

Fenggu 風骨
(Wind and bone; forceful and
affective power in literature)

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SUMMARY

Fenggu as a literary term appeared in *The Wei Shu (History of Wei)* and then in Liu Xie's *Wenxin Diaolong (The Literary Mind and the Craving of Dragons)*. Roughly speaking, *feng* refers to literature's affective power upon the reader, while *gu* refers to the content of literary work which is characterized by concreteness, force and unity. The "*Fenggu*" chapter in WXDL sometimes treats *feng* and *gu* separately as two terms and sometimes treats them as a compound. The latter treatment has caused tremendous troubles as modern experts on WXDL try to define *fenggu* as a critical term. Their opinions differ greatly; no consensus has ever been reached as to its exact meaning.

This author inclines to the opinion that *feng* and *gu* are related to the idea of forceful and affective power in literature. As a style with such qualities, it comes close to *zhuangli* (vigorous and beautiful), which is one of the eight styles described in the chapter "*Tixing*" in WXDL; it bears some resemblance to the Western concepts of the "sublime" and of the "grand style."

KEY WORDS

grand style
Jian'an *fenggu*
Liu Xie
romanticism

sublime
Tixing 體性
Wenxin diaolong
zhuangli 壯麗



The term *fenggu*, literally the wind and the bone, has been used to describe a person's appearance and demeanour. It is recorded in *Wudi ji* of *Song shu* 宋書、武帝紀 ("The Chronicle of Emperor Wu" in the History of Song) that if "someone's *fenggu* differs from others'; he is an outstanding man" (Chan 39).¹ *Fenggu* here refers to the general impression that "one's physical appearance and demeanour has left on others. In more modern usage, a person with *fenggu* usually means one who is righteous and courageous." *Fenggu* as a literary term first appeared in the third century. It is one of the most ambiguous term--perhaps the most ambiguous terms--in the history of Chinese literary criticism.

It is almost impossible to define *fenggu*. However, in order not to scare the student of Chinese literary criticism away from the study of this field, some brief explanation of this controversial term is necessary. Very roughly speaking, *fenggu* may signify a literary style or a piece of literature that is characterized by concreteness, force and unity in content (*gu*) and an affective power upon the reader (*feng*). It must be clearly stated that no consensus has ever been reached as regards the meaning of *fenggu* as a literary term, especially as expounded by Liu Xie in his *Wenxin diaolong* 文心雕龍 (*The Literary Mind and the Craving of Dragon*; hereafter WXDL).

Fenggu as a literary term first appeared in "Zu Ying zhuan" 祖瑩傳 (*The Biography of Zu Ying*) (third century) of *Wei shu* 魏書 (*The History of Wei*): "Literary writing must have its own characteristics, forming one's own *fenggu*. How can it

exist the same as others" (Chan 38). Another important appearance of *fenggu* occurs in a comment by the early Tang poet Chen Zi'ang 陳子昂 (661-702) who lamented the declining of the "Jian'an *fenggu* of the Han and Wei periods. "Jian'an *fenggu*" is a literary style usually described as forceful and vigorous (see Lin). Certainly, the most important source for *fenggu* is the chapter on it in WXDL which opens:

The Book of Poetry contains six elements, and of these *feng*, or wind, stands at the head of the list. It is the source of transformation, and the correlate of emotion and vitality. He who would express mournful emotions must begin with the wind, and to organize his linguistic elements he must above all emphasize the bone (Shi 313).

Here Liu Xie first traces *feng* back to *The Book of Poetry* and briefly discusses its functions. He does not do the same as regards *gu*. He proceeds to compare *feng* and *gu* and thus makes the meanings of each of these two separate characters rather clear to the reader. According to his statement, *feng* is related to the emotion of a literary work, while *gu* to its language. Liu Xie goes on to explain *feng* and *gu*, basically maintaining the previous distinction:

Literary expressions are conditioned by the bone in much the same way as the standing posture of a body is conditioned by its skeleton; feeling gives form to the wind very much as a physical form envelops the vitality which animates it. When expressions are organized on the right principles, literary bone is there; and when the emotion and vitality embodied are swift and free, there we find the purity of the literary wind (Shi 313).

However, Liu Xie strikes a very different note when he adds immediately: "If a literary piece has nothing but rich and

brilliant colors, without wind and bone to keep it air-borne, then one shaking is enough to destroy its splendor, lacking as it does the vigor which can justify fame" (Shi 313). Instead of treating *feng* and *gu* separately as two terms, he uses *fenggu* as a compound, which means something like "emotion," "ideas" or "theme"--as opposed to "language" or "rhetoric" in the "emotion vs. language" dichotomy. Then he continues to elaborate on *fenggu*, sometimes using it as two separate terms, sometimes as a compound. The "*Fenggu*" chapter as a whole is consequently rather confusing, not unlike the tower of Babel, or even the box of Pandora. It is almost impossible for the reader to know what Liu Xie exactly means by *fenggu*.

Though written as early as in the 5th century and undoubtedly the greatest among the treatises on Chinese literary criticism, WXDL was not seriously studied and annotated until recent centuries. Later explications of the concept of *fenggu* differ vastly. The various opinions are, for the sake of convenience, classified as follows:²

(1) *Feng* as the theme of a literary work and *gu* as the rhetoric and form--Huang Kan 黃侃, Fan Wenlan 范文瀾, Liao Weiqing 廖蔚卿 and Fu Gengsheng 傅庚生 belong to this group of commentators.

(2) *Feng* as the emotions of a literary work and *gu* as the concrete contents including reasons and allusions--Liu Yongji 劉永濟, Xu Fuguan 徐復觀, Liao Zhong'an 廖仲安, and Liu Guoying 劉國盈 belong to this group of commentators.

(3) *Feng* as the affective power of literary work and *gu* as the use of forceful and concise language in it--Zhou Zhenfu 周振甫, Wang Yunxi 王運熙, Feng Chuntian 馮春田, Lin Wen-yue 林文月, Ji Qiulang 紀秋郎 and Donald Gibbs belong to this group of commentators. (It should be noted that the word *feng* is used by these scholars to refer to one group of poems in the *Shi Jing* (*Book of Poetry*) which were composed with the purpose of affecting, politically and ethically, its reader.)

(4) *Feng* as the power of emotion and *gu* as the power of

rhetoric--Zhang Wenxun 張文勛 thus explains.

(5) *Feng* as the power to influence and educate the reader and *gu* as the use of language to reach that aim--Lu Kanru 陸侃如 and Mou Shijin 牟世金 belong to this group of commentators.

(6) *Feng* as the *qi* (vital force) of a literary work which is to affect the reader and *gu* as the concrete substance of it--Guo Jinxi 郭晉稀 and Wang Gengsheng 王庚生 belong to this group of commentators.

(7) *Feng* as form and *gu* as content--Shu Zhi 舒直 thus explains.

(8) The compound *Fenggu* as a concept referring to the *qi* (vital force) or *shen* (spirit) of a literary work, which is a combination of thematic contents and artistic skills--Vincent C. Shih thus explains.

(9) The compound *fenggu* as style--Luo Genze 羅根澤, Ma Maoyuan 馬藏元 and Wu Diaogong 吳調公 belong to this group of commentators.

(10) The compound *fenggu* as the "grand style" like the "sublime" style of Longinus--Zhan Ying 詹瑛 and Cao Shunqing 曹順慶 belong to this group of commentators.

(11) The compound *fenggu* as a concept touching upon the idea of the combination of romanticism and realism--Wang Dajin 王達津 thus explains.

As regards the explanation of *fenggu* as form-content, since there is already the WXDL chapter "*Qingcai*" 情采 (Emotion and Literary Expression) which eloquently deals with the same topic, it is untenable to suggest that Liu Xie would have wanted to burden the reader of his book with another discourse on the same topic.

As regards the explanation of *fenggu* as emotion and concrete content, Those topics are treated in more than one place in WXDL (i.e., the chapter "*Zhiyin*" 知音 (The Understanding Critic) and the chapter "*Fuhui*" 附會 (Organization). Since Liu Xie has mentioned these two elements as ingredients

of a literary work, and he has also analyzed the elements of emotion and content in detail in separate chapters, it is quite unlikely that he should need to devote another chapter to this topic.

I incline to the opinion that *feng* and *gu* are related to the idea of forceful and affective power in literature; it can also be deemed as a style with such qualities. In Liu Xie's "*Fenggu*" chapter, he variously uses the words *fei* 飛 (to fly), *huiguang* 輝光 (splendor), *qihaoer lingyun* 氣號而凌雲 (a vitality that soars to the clouds), *zao yao er gao xiang* 藻耀而高翔 (with beautiful colors and the ability to soar high) and *ming feng* 鳴鳳 (singing phoenix) to refer to literary writing that embodies the concept of *fenggu*. Therefore we can say, as a style, *fenggu* comes close to *zhuangli* 壯麗 (vigorous and beautiful) which is one of the eight styles described in the chapter "*Tixing*" 體性 (Style and Nature). In WXDL, the chapter "*Fenggu*" follows immediately after "*Tixing*;" thus, it is reasonable to argue that *fenggu* is an important style Liu Xie singled out for special discussion. When treating *fenggu* as a style, we see that it bears some resemblance to the Western concepts of the "sublime" (of Longius), the "grand style" (of Matthew Arnold) and to certain aspects of romanticism.

WXDL ranks among the highest masterpieces of literary criticism, in China as well as in the West. However, there can be flaws and slips in great classics; the chapter on *fenggu*, one may venture to say, is something of a liability to WXDL. As there have been dozens of commentators on *fenggu* by scholars whose intelligence and scholarship are generally recognized, and as their explanations differ immensely, one tends to believe that the faults are more in the original text than in the commentaries. Imprecision and even confusion in presentation do occur in some great writings. Though enormously learned and brilliant, Liu Xie might have fumbled in his composition sometimes (he was only in his mid-thirties when he completed his WXDL). The term is bound to remain controversial; its

built-in ambiguity seems to reside permanently in Liu Xie's "Fenggu" chapter.

Notes

¹ Throughout this essay, translations of Chinese texts except those of WXDL are by this writer. Quotations from WXDL are drawn from Vincent Shih's translation of WXDL.

² In cataloguing the different interpretations of *fenggu*, I have borrowed very heavily from Chan Yiu-man's article as cited above. Chan's article includes titles of essays which explain and comment on the concept of *fenggu*. I share with Chan the opinion that the chapter on *fenggu* in WXDL must have been flawed.

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