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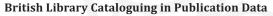
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READING FU POETRY

FROM THE HAN TO SONG DYNASTIES

edited by Nicholas Morrow Williams





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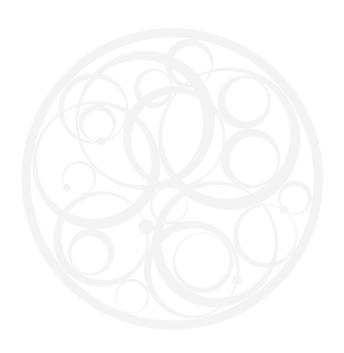
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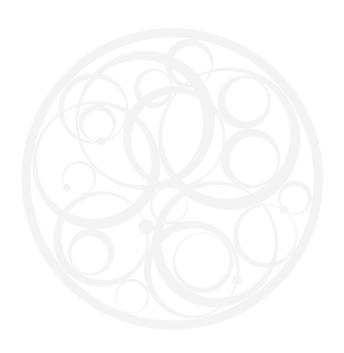
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PREFACE

NICHOLAS MORROW WILLIAMS

THE FU 赋 genre was one of the main genres of imperial Chinese literature from the Han dynasty to the fall of the Qing in 1911 and even beyond.¹ The genre encompasses some of the most ambitious and finely wrought works in the tradition, while also reflecting key developments in politics, society, gender relations, material culture, economics, and much else.² Because one of the distinctive features of the fu is its length, it can be difficult to examine the genre seriously within the space of a conventional academic article. This volume presents detailed studies of five fu poems intended to elucidate their formal features and also broader historical significance. While the limited scope of the volume represents only a tiny soupçon of the genre as a whole, each study compensates for this selectivity by showing the interconnections of each text with a much broader world beyond the fu genre itself.

The complex etymology of its name has sometimes distracted from the content of the fu genre itself. 3 The term fu can be traced back to several sources in early China, firstly its use as one of the basic six principles of the Shijing 詩經 (Book of songs), the poetry classic. In comparison to the more elusive modes of bi 比 "comparison" and xing 興 "stimulus," it is said to be a more direct kind of description of a given situation. But as the name of a genre, "fu" probably derives more directly from this word's sense of "recitation," since fu poems were originally recited in court, rather than being sung with music like the poems of the Shijing. 4 The fu was generally a long composition employing rhyme and elaborate verbal devices. One of its most distinctive features is the heavy use of descriptive compounds (known in Chinese as lianmian ci 連綿詞), either rhyming or alliterative compounds of two Chinese characters, which pose a special challenge to the reader.

Nicholas Morrow Williams is associate professor of Chinese literature at Arizona State University. His books include *Imitations of the Self: Jiang Yan and Chinese Poetics* (Brill, 2015) and *The Residue of Dreams: Selected Poems of Jao Tsung-i* (Cornell East Asia Series, 2016).

I The term "fu," when used as the name of a literary genre, will not be italicized.

² Major studies of the fu genre include Suzuki Torao, *Fushi taiyō*; Nakajima Chiaki, *Fu no seiritsu to tenkai*; Ma Jigao, *Fu shi*; Cao Minggang, *Fuxue gailun*, Xu Jie, *Futi wenxue de wenhua chanshi*; Guo Jianxun, *Cifu wenti yanjiu*. For a survey in English, see Knechtges, *The Han Rhapsody*, and the introduction to the edited volume, *The Fu Genre of Imperial China: Studies in the Rhapsodic Imagination*, 1–15, as well as the essays contained therein.

³ A concise overview may be found in Knechtges, "Lun futi de yuanliu."

⁴ See Su Jui-lung, "The Origins of the Term 'Fu' as a Literary Genre of Recitation." Su challenges, rightly, the theory that fu as a genre name derives directly from its application to the *Shijing*. This error may be responsible for the common misperception of the fu as a purely descriptive genre, which is extremely difficult to reconcile with examples like the fu presented in the first chapter of this book.

The abundance of ornate rhetoric in the early fu, especially, seems intended precisely to compensate for the absence of accompanying music, which would have been typical for the earlier Shijing tradition. This style has been called "epideictic" because of its grand display of imagery and onomatopoeia in relation to its topic. But epideictic rhetoric was not necessarily an end in itself, since medieval fu were often expected to contain some kind of oblique political criticism or implicit admonition. A fu poem was expected to attain a holistic balance of sound and sense, only a small sense of its meaning being conveyed directly, and a much larger part implicitly through formal and rhetorical means. Because the fu was so strictly and essentially a verbal artifact, it could be cogently argued that the fu is the single genre of Chinese literature whose domain is closest to that of English "poem." The more obvious candidates, shi is and ci is, both originated as lyrics intended for musical accompaniment, while the fu has stood on its own verbal ground from the very beginning.

From the broader perspective of Chinese or world literature, in fact, the simplest definition of the fu might be simply as a "long poem." Twentieth-century scholars sometimes misrepresented the fu as a prose genre, as in the unfortunate formulation "rhymeprose." This error arose naturally out of the abrupt confrontation of Western modernity into the gradual historical development of Chinese genre theory. On one hand, modern Western languages possessed a stable division between "poetry" and "prose," even if these categories were challenged by the appearance of works like Rimbaud's prose. This binary opposition appeared to correspond neatly to Qing scholars' division between shi 詩 and wen 文. But in fact wen is a category quite different from English prose, and even diametrically opposed to it in the medieval Chinese context, where it means belles lettres, the written instantiations of the patterning forces that shape both nature and culture. So the fact that fu has consistently been classified as wen—sometimes even as its paramount form—tells us little per se about its relation to Western genres. That one of the main genres of Chinese poetry is a long, baroque, descriptive form has been inconvenient for some of the theorizations of comparative literature. But it is easy enough to discard the husks and shells of twentieth-century literary criticism and return to the Chinese texts themselves.

The fu is indispensable to any serious account of Chinese literature or culture, as can be seen immediately from its deep embedding in the political scene. In the Han dynasty (202 BCE–220 CE), the fu was employed at court as a form of entertainment for the emperor or princes. It was also employed as a means of indirect political persuasion by Yang Xiong 揚雄 (53 BC–18 CE) and some other poets.⁸ In the Six Dynasties it was

⁵ See chapter two, below, for more on this issue.

⁶ As in so many other cases with Chinese poetry and other arts, this political dimension may only be hinted at so indirectly that it is arguable whether it actually exists. For a telling example where such a critique is present but requires careful examination and consultation of astronomical charts to be appreciated in full, see Lien, "The Hidden Message of Zhang Heng's 'Contemplating the Mystery."

⁷ E.g. the misguided view of the otherwise very learned Earl Miner that Asian literature is founded on the lyric and is essentially "affective-expressive," as argued in his *Comparative Poetics*.

⁸ See Knechtges, The Han Rhapsody.

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used more frequently for personal lyrics as well, but then in the Tang the fu took on a political role as fu composition was even tested in the jinshi examinations. After the Han dynasty, the fu was not the most widely used genre of literary composition, but it remained the genre of choice for some of the most ambitious work of the greatest writers: it is hard to imagine Chinese literature without Yu Xin's 庾信 (513–581) monumental "Lament for the Southland" (Ai Jiangnan fu 哀江南賦). As the last two chapters of this volume show, moreover, it remained a potent means of expression even for authors associated primarily with other genres.

Though numerous fu have been translated into English before, there are still relatively few English publications that offer complete translations of fu poems accompanied by interpretive essays. ¹¹ This volume thus aims to make distinctive fu poems accessible to English readers in a new way. Each chapter focuses on a single fu, and each piece chosen is a lesser-known work that complements and complicates received notions about the genre. Interpretations also relate the pieces to contemporary trends in intellectual history, society, other literary genres, and gender.

The first chapter presents a fu from the Han dynasty, golden age of the fu, but one that is closely tied to Warring States literature as well. This is Sima Xiangru's 司馬相 如 (179-117 BCE) "Great Man" (Daren fu 大人賦). Traditionally this fu has been read in tandem with "Far Roaming" (Yuanyou 遠遊) from the Chuci 楚辭 (Elegies of Chu) anthology. "Far Roaming" was originally attributed to the great poet Qu Yuan 屈原 (ca. 300 BCE), so Sima Xiangru's poem has unjustly been treated as a second-rate work of plagiarism. In fact, it is impossible to be certain of the dating of either poem. From the perspective of literary criticism, the two poems can be seen as a kind of minimal pair illustrating essential differences between the fu genre and the closely related sao 騒 (i.e., the poetic genre to which the Chuci anthology belongs). Both "Great Man" and "Far Roaming" adapt the model of the "Li sao" to more Daoist subject matter, a celestial journey to join the immortals who live somewhere beyond the mundane world of politics. But "Great Man" is distinguished by its improvisational style and verbal extravagance, which foreground the creative role of the poet and the circumstances of composition. Though it is unlikely the poem was composed in a single burst of inspiration in front of the emperor, it is carefully crafted so as to seem so. Moreover, its style is used to present a portrait of the philosophical transcendent in opposition to the contemporary cult of life-prolonging artifice, so its fu rhetoric is employed in service of the political criticism which was another main function of the genre. This simulated spontaneity is a feature of

⁹ Cheng, "The Assimilation and Dissimilation of Fu and Shi Poetry up to the Tang Dynasty."

¹⁰ Xu Jie has drawn attention to the importance of these works in articles such as his "Keju yu cifu: Jingdian de shuli yu pianli."

¹¹ Apart from Knechtges' translation of the *Wen xuan* and other publications, and Watson's *Chinese Rhyme-Prose*, it is also worth mentioning the translation of Gong Kechang's *Studies of the Han Fu*, edited by David R. Knechtges. This is a substantial volume dedicated solely to the genre during the Han dynasty (206 B.C.E.–220 C.E.). Some recent textbooks and surveys also offer valuable new studies, such as two chapters in Cai Zong-qi's *How to Read Chinese Poetry in Context*. Another outstanding close reading of a single fu poem is Stephen Owen's "Hsieh Hui-lien's 'Snow Fu': A Structural Study."

many of the best fu poems, in keeping with the origins of the genre in the specific situation of oral recitation. It is only with regard to content that "Great Man" bears a strong resemblance to *sao* poetry; its stylistic and formal features exemplify Sima Xiangru's distinctive creative genius in the fu form.

Chapter Two turns to a little-read fu by another representative Han poet: Yang Xiong's 揚雄 (53 BCE–18 CE) "Shu Capital" (Shu du fu 蜀都賦). This panegyrical celebration of the capital of Chengdu, capital of Shu (modern Sichuan province) is extraordinary rich in its diction, containing many expressions that are unprecedented. In a thorough study and translation of the piece, David R. Knechtges shows that it is characteristic of Yang Xiong's mature style, and a representative example of the capital fu of the Han dynasty. The piece has been overlooked in part because of its difficulty, but that is precisely where the achievement of the poem lies, in its recherché vocabulary and intricate references to actual flora, fauna, and geographical details of Shu. By carefully tracing the origins of each challenging term in the poem, Knechtges shows how faithfully the poem is grounded in the historical actuality of its place and time. Rather than being "problematic," as it has been presented in some modern scholarship, "Shu Capital" shows how the encyclopedic catalogues and verbal virtuosity of the fu form a virtual cornucopia of Han China. It is a memorable example of the epideictic style at work, and ought from now on to be accorded its rightful place in the canon of Han fu.

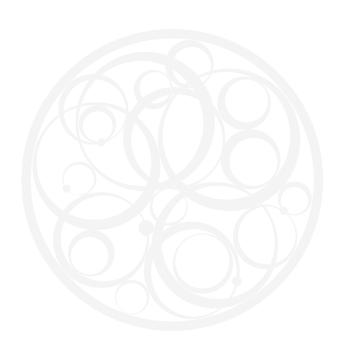
As dazzling as the verbal pyrotechnics of Han fu poets can be, there is also a more subtle kind of creative virtuosity at work in the more personal and private fu that thrived during the Six Dynasties (220–589). Chapter Three examines a work by one of the finest fu writers of this period, Yu Xin. While Yu Xin's greatest work, the aforementioned "Lament for the Southland," would require a book-length study to do it justice, his relatively minor fu poems are also major works in their own right, including the "Small Garden" (Xiaoyuan fu 小園賦), in its own way a subtle study of the author's emotional world. In this chapter Luo Yiyi elucidates the complex network of historical and literary allusions in the piece. Though at first glance a study of reclusion, the deeper significance of the piece lies in its reflections on Yu Xin's own life and times. While we expect the recluse to be a high-minded sage at ease in Daoist contemplation, Yu Xin subtly conveys his regrets and frustrations as well. Whether describing a vast metropolis or a modest garden, the microcosm of the fu poem is carefully wrought to represent the world beyond as well.

The Tang dynasty is conventionally seen in Chinese literary history as the golden age of the short, lyrical shi 詩. But it was a period of creative brilliance in the fu and other genres as well, as we can see in Timothy W. K. Chan's study and translation of Wang Bo's 王勃 (650–676?) "Spring Longings" (Chunsi fu 春思賦). Wang Bo was the poetic prodigy who signaled new heights of economy and passion in the shorter genres of lyric poetry in the Early Tang, but "Spring Longings" is a glorious piece that deserves to be studied along with the greatest poetry of the Tang. As Chan shows in his rigorous analysis, this fu can be subdivided into numerous short sections which are essentially pentasyllabic yuefu songs. It also draws on the inspiration of Qi and Liang court poetry (such as that written by Yu Xin). Thus, the fu genre does not remain static, but draws on contemporary trends in other genres to enrich itself. Nonetheless, only in the fu genre would a

piece of this scale and complexity be possible. In over 200 lines, Wang Bo paints dozens of separate spring scenes of romance and nostalgia, ranging across both Chang'an and Luoyang to the remote frontier, alternating between his own voice as an ambitious young poet and that of lonely palace ladies, weaving together the various scenes with fluent modulation of repetition and parallelism.

Finally, the last chapter of this book presents an extraordinary but little-known poem by China's most famous female poet, Li Qingzhao 李清照 (1084–1150s). This is her "Capture the Horse" (Dama fu 打馬賦), a poem on a popular board game which uses it as an innovative vehicle to convey Li's thoughts on military strategy. In Ronald Egan's subtle and sensitive reading, we see that Li is using the deceptively modest topic to express her heartfelt desire for the Southern Song generals to recapture the northern heartland from the Jin invaders. What is particularly notable about this poem is that, as Egan shows, Li Qingzhao also wrote a long shi poem conveying similar views. By comparison, the shi poem seems relatively formal and restrained, while the freedom and scale of the fu genre allows her to present her feelings more fully. Both examples of her work, needless to say, offer a different view of Li Qingzhao than the brief song lyrics for which she is so famous. Though "Capture the Horse" is not Li's masterpiece, it is a vivid example of how attention to the fu genre enriches our view of every period of Chinese literature.

It will be seen from the summaries given above that each of the chapters of this volume refer, sometimes in passing but elsewhere in considerable depth, to the broader historical context of the compositions under consideration, ranging from the travails of individuals to the fall of cities and empires. But these considerations are grounded in each case in a translation of one fu poem in its entirety, with annotation and explication as appropriate, and close attention to the particular verbal and stylistic choices of the individual writer. For the concept of a literary genre, as useful as it may be as a label or sorting device, is after all in the end a fiction imposed on literary works that exist individually. Even though all the poems in this volume were composed consciously as "fu" that revel in the spontaneous, verbose, allusive, polyphonic, and allegorical qualities of that genre, they are each unique and incomparable cases that have to be read on their own and can in no way be predicted from the characteristics of the genre. Each study is a close reading of its own, that follows the course of the original fu text in ways that frequently end up going against the grain of contemporary expectations, whether as to the nature of poetry, or of genre, or Chinese literature. Thus, this volume is intended not just as a contribution to the study of a major genre of Chinese literature, but also as an original venture in the art of close reading.



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