring new aspects of experience in poetry. In the Chinese conceptual framework, it is that and much more: it represents Tu's mastery of living as the Cosmos awakened to itself. For in its elemental gaze, the Cosmos too accepts everything.

This mastery was a result of Tu's early study and practice of Taoism and Ch'an Buddhism. Born into the privileged intellectual class, he was assiduously educated in all aspects of the culture, and he is renowned for his erudition. But Tu was unusual in that he spent large amounts of time away from home as a young man. Little is known about those years, but it seems likely that he traveled because he was uncomfortable at home. Tu's mother died shortly after his birth, and he was apparently raised by an aunt. His father remarried and had several children with Tu's stepmother, so by the time he was a young man, his itinerant life may have been due to family tensions: hence, he was already a refugee of sorts.

In any case, this period of wandering must have involved substantial amounts of time in and around Ch'an monasteries—because his well-documented adult life doesn't include any extended time spent practicing Ch'an; and as we will see, the poems reveal that from the beginning Tu was familiar with the Ch'an monastic setting and that he comfortably associated with Ch'an masters. This includes no less than Spirit-Lightning Gather (Shen Hui), dharma-heir to the illustrious Sixth Patriarch and arguably the preeminent historical figure in the formation of Ch'an. Indeed, Tu called him the Seventh Patriarch in a late poem, referring to the seminal dispute in Ch'an's development, where Spirit-Lightning Gather convinced the Ch'an world that his teacher Prajna-Able (Hui Neng) was the true Sixth Patriarch. But more importantly, the poems show that he had mastered Taoist/Ch'an insight in deep ways. Tu is often described as having little interest in Taoist/Ch'an experience because his poems are rarely concerned with the insights of that tradition. But that is only true on the surface. In fact, Tu's mastery of those insights was so deep that there was no need for him to work at them in his poems. Instead, those insights provided the conceptual framework within which Tu moved through the world, the operating assumption shaping his poems. This suggests how fundamentally that framework structured experience for artist-intellectuals like Tu, and it provides a more complicated lens on Taoist/Ch'an insight than direct approaches to the ideas themselves, because it reveals that insight under the stress and compromise inherent to a broad range of lived human experience.

The terms of that Taoist/Ch'an insight will be described in the chapters that follow. Suffice it to say for the moment that Ch'an masters insisted awakening was not some transcen-

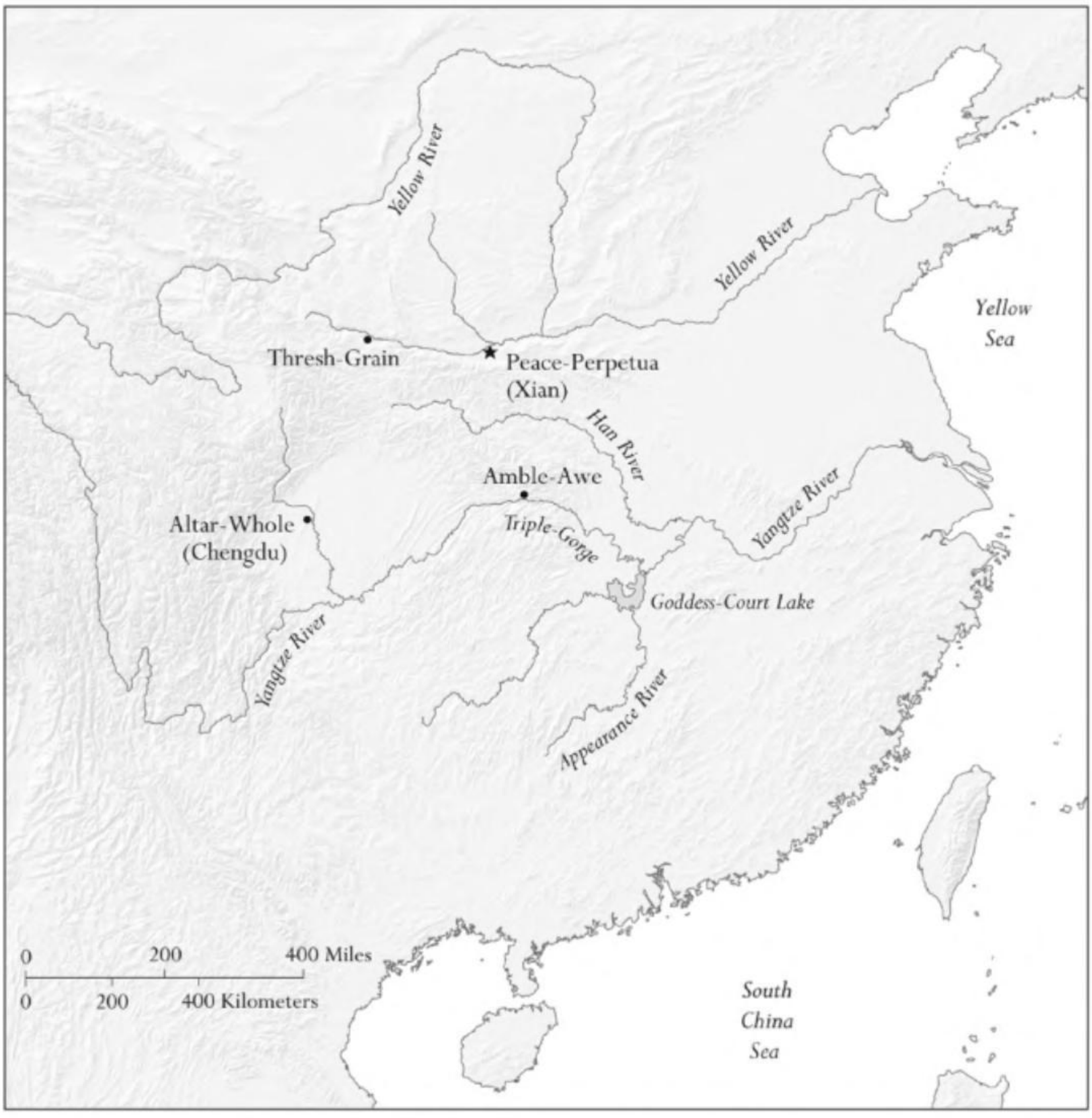
dental state, but our everyday awareness. Hence, enlightenment as the fabric of everyday experience. However confused and unenlightened our lives may seem, however blind to that everyday enlightenment we may be—we are always already wild consciousness in the open, always already the Cosmos aware of itself, awakened to itself. It is this awakening that Tu's poems enact through all the disorienting, seemingly unenlightened struggle of his life, and this is why he is so revered in the tradition. Especially because the poems enact that awakening across such a broad range of experience—perhaps most notably his late poems, which probed the deepest darkest dimensions of Taoist/Ch'an insight, for he lived those years at the extreme edge of existential exposure to a vast and indifferent Cosmos, a Cosmos that is in the end impervious to our attempts at wisdom.

Tu's awakened perspective—consciousness in the open, the wild Cosmos open to itself—can be talked about to some extent in English, but cannot easily be rendered as immediate poetic experience. As the chapters that follow will make clear, our cultural assumptions and the very structure of the language through which they speak largely preclude it. In a word, there is no wildness in the structure of English. This book tries to tell the biography of that awakened perspective by exploring representative poems from Tu's life, approaching each poem in a chapter with three parts that try to work past those limitations of English: First, the original poem, with English equivalents, which provides direct access to the very different nature of the Chinese poetic language and how that language structures consciousness differently. Second, a translation rendering the poem as it might best be understood within the constraints of English. And finally, an essay that describes the inner wilds of the poem, the dimensions not available in translation: how

the poem is not only about what the words say, but also about how those words animate the silence, the cosmological emptiness surrounding them, how they give voice to that emptiness, which is the existence-tissue Cosmos awakened to itself. Said another way: how that awakened perspective of Taoist/Ch'an insight is manifest in the poem; and how it transforms the poem, Tu's biographical experience, and the possibilities of consciousness in the open. In this, these chapters portray a person living and acting not as a detached spirit-center, but as wild: dwelling in and acting from the cosmological/ontological ground. That is, the chapters together present a biography of the wild Cosmos awakened to itself in one particular human manifestation: a magisterial poet who lived a remarkably insightful life in eighth-century China.

Reading Guide

THIS BOOK HAS A COMPANION VOLUME PUBLISHED BY New Directions: *The Selected Poems of Tu Fu: Expanded and Newly Translated*, which is an updated version of my first book. It is much enlarged and offers a new approach to translation that has developed over the decades since I worked on that first book. *The Selected Poems* makes available a large body of Tu Fu's work, thereby providing a broader poetic context for the discussions in this book, and this book provides the necessary conceptual framework through which to more deeply read the full range of poems in the *Selected Poems*.



1

Ancestor Exalt

望　嶽
gaze　sacred peak

岱　宗　夫　如　何
Exalt Mt.　ancestor　then　like　what

齊　魯　青　未　了
Ch'i　Lu　blue/green　never　end

造　化　鍾　神　秀
create　change　concentrate　divine　beauty

陰　陽　割　昏　曉
yin　*yang*　cleave　dusk　dawn

盪　胸　生　曾　雲
heaving　chest　birth　layers　cloud

決　眥　入　歸　鳥
burst　eye　enter　return　bird

會　當　凌　絕　頂
soon　when　reach　extreme　summit

一　覽　衆　山　小
one　glance　all　mountains　small

Gazing at the Sacred Peak

What is this ancestor Exalt Mountain like?
Endless greens of north and south meeting

where Changemaker distills divine beauty,
where *yin* and *yang* cleave dusk and dawn.

Chest heaving breathes out cloud, and eyes
open dusk bird-flight home. One day soon,

on the summit, peaks ranging away will be
small enough to hold, all in a single glance.

To understand who Tu Fu was, to tell the story of his life in a conventional sense, one might begin with his ancestors: his mother a great-granddaughter of the emperor who founded the T'ang Dynasty, his father a government official descended from a distinguished line of government officials. But to understand Tu in the more fundamental sense of consciousness in the open, the Cosmos open to itself, we must understand his deeper ancestors. And that is where this poem begins, an interest very possibly related to the fact that, in addition to his mother's death when he was very young, his father had recently died—meaning his human ancestors were all lost to him now. Mountains were seen as vast and sage presences in Tu Fu's China, deeply comforting, but how is it exactly that Exalt Mountain could be an "ancestor"?

This is among the earliest surviving poems by Tu Fu. He was around thirty when he wrote it, six years after failing the

national examination that qualified people from China's elite class to fulfill their primary purpose in life: to help the emperor care for the people by working in government. Tu was exceptionally brilliant and very cosmopolitan because of his extensive travels. In addition, he was nominated for the exam by the capital district, intellectual center of the nation, which meant he was among the most sophisticated and well-connected candidates, and virtually guaranteed to pass. It isn't clear how it happened—perhaps because of political intrigue, or perhaps because he was too forthright and independent-minded in his political essays—but somehow he failed. For the next six years, he wandered. Little is known about this time, though it's clear he continued cultivating Taoist/Ch'an insight, his most foundational cultural inheritance. That inheritance is on conspicuous display here in this poem, and it describes the remarkable dimensions of Exalt Mountain as ancestor.

Exalt was one of China's five sacred peaks, and in its popular sense, Exalt-Mountain Ancestor refers to the mountain as a deity. But given the cosmological ways Tu Fu describes Exalt Mountain, it's clear he sees something quite different. That mountain cosmology begins here in this poem with Changemaker, which also sounds like some kind of deity. But it is in fact Tao, that generative existence-tissue that is the *maker of change*. In gazing at the mountain, Tu Fu is gazing at a dramatic manifestation of the wild Taoist Cosmos: he sees Exalt as a kind of cosmological center-point where space stretches endlessly away north and south (literally, the ancient kingdoms of Ch'i and Lu from Lao Tzu's time), where the divine beauty of all existence is condensed into a single dramatic site by Changemaker Tao. But Changemaker, the generative tissue of Tao, is not separate from the mountain. Instead, the mountain is simply a particularly dramatic intensification or distillation

of that tissue, a fact emphasized when the mountain is described as a place where the dynamic interaction of *yin* and *yang* becomes visible.

Tu has in mind here the early meanings of *yin* and *yang* as the shadowy northern slopes (*yin*) and sunlit southern slopes (*yang*) of a mountain, but also their more philosophical meanings as the two fundamental elements of *ch'i*. Widely known as something like the cosmic breath-force, the energy giving life to the material Cosmos, *ch'i* is actually much more. It is another way of describing Tao, emphasizing its nature as a single living tissue: the matter and energy of the Cosmos seen together as a single dynamic and generative tissue surging through its perpetual transformations. Manifest as female and male, dark and light, cold and hot, receptive and active—*yin* and *yang* produce the cosmological process of change through their dynamic interaction. Indeed, in their most magisterial incarnations, *yin* and *yang* are earth and heaven, the interaction of which produces the ongoing transformations of the Cosmos as a whole, and mountain landscape is where that interaction was most dramatically visible for artist-intellectuals like Tu Fu: earth tipping up and churning into heaven, heaven seething down to mingle all windblown mist and sky breathing through earth.

As a religious deity, Exalt-Mountain Ancestor supposedly summoned the dead to the mountain's slopes, and "to wander Exalt Mountain" was to be among the dead. In the cosmological ways he describes Exalt Mountain, Tu Fu opens this mythological account to a more profound level, for he reveals the mountain as a grand incarnation of Tao as the generative tissue from which we are born, and to which we return in death. For Tu Fu, born of this generative tissue, the mountain could therefore only be called *ancestor*.

This relationship to the mountain takes on a surprising intimacy in the third couplet, where grammar becomes wildly ambiguous and spacious, weaving Tu Fu and the mountain together. The "heaving chest" sounds like it's Tu out of breath and panting from the climb, but how could Tu's chest give birth to layered banks of cloud? Mountain slopes might be called the mountain's *chest*, and they were popularly thought to be the source of clouds, for wisps of mist and cloud are often seen rising out of valleys and canyons and forests there. This image appears often in Chinese poetry, suggesting pure mountain landscape as a place at the origin of things, at the generative heart of the Cosmos. Here, that origin-landscape is integrated with Tu Fu himself—his chest indistinguishable from the mountain's chest breathing out mist and cloud. This also invests the mountain with the sense of being a living body. And indeed, the term meaning "chest" can also mean "heart-mind," interfusing Tu and the mountain at an even deeper level, while at the same time investing the mountain with a kind of sentient life.

The empty-mind mirroring cultivated in Ch'an meditation appears dramatically in the second line of this couplet. There, a grammatically literal reading suggests Tu's eyes burst so widely open by this moment of awakening to landscape that sight seems to enter the scene of birds returning through the mountain landscape at nightfall to their nests. But the grammar with all its empty space affords another reading: a grammatical inversion in which birds returning home seem to enter Tu's eyes, as if their nesting place were within him. And combining these readings, we again find Tu's mirror-deep mind wide-open and interfused with this mountain landscape, no distinction between subjective and objective. This integration of mirror-deep consciousness and mountain cosmology is distilled in the poem's title, where 望 means not only "to gaze,"

but also the "landscape seen," thereby dissolving the distinction between Tu and mountain. Hence, consciousness as integral to that generative and ancestral cosmology, as belonging to it wholly. Or in other words: consciousness in the open, wild, the existence-tissue Cosmos aware of itself.

We would expect this "landscape awakening" of mirror-mind to happen after a long difficult climb, on the summit where vast views open away, but Tu's awakening comes as he confronts day's end and the failure of his (perhaps half-hearted) effort to reach the summit. And it deepens in his description of what he will one day find on the summit, for the last line grammatically establishes a simple equation between his "single glance" and all those small mountains—an equation at those mirrored depths of consciousness that makes little sense in the Western conceptual framework, with its "soul" radically separate from earthly landscape, and is all but impossible to articulate in the structures of English grammar (which reflects that framework). Again, the poem's empty grammar integrates subjective and objective into a single tissue, reenacting a mirror-deep identity with the ancestral mountain landscape, identity which means in Taoist/Ch'an terms that Tu's truest self is nothing other than the generative tissue of the Cosmos. And so, the apparent content of the poem—Tu's experience on the mountain—shapes the emptiness around it by rendering consciousness as the opening through which the Cosmos looks out at itself. Here, Tu encounters the vastness of his wild mirror-deep mind—for in its depths, horizon-wide expanses of imposing mountain peaks seem small.

Tu Fu will spend his life wandering among those ancestors, traveling thousands of miles through that cosmology of peaks his single mountaintop glance can hold. It was an impoverished life of refugee wandering. But however tangled he was in

the difficulties of his life and times, Tu's wandering was always that existence-tissue Cosmos open to itself—ancestor wandering itself and gazing into itself, thinking itself and feeling itself, lamenting itself and celebrating itself, writing poems about itself. That is how this poem animates the cosmological emptiness surrounding its words, how it voices that existence-tissue Cosmos awakened to itself: it renders wild mirror-deep consciousness itself as ancestor.

2

Depths Awakening

遊	龍	門	奉	先	寺
wander	dragon	gate	devotion	ancestor	monastery

已	從	招	提	遊
already	from	[four-]	[directions]	wander

更	宿	招	提	境
yet	overnight	[four-]	[directions]	border

陰	壑	生	虛	籟
yin	valley	birth	empty	music

月	林	散	清	影
moon	forest	scatter	lucid	shadow

天	闕	象	緯	逼
heaven	rift	star	planet	close

雲	臥	衣	裳	冷
cloud	sleep	robe	clothes	cold

欲	覺	聞	晨	鐘
almost	wake	hear	dawn	bell

令	人	發	深	省
call	people	incite	deep	awakening

Wandering at Dragon-Gate's
Ancestor-Devotion Monastery

At four-directions monastery, I wander off,
stay the night in four-directions borderland.

Born of the valley's *yin*-dark, empty music
drifts, moon-forest pellucid shadow-scatters.

Heaven-rift planets and stars gathered close
here—I sleep all cloud-mist and chill robes,

then beginning to stir, hear the morning bell
call out, opening such depths of awakening.

FEARED AND REVERED AS THE AWESOME FORCE OF change, of life itself, the dragon in ancient China was a mythological embodiment of Tao and its ten thousand things tumbling through their traceless transformations. Small as a silkworm and vast as all heaven and earth, dragon descends into deep waters in autumn, where it hibernates until spring, when its reawakening corresponds to the return of life to earth. It rises and ascends into sky, where it billows into thunderclouds and falls as spring's life-bringing rains. Its claws flash as lightning in those thunderclouds, and its rippling scales glisten in the bark of rain-soaked pines. Existence all generative transformation driven by a restless hunger, the refugee Cosmos as a dynamic interplay of heaven and earth—it's all dragon. Dragon is the vast and mysterious tissue of Tao given just enough form that we can *feel* it, that it can *feel* in us its dynamic life writhing

through its endless transformations. So, this book might also be called a biography of dragon in the form of Tu Fu.

The title sets the stage for this poem: Tu Fu wandering out into the land of dragon. It is a paradox central to Taoist/Ch'an practice: the more you struggle toward awakened dwelling—consciousness integral to dragon's generative tissue, as the dragon awakened to itself—the more you isolate yourself as a thinking center of identity separate from that tissue, and the more you project that awakening out into some future time and place. In "Gazing at the Sacred Peak," we would expect realization to come after a long arduous climb, on the summit of Exalt Mountain with its open distances and inspiring views, but Tu Fu finds realization by *not* climbing the mountain. And it's the same here, in this roughly contemporaneous poem: rather than arduous practice in a monastery, he finds realization by turning away from realization—by leaving the monastery, wandering among ancestral dragon-lands, sleeping, waking. It is a form of insight that recurs often in Tu's poems, as in "Visiting the Ch'an Master at Clarity-Absolute Monastery" from his last years:

> Isolate, high among mountain peaks rising
> ridge beyond ridge, dawn smoldering mist,
>
> icy stream spread thin across a gravel bed,
> sunlit snow tumbling from towering pines:
>
> in such dharma perfected, poems are folly.
> And I am who I am, lazy even about wine,
> so how could I renounce wife and children,
> *ch'i*-site home again beneath further peaks?

Here again, mountain landscape is the great teaching ("dharma"), and when Tu is too lazy to go be a Ch'an monk

among those dharma mountains, it reveals a deeper Ch'an wisdom in which there is no reason to struggle for insight because it is already the very fabric of his everyday life.

Tu refers to Ancestor-Devotion Monastery as 招提 (*chao-t'i*), an abbreviated transliteration for the Sanskrit *caturdisah*, meaning the four directions of space. *Caturdisah* asserts that the monastery and its sangha *belong to the four directions*, because awakening is all about belonging to landscape as the manifestation of Tao's generative tissue. *Four directions* suggests vast expanses of landscape; and in the second line, Tu wanders away from the monastery to the very borders of those four directions. It almost sounds as if he has traveled to the edge of the world. But there's quiet whimsy here, because he hasn't actually gone far at all, only to the edge of the monastery's property. And it is from this humorous exaggeration that Tu shapes awakening as a deep belonging to those expanses—the same ancestral expanses lazybones Tu holds in a single glance at the end of "Gazing at the Sacred Peak."

In the monastery, the struggle toward awakening inevitably involved a great deal of philosophical thought directed at understanding the weave of consciousness and Cosmos. At the same time, realizing that the isolate thought-realm precludes awakened dwelling, the sangha took meditation as a core practice that returns consciousness to its wild original-nature as empty and open and integral to the Cosmos, as indeed the Cosmos aware of itself. As we have seen, meditation in its barest outlines began with sitting quietly and watching thoughts come and go in a field of silent and dark emptiness. From this attention to thought's movement came meditation's first revelation: that we are, as a matter of observable fact, separate from our thoughts and memories. That is, we are not the center of identity we assume ourselves to be in our day-to-day

lives—that center of self-absorbed thought that takes reality (Tao's cosmological tissue) as the object of its contemplation, defining us as fundamentally outside reality. Instead, we are wild: the empty awareness (known in Ch'an terminology as "empty-mind") that watches identity rehearsing itself in thoughts and memories relentlessly coming and going.

With experience, the thought process slowed, and it was possible for adepts like Tu Fu to watch thoughts burgeon forth out of the dark emptiness, evolve through their transformations, and disappear back into it. The revelation here was that thoughts appear and disappear in exactly the same way as the ten thousand things appear and disappear in the process of Tao's unfurling, and that both thought and things therefore share as their primal source the same generative emptiness, dark and silent. In this, meditation revealed that consciousness shares dragon's nature, that consciousness is wild by its very nature—always already integral to the living tissue of a generative Cosmos. And so, it is always already awakened.

After enough experience in meditation practice, the stream of thought fell silent, and adepts inhabited empty-mind, that generative ground itself. Here, they were wholly free of the center of identity—free, that is, of the self-absorbed and relentless process of thought that defines us as centers of identity separate from the world around us. This was the heart of dwelling for ancient Chinese artist-intellectuals like Tu Fu: mind and Cosmos woven together in the most profound cosmological and ontological way, identity revealed in its most primal form as the generative tissue itself. It is a mind in which the thought and memory that structure isolate identity have emptied away, a mind in which the stories and explanations that promise a path toward awakening have also emptied away. Hence: consciousness in the open, the existence-tissue Cosmos open to itself.

Here in this poem, Tu Fu applies the insights of meditation practice to a kind of landscape practice, leaving the monastic realm behind and entering the Dragon-Gate landscape where a river had carved its way between two cliffs. This was a landscape that embodied Ch'an awakening. It was invested with the aura of Buddhist practice, for its cliffwalls contained thousands of celebrated Buddhist statues—a concentration of art so intense it is now a UNESCO world heritage site. And at the same time, as wild landscape, it was itself free of story and explanation, our human meaning-making. This is deepened by the fact that it is night: those meaningless wilds gone nearly dark, a consuming dark that is not only without conceptual distinctions, but also without perceptual distinctions. And it is a very particular kind of darkness. It is "*yin*-dark": female, source that generates the ten thousand things in their constant transformation, the same source-tissue revealed in meditation as our most essential identity, as the dark ground that generates the ten thousand thoughts. Here, it is more simply a place of awakening, of nurturing in a vast cosmological sense: fecund *yin*-dark with planets and stars nestled close in a "heaven-rift," Tu Fu's descriptive for Dragon-Gate that emphasizes cosmological dimensions cradled there over the river, filling the open space between Dragon-Gate's cliffs.

This is a nurturing at once cosmological and ontological, reminding us of the graph for *ch'an*: 禪. Meaning literally "meditation," 禪 contains as its left-hand element 示, which derives etymologically from  and the more ancient oracle-bone form , images showing heaven as the line above, with three streams of light emanating earthward from the three types of heavenly bodies: sun, moon, and stars. These three sources of light were considered bright distillations of, or embryonic origins of, *ch'i*: the breath-force that pulses through the Cosmos as

both matter and energy simultaneously—its two dimensions, *yin* and *yang*, giving form and life to the ten thousand things and driving their perpetual transformations. And although the terminology is different (and the moon is only secondarily a light/energy source), this ancient Chinese description of reality is basically the same as contemporary cosmology's account, in which stars are in fact the "embryonic origins" of reality: in their explosive deaths, stars create the chemical composition of matter; and in life, they provide the energy that drives earth's web of life-processes.

Yin-dark, planets and stars nestled close: Tu Fu's dwelling as integral to the *ch'i*-tissue is palpable and powerful here, dwelling that already has all the elements of awakening. In night's near darkness, Tu's attention naturally turns to sounds, and he describes those sounds as music, but music that is *empty* (虛). In Ch'an, this term has considerable philosophical resonance. It is one of several synonymous Taoist/Ch'an terms that describe things as empty of all conceptual content: usually landscape, as here, or consciousness. Here, applied to music as the voice of Dragon-Gate's dark wilds, it suggests those wilds are pure and empty of meaning. It also suggests that Tu is hearing sounds and experiencing dark wilds with the clarity of an empty mind, free of story and explanation and meaning-making He has shed those structures of isolating identity, opening the wild empty-mind that is the goal of meditation practice in monasteries like the one he had just left.

To cultivate mind as wholly empty in the Taoist/Ch'an sense, the act of perception become a spiritual practice: it is perhaps first and foremost to cultivate a direct engagement with one's immediate experience, as opposed to being consumed in the machinery of mental events. Tu describes cultivating such landscape practice like this: "In a river's clarity,