

EXCERPTS FROM "A SONG OF WAR CHARIOTS"
By Du Fu

Introduction

The Tang Dynasty engaged in a number of wars of aggressive territorial expansion, particularly into Central Asia and on the Korean peninsula. These wars enabled the Tang to greatly expand the territory of the Tang Empire. They also involved extensive mobilization of men and resources. War also touched the Tang heartland directly in the form of the An Lushan Rebellion, which lasted from 755 to 763 and brought devastation to the central areas of the empire, including the capital cities of Chang'an and Luoyang.

Tang poets — who were generally also high-ranking officials — had ample opportunity to observe war (often as participants and eyewitnesses) and to reflect on it in poetry. Du Fu (712-770) is among the most celebrated poets of the Tang. He served as an official (although never in the high-ranking posts that he hoped for). He also lived through the An Lushan Rebellion, being taken prisoner by the rebels in 756 and escaping to rejoin the Tang court the next year.

Document Excerpts with Questions (Longer selection follows this section)

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Excerpts from "A Song of War Chariots"
By Du Fu

Each man of you has a bow and a quiver at his belt.
Father, mother, son, wife, stare at you going,
Till dust shall have buried the bridge beyond Ch'ang-an.
They run with you, crying, they tug at your sleeves,
And the sound of their sorrow goes up to the clouds;
And every time a bystander asks you a question,
You can only say to him that you have to go.

... Do you know that, east of China's mountains, in two hundred districts
And in thousands of villages, nothing grows but weeds,
And though strong women have bent to the ploughing,
East and west the furrows all are broken down?

Primary Source Document with Questions (DBQs) on

EXCERPTS FROM "A SONG OF WAR CHARIOTS," BY DU FU

... We have learned that to have a son is bad luck —
It is very much better to have a daughter
Who can marry and live in the house of a neighbour,
While under the sod we bury our boys.

Questions:

1. What does Du Fu think of war?
2. If you were a soldier in the Tang army, what would you think of this poem?
3. What social class does Du Fu express sympathy with in these lines from the poem? Why?
4. In what sense does the poem draw on Confucian philosophy to make its point?
5. If you were the emperor, how would you respond to Du Fu's concerns as expressed here?

Longer Selection

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Excerpts from "A Song of War Chariots" By Du Fu

The war-chariots rattle,
The war-horses whinny.
Each man of you has a bow and a quiver at his belt.
Father, mother, son, wife, stare at you going,
Till dust shall have buried the bridge beyond Ch'ang-an.
They run with you, crying, they tug at your sleeves,
And the sound of their sorrow goes up to the clouds;
And every time a bystander asks you a question,
You can only say to him that you have to go.

... We remember others at fifteen sent north to guard the river
And at forty sent west to cultivate the camp-farms.
The mayor wound their turbans for them when they started out.
With their turbaned hair white now, they are still at the border,
At the border where the blood of men spills like the sea —
And still the heart of Emperor Wu is beating for war.

... Do you know that, east of China's mountains, in two hundred districts
And in thousands of villages, nothing grows but weeds,
And though strong women have bent to the ploughing,

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East and west the furrows all are broken down?

... Men of China are able to face the stiffest battle,
But their officers drive them like chickens and dogs.
Whatever is asked of them,
Dare they complain?
For example, this winter
Held west of the gate,
Challenged for taxes,
How could they pay?

... We have learned that to have a son is bad luck —
It is very much better to have a daughter
Who can marry and live in the house of a neighbour,
While under the sod we bury our boys.

... Go to the Blue Sea, look along the shore
At all the old white bones forsaken —
New ghosts are wailing there now with the old,
Loudest in the dark sky of a stormy day.

[Translated by Witter Bynner]