

China Research Seminar Series

Li Bai and Du Fu

A Challenge Left Unfulfilled



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2pm, 16 February (Thursday), 2023 (in-person seminar)

Room LG18 (Faculty of Law, Sidgwick Site)

Abstract

The friendship between Li Bai and Du Fu has long attracted scholarly comment. It was an unbalanced relationship in that Du Fu was greatly impressed by Li Bai and remembered him for years after the brief period when they were together. Li Bai, on the other hand, said little about Du Fu. One point of contact is likely to have been that Li Bai, quoting the *Analects* and following the late seventh-century official and literary figure Chen Zi'ang 陳子昂, challenged the literary arena of his day to revive the high standard that Confucius, before his death, had attributed to Zhou dynasty literature. Du Fu, and one or two of his circle, registered Li Bai's challenge, and referred to it intermittently in their verse. Li Bai died in 762 and Du Fu in 759 fled into semi-exile in Sichuan. As late as 767, however, when Du Fu was at Kuizhou on the upper Yangtze, he meditated on the death of Li Bai. He still recalled Li Bai's pre-rebellion challenge and expressed regret that he had not been able to meet it. This talk describes in detail Du Fu's impression of Li Bai and suggests the reasons for his devotion to Li's memory.

Speaker

David McMullen first studied Chinese in the Royal Air Force during National Service. He then read Chinese Studies at Cambridge (1959-62) and, under the supervision of Professor E. G. Pullleyblank, read for the Ph.D., again at Cambridge. As a graduate student he studied for one academic year in Taiwan, and for two years in America. He then served in the Faculty of Oriental Studies from 1968 as Assistant Lecturer, Lecturer and Professor of Chinese. He published *State and Scholars in T'ang China* in 1988 and has also published nearly thirty full-length articles on aspects of Tang-dynasty political thought, institutions and literature. He retired in 2006 and lives in Grantchester.