

# Poetry – Collecting: From Parable to Political Necessity

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## I

In a highly centralized government such as imperial China, a ruler was often tempted to seek direct communication with his subjects. The purpose was clearly political: to gauge the state of his administration or simply to keep in touch with the people. An ancient parable illustrates very well the intentions behind, and the approach toward, this time-honored tradition:

Once upon a time there was a king in China by the name of Yao (堯), who had ruled the kingdom for fifty years. He did not know if his subjects were willing to continue supporting him. Thereupon, he inquired of the men around him, but they could not give him an answer. He then asked about the state of his rule in the court, but the courtiers could not come up with an answer either. So he sought suggestions from local officials. Still they could not give him a satisfactory answer. As a last resort, King Yao went down to the street, in disguise. There he heard some children singing:

It is by virtue of your grace alone  
That the people are fed with grain-food.  
We are ignorant, we know nothing,  
Nothing but to follow the ruler.

立我烝民，莫匪爾極  
不識不知，順帝之則

King Yao was delighted. He asked them, "Who taught you these lines?" The children said, "We learned the song from the Great Officer." King Yao then called upon the Great Officer for an answer. The answer was, "An ancient poem."

The parable should not be taken as a reliable historical document. The anecdote is in the first place taken from *Lieh tzu* (列子). Though traditionally attributed to Lieh Yu-k'ou (列禦寇, ca. 450-375 B.C.), it was actually written much later, possibly in the last years of the Later Han (A.D. 25-202). Thus the work post-dated the apocryphal author, not to mention King Yao, by several centuries.<sup>1</sup> Moreover, King Yao was a mythical king and nothing about him could be ascertained historically. It is quite likely that the parable was a projection of ideal kingship rather than a factual record of a king's search for ideal government. As for the street song which King Yao went out to collect for himself, it was an ancient poem indeed. The first two lines are taken from "Ssu wen" (思文) of *Chou sung* (周頌) from the *Book of Songs* (詩經). In its original context, the lines do not refer to King Yao. Rather they are designed for "the border sacrifice, when How-tsieh [Hou chi] (后稷) was celebrated as the correlate of God."<sup>2</sup> In other words, it is an ode to the god of the grains and is not necessarily related to King Yao. In the same way, the last two lines are taken from "Huang i" (皇矣) of *Ta ya* (大雅), which again deals with the supernatural god, generally referred to as "ti" (帝) and not to be confused with King Yao.

For all the historical ambiguities, the episode is highly valuable as a parable which demonstrates the relationship between poetry and politics in imperial China. Specifically, the parable tells a story about a ruler and his subtle and dynamic relations with his subjects. The ruler passes through several bureaucratic doors, so to speak, before coming face to face with the people he actually rules. The parable is also about poetry used as an upward channel of communication from the ruled to the ruler. A brief look at the political structures of post Ch'in (221 B.C.-) imperial China should further clarify the political implications of this model. We shall see how the embryonic form of this proto song-collecting grew into a complex and complementary relationship between poetry and politics which persisted almost for the next two thousand years.

## II

After almost ten centuries of tribal, feudal and warring states from approximately the fourteenth to the third century B.C., China was finally unified in the hands of the First Emperor of Ch'in (秦始皇, 246-210 B.C.). For the first time, the government became highly centralized, so much so that it was sometimes referred to as oriental despotism.<sup>3</sup> The emperor was the absolute ruler reigning on top of a hierarchical society.<sup>4</sup> To consolidate his power, a complex bureaucratic machinery was built. In the parable King Yao was surrounded by circle after circle of bureaucrats including his personal retinue, courtiers, local officials and Great Officers. In a way they all helped him to rule his kingdom with some efficiency. Yet, paradoxically, they also obstructed him in his search for rapport with the common people in the field. Further, since the bureaucrats were delegated to rule, they were prone to seizing power for their own benefit and to perpetuating their privileged positions. This was especially so if the bureaucrats also happened to be nobles protected by inheritance laws. The absolute ruler naturally felt threatened. To counter-balance the power of his ruling surrogates, the ruler appealed directly to the common people for suggestions and support. This was especially necessary if the ruler came from a grass-root background and if his power had not yet been fully consolidated. The founding father of Former Han, Kao-tsu (高祖, 206-195 B.C.), for instance, returned to his native country of P'ei (沛) and chanted "Song of the Big Wind" (大風歌) to rally support from his former associates:

The big wind rises, the clouds scutter.  
With authority imposed within the Four Seas, I'm back:  
How can I enlist the brave to guard the four quarters?

大風起兮雲飛揚  
威加海內兮歸故鄉  
安得猛士兮守四方

Composed by a man who with extraordinary military success had subdued his enemies and founded his empire, the song nonetheless testified to his need for communication and support from the common people.

In King Yao's parable, the song was collected from the bottom of the

political hierarchy while the poem in Kao-tsu's case was created at the top. Either way the songs were folk in nature or by connections. The children's song was transmitted, if not created, on a folk level. In the same way, Kao-tsu's song, though initiated by a ruler, was no less folk because of the non-elitist background of an emperor known for his anti-intellectual attitude and because of the fact that the song was performed by one hundred and twenty local youths. As a folk medium of communication – versus the elitist channels of communication, such as government edicts and bureaucratic procedures – the folksong provided an alternative approach to government. Either by collecting or by creating folk pieces for popular appeal, a ruler presumably hoped to maintain a direct channel of exchange with the ruled class. In other words, by using folk poetry, the ruler had at his disposal an alternative to the otherwise indirect and cumbersome system of government, conducted mainly through the bureaucratic machinery.

Notwithstanding the original communicational intentions behind the collecting and the creating of folksongs, they eventually could not avoid being incorporated by the self-perpetuating and the ever-absorbing bureaucratic system. In the very beginning the ruler might use folksongs as a medium of communication or at least as a token gesture to maintain an exchange of some kind with the people. However, in time the bureaucratic machinery in its snowballing process eventually superseded this unorthodox approach toward government and assimilated the songs into an integrated whole. Kao-tsu's personal initiative, for example, was institutionalized after his death. A temple was built in his honor and his song was made a ritual tune and performed periodically. Such, obviously, was the bureaucratizing process of the songs in the street. And such was precisely the beginning of the appropriation of folk poetry in the Han and especially in the reign of Emperor Wu (武帝, 141-87 B.C.), whose rule marked the climax of the absolute government in the Han.

This transformation can be attributed to the fact that the ruler was too far removed politically from the ruled to actually maintain a personal commerce with the ordinary peasants. In fact, way back in the pre-feudalistic days before the Han, the rulers already sent delegates out into the field to solicit people's reactions to their administration. In one instance, we are told,

In the early month of spring as those who lived together [for the winter] were about to disperse, the official messenger would shake a bell with a wooden tongue on the road to collect songs and then submit the songs to the grand master, who regulated them in accord with notes and tunes to present to the king. That is why we say that though a prince does not watch beyond the window and the door, he knows the world.<sup>5</sup>

The embryonic form here already contained some of the basic elements of the tradition of song-collecting. The purpose of song-collecting was to "know the world" – to be acquainted with the state of his rule, that is. Yet this he could not accomplish on his own; messengers were dispatched to do the fieldwork. Moreover, the collected songs were first presented to the grand master to be "regulated" before being submitted to the ruler. We shall see later how these collecting processes were institutionalized in Emperor Wu's time. In the same vein, we shall also examine how poetic production became to a certain extent a political necessity.

The Yüeh-fu (樂府, the Music Bureau) was founded by Emperor Wu. *Han shu* (漢書, *The Former History of Han*) chronicles the establishment of the Yüeh-fu as concurrent with, and closely related to, the implementation of the religious cults of state. *Han shu* begins by recording the religious innovations:

When Wu-ti [Emperor Wu] established ceremonies for the seasonal worship of the bounds, services were held in honour of the Grand Unity at the dedicated site that lay at Kan-ch'üan; and the Earth Queen received sacrifice at Fen-yin, on the square mound that lay within the lake.<sup>6</sup>

Before we go on to give the second half of this entry which is about the establishment of the Yüeh-fu, some clarifications of the religious practices of the period, and especially the supremacy of the Grand Unity, are required. Before Emperor Wu's time, the Chinese religion was as a whole non-hierarchical, with Heaven (天) and the Five Gods (五帝) sharing more or less the same divine status.<sup>7</sup> They were all void of personal wills and were undifferentiated. The Five Gods, moreover, were passive and were controlled by the Five Elements. As such they were of little help in providing a theological justification for the absolute power of the emperor. Miao Chi (謬忌) thus submitted to Emperor Wu:

Among the gods in heaven, Grand Unity is the most divine. The Five Gods should be subordinated to Grand Unity.<sup>8</sup>

His proposal was immediately adopted, and by elevating one specific god above the others the emperor as a mortal being very skilfully correlated himself to what was supreme and supernatural.<sup>9</sup> In other words, by privileging a divine being, the Grand Unity, the mortal emperor also hoped to provide a theological justification for his unique status as the one and only ruler in the land.

What further intrigues us is that *Han shu* treats this event as a prelude to the founding of the Music Bureau. The passage about the establishment of the Grand Unity as the supreme spirit is immediately followed by probably the most significant statement on the history of the Bureau in its initial stage:

It was now that the Office of Music [Music Bureau] was set up to make a collection of poems and to maintain a complement of choirs for the palace. There were heard the strains of Chao, Tai, Ch'in and Ch'u. Li Yen-nien was appointed Master of Harmony, and often gave performances of the poems and of fu which had been composed by Ssu-ma Hsiang-ju and many others.<sup>10</sup>

There are two ways to relate this event to its religious counterpart. Chronologically, the establishment of the cult occurred between 114 and 113 B.C., thus prompting critics to conclude that the Bureau was also founded around 114 B.C.<sup>11</sup> However, that the two events took place at the same time should not be taken merely as a coincidence. The two measures were part of a trend toward imperial expansion in Emperor Wu's time. (The trend was reversed from 70 B.C. onward though.)<sup>12</sup> The two innovations can be seen, in other words, as an attempt on the part of the emperor to strengthen his power vertically by elevating his position above that of an ordinary mortal ruler with the establishment of the state cults, and on the other hand by expanding his power base horizontally among the populace with the founding of the Music Bureau. Causally, one can actually see the establishment of the Bureau as a means to promoting the state cults. The musical activities of the Bureau — though originating in the folk tradition — were initially designed for religious functions. Entertainment was only secondary in importance. *Songs for Suburban Sacrifices* (郊祀歌), which was a repertory piece of the Bureau, for instance, was related to the folk tradition,

and yet its function was essentially religious. It was actually a suite of ritual songs, celebrating the felicitous events of the period.

When the Bureau was first instituted, it was, as a matter of fact, quite diversified in function. It was entrusted with the collecting of songs from the various parts of the country, the commissioning of literate pieces which were then set to music, and the maintenance of a choir of virtuoso artists to perform the collected and commissioned pieces. We learn from the passage in *Han shu* that the songs collected came from a wide variety of geographical locations and thus represented a wide spectrum of folk ways. As for the commissioned pieces, *Songs for Suburban Sacrifices* came from the hands of such court poets as Ssu-ma Hsiang-ju (司馬相如, ca. 179-117 B.C.) and Tsou Yang (鄒陽, ca. 206-129 B.C.). The two corpora—the genuinely collected and the commissioned—were then turned in to the Master of Harmony to be set to music for performance in religious rituals, court audiences, official banquets and other formal occasions. Since the activities were so diversified, it would be a mistake to equate the Bureau to an auxiliary office concerned with the religious affairs of the state. Rather its activities must be seen as a comprehensive political move before one can fully realize the dynamic relationships between poetry and politics.

### III

A brief examination is in order here of the simultaneous establishment of the Bureau and the state cults as a new bureaucratic initiative capable of mystifying the actual relationships between the ruler and the ruled. In a pre-bureaucratized society, the folksongs as a medium enabled the ruler to gauge the public opinions as King Yao did, or to appeal directly to the people as Kao-tsu did. Now in the centralized political structure, the otherwise simple and direct communication was developed into a complex political machinery. The folksongs were now incorporated into the government bureaucracy, and made to work for the state cults which were eventually designed to perpetuate the imperial power through a process of mystification. An imperial edict of 113 B.C. should help us to understand how this was possible:

With our insignificant person [we] have been entrusted [with a position] above that of kings and marquises, [but our] virtue has not yet been able to tranquilize the common people. Some of the common people [have suffered from] hunger and cold, hence [we] have toured about and have sacrificed to Sovereign Earth in order to pray for a prosperous year.<sup>13</sup>

The basic assumption here was that the welfare of the people was determined to a great extent by supernatural forces. Meanwhile the emperor was endowed with the power to placate the spirits on the one hand and to "tranquilize" the common people on the other. In other words, the relationships between the ruler and the common people could no longer be defined as those of simple and factual government. They involved instead a rather complex mechanism with real as well as false dynamics among different social, political and supernatural forces. And since the common people were denied any direct access to the supreme supernatural powers, the rulers enjoyed the monopoly of this ultimate communication between man and nature.<sup>14</sup> In the same manner, the literature that used to serve as a means of straightforward two-way communication between the two parties was now transformed into celebrations of mystical events designed to benefit the ruler. *Songs for Suburban Sacrifices*, for instance, described not so much life on the commoner's level as the supernatural portents which were believed to be closely related to the state of the government. They described such supernatural phenomena as the unearthing of the holy tripods (114 B.C.), the growth of the magical plants believed to be able to confer immortality (109 B.C.), the capture of the unicorn-like lin (麟, 122 B.C.) as well as the discovery of six scarlet geese (94 B.C.). Basically these pieces served the ruler by glorifying the power of the imperial house and thus were quite divorced from the common life which the folksongs were capable of reflecting while in their original, pre-appropriated stage.

Poetry thus changed from a means of two-way communication between different classes into that of a one-way tribute to the ruler. We have touched briefly on the oral songs coming from the grass-roots level. It is appropriate, therefore, also to elaborate on their elitist counterpart. Notice how in the passage taken from *Han shu* the commissioned pieces are referred to as fu (賦) (not to be confused with "fu" [府] of "Yüeh-fu"), which can be defined as occasional pieces solicited by the ruler from his courtier-poets. As early as the Spring and Autumn Period (春秋, 722-463 B.C.) a king would

command his courtiers from the high-ranking nobilities down to the enfeoffed scholars to orally present poetry of their own creation.<sup>15</sup> The poetry presented in this fashion served the same purpose of improving the administration by offering advice, but in due course of time its integrity deteriorated. The poetry submitted to the king eventually amounted to little more than panegyrics of the ruler's wealth and success. Whatever didactic effects were retained were mainly for cosmetic reasons, and the criticisms were at best half-hearted. Later when Emperor Wu came to power, he himself was a poet of some merit and therefore made it a practice to have his court poets accompany him on his excursions. These poets were commanded to compose works on strange animals and plants they encountered on their journeys.<sup>16</sup> Like the folksongs collected, these *fu* pieces were presented as tributes to the emperor, but there was a basic difference between the two genres. The folksongs were the genuine expressions of the common people who were distanced from the ruler by the very complexity of the bureaucratic structure. As for *fu*, because of the fact that the court poets were at the service of the ruler and were subject directly to his whims, it was inevitable that the genre hardened into a style which lent itself to endless glorifications of the material as well as the spiritual wealth of the emperor.<sup>17</sup> The style used is thus almost in diametrical opposition to that employed in folksongs. While the *fu* pieces are generally descriptive and static, the oral *yüeh-fu* ballads (the genre borrowed its name from the office) tend to be narrative and dynamic. And while one sets out to enumerate spatially a world imagined or observed, the other goes about experiencing life from a participant's view. In terms of the ideological climate of the age, the tight political control, the prevalence of the mystical Yin-yang (陰陽) school of thought as well as the meticulous attitude toward textual problems (as exemplified in the polemics surrounding the Classic Text School [古文派] versus the Modern Text School [今文派]) all contributed to the preoccupation with form and especially the formal totality in the courtly *fu* pieces.<sup>18</sup> As a contrast to the cultured and hence controlled court production, the folk ballads were able to lead a more diversified existence and thus provided greater room for a larger array of expressions. Their form, as a result, was rather open, thus enabling the composers to experience their lived reality within the expanse of their creation.

In examining this two-fold imperial appropriation of the formalized *fu*, generally translated as "rhyme-prose," and the experiential *Yüeh-fu*

ballads, one can easily see the political purposes involved. Specifically, one may scrutinize the written tradition of *fu* by using for example Ssu-ma Hsiang-ju's "Fu on Shang-lin Park" (上林賦), which is probably the *fu* piece par excellence of the period in terms of style as well as content. In doing so, one must pay attention to how its ornate and accumulative style reinforces the poet's mystified outlook on politics. As a contrast to this mode of representation, studies on the oral tradition of Han can also be conducted with a view to showing how this experiential mode of expression is suitable for reliving the socio-economic reality of the age within a relatively straightforward narrative framework. Aside from the two distinct modes of expression, one may also look into a group of Emperor Wu's religious hymns — *Songs for Suburban Sacrifice*, that is — as a mediating form because they were composed by court poets, and yet they were also designed to appeal to the common folk. Consequently the mediating style oscillates between the accumulative enumeration of the literate tradition and the narrative experiencing of the oral tradition. Due to the limitations of space, significant as they are in supporting our argument, these studies cannot be given in detail here.

#### IV

In order to understand the true nature of Han literature — both written and oral — it is necessary to examine the dynastic history by focusing on the growth of its political structures as well as the socio-economic relationships between different strata of society. For the convenience of discussion, we shall take up only the reign of Emperor Wu which was radically different from that of the Chou kings or the princes of the Spring and Autumn and the subsequent Warring States periods. It even differed from the first three reigns of the dynasty. The difference, moreover, was not limited to political structures. It also determined the ways in which literature was to be appropriated for political purposes. In other words, the unique political use of literature could be expected only from the rule of Emperor Wu, or of other emperors with similar ambitions and dexterity. The double appropriations of literature—of written *fu* on the one hand and of oral *yüeh-fu* on the other—were, moreover, best suited for a sovereign who traveled a medial path between high-handed repression and condescending protection.

At the outset, it must be made clear that imperial China was essentially hierarchical. The concept of "equality" in ancient Greece or in the "modern" West was practically absent throughout the history of the dynasties.<sup>19</sup> The absence, however, should not be taken to mean that Chinese history did not undergo dynamic changes. From the ancient Chou dynasty (1027-256 B.C.), through the Spring and Autumn (722-463 B.C.), the Warring States (463-220 B.C.) and down to the Han dynasty (206-8 B.C.; A.D. 25-220) there were actually changes in social structures which are relevant to our study of Han literature. In the feudal society of Chou, social mobility was hardly possible. The barrier between the ruling and the ruled classes was totally impassable. On top of this feudalistic structure was the king who ruled the nation with the alleged mandate of heaven. To consolidate his control over the lower Yellow River basin, the king installed princes and royal kinsmen as feudal lords and delegated his power to them as both a political leader and a family head. Within each individual territory, power was transferred from generation to generation, thus leaving very little room for mobility: commoners could never hope to be accepted into the ruling class. This direct transition of hereditary power was true not only of the nobilities. Even the lowest-ranking group in the ruling class, the literati, followed the same tradition. Though the literati were by birth warriors, landlords and scholars at the same time,<sup>20</sup> they were "classificatory kin to one another; hence their socio-political relationships . . . were predominantly familial."<sup>21</sup> What we had here was basically a stagnant society. One could only be born, but not work one's way up, into a ruling class. If one had been born into a peasant's, a merchant's or an artisan's family, he was expected to live his life supporting the upper strata of the society. He was a "hsiao-jen" (小人, small man), destined since birth to take orders and labor for the "chün-tzu" (君子, gentleman), because he was regarded mentally inferior to his superiors.<sup>22</sup> Such social stagnation lasted for almost three hundred years until the eighth century B.C. when the Chou capital in the west was lost to the barbarians. From then on the power of the imperial house underwent a drastic decline and the kings could no longer claim to be the universal rulers of the territory. Instead, different feudal states enjoyed *de facto* sovereignty. We witness in this period not only the greatest mobility in the Chinese social structure but also the growth of divergent philosophical schools, vying to cure the ills caused by the disruption of the social order. So far as the reshuffling of the social structure was concerned, the previous

aristocratic class found their hereditary privileges no longer honored. As they slid downward, their positions were replaced by the scholar-strategists who were well versed in the art of government.<sup>23</sup> By the fifth century B.C. the noble class had almost completely disappeared from the political scene, and Hsü Cho-yün (許倬雲) characterized this transformation as a complete transition:

Changes in the economy . . . lead to a new, economically stratified social structure that challenged the domination of the society by those of high political rank. By the later part of Ch'un Ch'iu [Spring and Autumn] period, the use of serf labor by manorial lords seems to have largely given way to a system in which the users of the land paid rent or taxes. At this point the feudal lord became a land-owner and his subjects became tenants. The next stage was the appearance of men who owned land but did not necessarily have a concomitant noble rank. Some landowners became rich by buying up land and landless peasants grew poorer still—an economic stratification that was also a social differentiation and caused a basic change in the structure of society.<sup>24</sup>

Along with the downfall of the aristocratic class came a drastic overhaul of the social structure. While during the Chou, "All the land in the kingdom is the king's land," to use Mencius' words, now for the first time wealth did not come with the political power. The political power as a result was forced to reckon with the power of wealth instead of taking it for granted. Once this trend was set, no matter what changes the political structures might undergo, the imperial house inevitably had to come to terms with the power of the peasants, the merchants and the land-owning bureaucrats and, in short, all the sectors of society which were directly involved with actual production. In terms of literary phenomena, we shall see how poetry was used as a means of soothing and, in some cases, checking the supporting populace. Specifically, we want to see how literature at the service of, or even as a critique of, the royal house was used as a way of coming to grips with the peasants and the merchants, as well as the royal relatives who enjoyed the political and economic blessings of their inherited power.

Politically the year 221 B.C. can be said to be a watershed between the multi-state power of the Spring and Autumn period and the subsequent centralized government which characterized both Ch'in and Han. The autocratic rule of the First Emperor of Ch'in reversed the trend toward locali-

zation which was especially prevalent in the preceding five hundred years. For the first time the absolute power was vested in the single person of the emperor. The centralization was actually so thorough that cultural activities that used to lie outside of the realm of government were now incorporated. The first Emperor actually took some drastic measures toward cultural affairs by burning practically all the classics. This can be seen as the beginning of imperial intrusion into otherwise uncensored and ungoverned literary activities. And once this trend was set, future emperors in an affirmative or negative way became fully aware of the significance of literature and the literati class as an inalienable link in government. Hence, efforts were often made on the part of the imperial court to incorporate literary activities into the bureaucratic machinery. Whereas the First Emperor suppressed literary activities, only to add to people's discontent and to have his empire overthrown after a short interval of fifteen years, Emperor Wu of Han, on the contrary, made skilful use of literature on both the written and the oral levels as a way of consolidating his highly centralized political machinery.

In terms of the social structure of the Ch'in dynasty, the most apparent feature was the centralization of the absolute power in the emperor. Yet unlike early kings who mystified themselves as descendents of gods and were thus endowed with extraordinary hereditary charisma further supported on the side by the familial system, these absolute rulers now managed to maintain their autocratic power through intricate political manipulations. The Legalists thus rose to power by advocating clear-cut demarcations between the ruling and the ruled classes, to be maintained with complex legal measures. In a sense the Legalists brought equality to those ruled, thus causing some historians to claim that all commoners in imperial China were equal.<sup>25</sup> Nonetheless, in actual political maneuvering some classes were prized over others because they contributed more to the upkeep of the empire. Since the peasants and the soldiers were often one and the same class, they were the backbone of the overall production and were often patronized for that reason. They were favored, furthermore, not merely for their contributions to the revenue of the state. They were so treated mainly because they did not easily voice their grievances.

If the Ch'in dynasty was dominated by the Legalist School of thought, with its emphasis on the authoritarian rule over the entire kingdom, the Confucian thought superseded the Legalist School and absorbed practically

all the other contemporary trends of thinking in the Han. While the Legalists stressed rule by law and thus would have almost nothing to do with cultural activities and especially education, the Confucianists offered a more pragmatic justification of the hierarchical structure of society by arguing that an individual had to earn his social position in accordance with his personal merits, such as moral character, administrative ability or, in our present context, achievement in literary arts. Translated into political terms, the system offered the ruling class an effective way to recruit bureaucratic personnel to serve the royal house and to open, at least as a token gesture, an avenue to high positions for anyone who prepared himself sufficiently for the climb upward toward social success. In the same manner, as a way of justifying one's rule, a recruited bureaucrat also needed to demonstrate to the public his willingness to live up to his position and to maintain constant communication with the public. In other words, a local official needed to evaluate his rule by regularly keeping in touch with his constituents just as a King felt the need to gauge public opinions. As for the ruled class, they owed to the ruling class as much allegiance and cooperation as the ruler was required to "rectify name" and to be accountable to them. This reciprocity was, nevertheless, easier said than done. In a centralized authoritarian rule, the ruler and the commoners were actually so far removed from each other that direct communication was hardly feasible. A Han emperor, for instance, could not be expected to go down to the street to solicit children's songs as King Yao did. For that reason, a new branch of the bureaucracy was built to channel the communication. The recruited bureaucrat-scholars were assigned the duty of reflecting the sentiments of the people and, at times, of offering token criticisms on behalf of the ruled. Now what is of special interest to us is how this reciprocal relationship was inserted into the literature of the age and how poetry was skilfully appropriated for this political purpose. The case shall be self-evident as we compare the elitist *fu* with the popular *yüeh-fu* on both the stylistic and thematic levels.

If the first seventy years of the Han dynasty were characterized by political and economic decentralization, the new situation in Emperor Wu's time dictated a transition in politics which also affected the mode of literary production. In the past the imperial house sought consolidation by building its power upon local fiefdoms. Now as these noble kinsmen with their ever-increasing wealth and power were beginning to pose a threat to the emperor, the conflicts between the central and local powers also started

to surface. (The Rebellion of the Seven Princes [ 七王之亂 ] in 154 B.C. marked the culmination of their conflict.) Financially, the first phase of retrenchment stressed economic recovery from the destruction caused by the expansion of the Ch'in and the subsequent revolutionary war. The land tax was reduced to one fifteenth, even one thirtieth, of the total crop, as a way of herding people back to the land, and of increasing production.<sup>26</sup> However, as years of peace and prosperity came back, the enfeoffed land turned out to be too profitable to be left in the hands of the nobles. In the case of Prince Wu ( 吳王 ), who headed the Rebellion of the Seven Princes, his land abounded in salt and copper, not to mention the extra profit he made by minting coins.<sup>27</sup> It was only natural that the emperor would want to get the land back. And at a time when the country was engaged in military expansion, this extra revenue was all the more vital. Various ways were devised to deprive the princes of their property and to increase the imperial wealth. The general practice was to strip their privileges outright or to force them to distribute their wealth and power among their relatives and descendants and thus hand up to the central government much of their autonomous power. In terms of literary activities, the economic prosperity on the local level fostered the patronage system which thrived under the roofs of powerful princes and wealthy merchants. Now as the power became centralized, the cultural assets were also amassed in the royal court. Ssu-ma Hsiang-ju, for example, left Emperor Ching's court to seek opportunities in the hall of Prince Liang ( 梁孝王 ). Naturally this displeased the emperor who managed to have the patron prince humiliated. And perhaps it was no accident that Emperor Ching's successor, Emperor Wu, recruited Ssu-ma back to the royal court.<sup>28</sup>

The reign of Emperor Wu witnesses politically the height of centralized administration. Militarily, the period was marked by ambitious expansions into areas as far as northern Korea, Ferghana, northern Vietnam and other border areas. Economically, natural resources were exploited and human labor utilized to the utmost extent through the implementation of the state monopoly of salt and iron and unrestricted land ownership. In terms of the literary history of the period, Emperor Wu can be said to be personally responsible for ushering in or, more appropriately, for canonizing, the genre of *fu*, which was generally treated as beginning from the time of Emperor Wu and ending in the Wei and the Chin (A.D. 220-420). As for the *yüeh-fu* ballads, they were by origin the product of the non-literate common people. Emperor Wu, however, saw in them assets worthy of incorporating and thus

initiated the Music Bureau under the Lesser Treasury (少府) for the collecting and performing of this folk genre.

An investigation of the social structure of the age is in order here before one can see literature as a conscious as well as unconscious reflection of the people involved with the production of literature, including the creators, the performers and the audience. Ch'ü T'ung-tsu (瞿同祖) divides the Han social classes into the following categories: the emperor and the imperial family, nobles (imperial relatives and consort families), officials, eunuchs, commoners (scholars, farmers, artisans and merchants), guests and slaves.<sup>29</sup> Their social relationships were far too complex to ascertain in terms of literary production. I propose to use instead a simple scale used by Hsü Fu-kuan (徐復觀). Aside from the imperial house, the Han society consisted of big landlords, merchants, middle and small farmers, artisans, tenant farmers and slaves.<sup>30</sup> The noble kinsmen were economically subsumed under the category of the big landlords for their wealth and power were built exactly on the leasing, and even annexing, of land. According to this classification, the emperor had two major groups to relate to, or to deal with: the big landlords and the merchants on the one hand and the farmers and artisans on the other. Great efforts were made to put down the first group who competed with the emperor for profit. We have already seen how the wealth of the nobles was reduced by distribution. In another instance, the policy of "Declaring Currency" (告譖) was implemented in 119 B.C., requiring all large landlords and especially merchants to pay taxes not only on their cash savings, but also on the converted value of their immovable properties. Those who committed fraud on tax payments were punished by confiscation of all their properties, while those who reported on the undeclared incomes and assets were rewarded with half of the confiscated value. By contrast, with regard to the farming population who cultivated the land and contributed to the constructions as well as the military service of the empire, condescending gestures were made by the imperial house to give them protection.

Thus, literature as an institution corresponded to these two different attitudes. While *fu* reflected the relationships between the ruler and his princes as well as the wealthy merchants, the establishment of the Music Bureau was designed to provide a channel of communication with the farming multitude. Specifically speaking, *fu* symbolized tributes from the literati class

to the emperor through its enumeration of the wealth and power of the royal house and, more significantly, through its token criticisms of the emperor. By making the genre almost a state monopoly, as it were, the ruler hoped to put the rival princes and merchants in their places and prevented them from using literature the same way he did. Both the content and the form of *fu* testify to this intention. As for the criticisms, they actually projected the contemporary ruler into a pantheon of the mythic past where a ruler was the ideal medium between the supreme heaven and the common people in the field. By offering token suggestions, *fu* actually elevated a mortal emperor to the state of an ideal king. The absolute ruler was theoretically not responsible to the human world and yet he kept himself open to the public opinions out of his parental love for his subjects. Token criticisms were, in other words, used to win approvals from the people. Thus, *fu* carried the double function of soliciting explicit glorification through enumerations and implicit gratitude through criticism. Either way *fu* contributed greatly to the consolidation of the imperial power.

As for the oral *yüeh-fu* ballads, they thrived and perished in their original habitat as a homogeneous part of the overall social activities of men in the field. Their appeal, however, was immense. Emperors were sometimes not immune to their charm. The First Emperor, for his atrocious anti-cultural stand, was known as a lover of Ch'u music. Kao-tsu, too, was the composer of a Ch'u tune which we have mentioned earlier. By the time of Emperor Wu, however, there was a major change in the ruler's attitude toward folk poetry. For the first time, the art of the common people was institutionalized. Instead of a personal and spontaneous love for the songs in the field, what we see instead is an organization, the Music Bureau, entrusted with collecting and performing folksongs with distinct symbolic implications. While earlier emperors loved songs of a particular geographical location, the songs now came from Chao, Tai, Ch'in and Ch'u. They took on a universal, rather than local, dimension. By showing his love for the people's art on a universal scale, the emperor was clearly eager to be thought of as an ideal king who shared the same taste with his people. Under these conditions, a product of the field was now transplanted into the court. On the part of the people, they probably lost their best artists to the court, not to mention the fact that the communication with the ruler through this channel was at best a token gesture. Somehow the poetry-collecting now

was different from its antecedent in the past. It was no longer as criticism- or opinion-oriented as before.

## V

The double appropriations of oral and written literatures occurred during the reign of Emperor Wu. To see the move as a historical phenomenon, one would have to look into the philosophical transformations involved. Before the Han, rulers did solicit literature from their subjects. *The Literary Mind and the Carving of Dragons* (文心雕龍) records one instance of this practice:

Duke Shao once said that dukes and ministers presented poetry, music masters presented *Chen* [admonitions], and the blind presented *fu*.<sup>31</sup>

This was obviously in the tradition of poetry-collecting for the sake of opinion gauging, exemplified in King Yao's parable. As such, it differed significantly from Emperor Wu's appropriations. In the past, poetry had been turned in on a personal basis, and there was not any real organization involved. Now for the first time poetry-collecting was bureaucratized and graced by imperial blessings. In other words, the Music Bureau was founded exclusively for this purpose.

Philosophically, the Han dynasty saw the emergence of Confucianism as the predominant mode of thinking by replacing the Legalist thought of the previous dynasty. The replacement, however, should not be taken as a complete reversal in the basic ways of thinking. Rather, as Lau Sze-kwang (勞思光) argues, in gaining its ideological supremacy Confucianism actually absorbed the Yin-yang School of thought which survived intact the First Emperor's repressive policy toward freedom of thought. As a result of this convergence, what used to be a psycho-centric philosophy in the hands of Confucius and Mencius was now transformed into the cosmo-centric philosophy of the Han.<sup>32</sup> Instead of stressing the cultivation of self, the secularized Confucianism emphasized the correspondence between nature and man. For the ruler, this means that in addition to his traditional rule of the country through the kinship system – the chief of the state being the head of the immensely expanded family structure which is the country (and the citizens being his children) – the new mode of thinking called for the sovereign to placate the supernatural powers on behalf of his people.<sup>33</sup>

As mentioned earlier, this Yin-yang thought provided a bureaucratic justification for the establishment of an office which supported the ruler in supervising a harmonious relationship between man and nature, nationwide.

As for the appropriation of the written form of literature, we need to look back at the idealistic trend of Confucian thought. In the Confucian code of conduct, under an ideal king it was considered a privilege to serve the government. In return, the king rewarded his subjects with blessings and protection. In concrete terms, this reciprocity comprised basically the presenting of tributes from the field to the court and in return patronage extended from the palace to the field. The tributes could take the form of literary productions. Since only scholars were literate, they were the sole mouthpiece of the tributes. The situation was thus complicated because these scholars were not exactly free agents. They were bureaucrats or aspired to be bureaucrats. Socially they were above the ordinary people and were protected by sumptuary laws. And once they were commissioned they were given the chance to witness the wealth of the monarch and were commanded to reproduce it in verbal terms. In fact it would not be an exaggeration to say that their literary tributes were a part of the wealth of the oriental despot. Yet seen from the class from which they came, they were really commoners since almost all men under the supreme ruler were equal. As such they were expected to plead the cause of the common people and do so in an extremely subtle way so as not to offend the emperor while at the same time making the ruler believe himself to be a sage king who was open to criticism from below. In a way, the presented pieces were also a form of civil service examinations, for while some degree of freedom was allowed they had to conform to some norms to meet the emperor's approval. One could actually see this as the beginning of a tradition in imperial China in which literature was used as the most decisive factor in determining if one climbed up the social ladder in the bureaucratic system. By the time of the T'ang (A.D. 618-907), *fu* had actually evolved into the regulated *fu* (律賦) which was highly rigid in form and was required of the participants in civil service examinations.

In the last analysis, the rise of state Confucianism facilitated the double appropriations of literature during Emperor Wu's reign. Unlike the Legalists who stressed repressive rule, Confucianists emphasized education in government. Any medium which might be useful to the administration was therefore incorporated. The ancient music was helpful in moderating and

internalizing human behavior, but it was dull.<sup>34</sup> Emperor Wu thus gave orders to have new music composed and folksongs collected.<sup>35</sup> In the same manner the ornate *fu* was considered conducive to the enumeration of the imperial wealth and to boosting the political position of the emperor to that of a demi-god. Hence, the incorporation of the written literature, as well.

## Notes

1. For a discussion of different critical opinions on the textual authenticity of *Lieh tzu*, see Chang Hsin-cheng (張心激), *Wei-shu t'ung-k'ao* (偽書通考, A Study of Apocraphal Texts), reprint (Taipei, 1970), II, pp. 699-712.
2. James Legge, *The Chinese Classics* (Hong Kong, 1970), IV, pp. 580, 454.
3. Karl A. Wittfogel, *Oriental Despotism, A Comparative Study of Total Power* (New Haven and London, 1967). For a discussion of the Asiatic mode of production, see Hou Wai-lu (侯外廬) *Chung-kuo ssu-hsiang t'ung-shih* (中國思想通史, A General History of Chinese Thought (Peking, 1957), I, pp. 3-17.
4. Ho Ping-ti (何炳棣) actually sees the society as equalitarian in the sense that the entire population under the emperor is on an equal footing. See his *The Ladder of Success in Imperial China* (New York and London, 1962), pp. 1-52.
5. Quoted and translated in C.H. Wang (王靖獻), *The Bell and the Drum, Shih Ching as Formulaic Poetry in an Oral Tradition* (Berkely, Los Angeles, London, 1974), p. 28.
6. Translated by Michael Loewe, *Crisis and Conflict in Han China, 104 B.C. to A.D. 9* (London, 1974), p. 195.
7. Tu Erh-wei (杜而末), however, tries to distinguish between the abstract Heaven and the concrete Five Gods, who are related to the spirit of the earth. See *Chung-kuo ku-tai tsung-chiao yen-chiu* (中國古代宗教研究, A Study of Ancient Chinese Religions) (Taipei, 1959), pp. 72-164.
8. *Shih chi* (史記), reprint (Hong Kong, 1975), I, p. 456.
9. Hou Wai-lu, II, pp. 86-89.
10. Loewe, p. 195.
11. The exact dating is still an open question. Some critics dated it back to 120 B.C., or even earlier. See Loewe, pp. 195-196.
12. Loewe, pp. 193, 167-171. From 70 B.C. on, the Bureau was reduced in number until it was finally abolished in 7 B.C. As for the cults of state, a great reform was also carried out by K'uang Heng around 31 B.C. The complex system of Grand Unity, the Five Gods and Queen Earth was replaced by a simpler worship of Heaven and Earth.
13. *Han shu* as translated by Homer H. Dubs, *The History of the Former Han Dynasty* (New York, 1954), II, p. 77.

14. The commoners were prohibited from worshipping the grand spirits such as Heaven and Earth. They were allowed only to worship their ancestors. See Lao Kan (勞幹), *Chung-kuo te she-hui yü wen-hsüeh* (中國的社會與文學, Chinese Society and Literature).
15. See Hsü Fu-kuan (徐復觀), *Chung-kuo wen-hsüeh lun-chi* (中國文學論集 Collected Essays of Chinese Literature) (Taipei, 1974), p. 354.
16. Aside from a few poems attributed to him, Emperor Wu could very well be involved with the writing of *Songs for Suburban Sacrifices*. See Wang Shou-p'ing (王壽平), *Han-tai yüeh-fu yü yüeh-fu ko-tzu* (漢代樂府與樂府歌詞, Yüeh-fu and Yüeh-fu Poetry of Han) (Taipei, 1970), pp. 86-94.
17. It is not to be denied that the genre was derived from Ch'u t'zu of the preceding age. The style, nevertheless, took a definite turn in the hands of the Han poets seeking to serve the emperors with literary achievement. The trend actually anticipated a time when civil service exams were conducted with poetry-composition contests with specific stylistic specifications.
18. For a rather sweeping discussion of the preoccupation with totality in fu and its ideological implications, see Mao Tun (茅盾), *Yeh-tu ou-chi* (夜讀偶記 Notes from Nighttime Reading) (Peking, 1958), pp. 7-11.
19. Ho, p. 2.
20. Hsü Fu-kuan, *Chou Ch'in Han cheng-chih she-hui chieh-kou chih yen-chiu* (周秦漢政治社會結構之研究, Studies of the Political and Social Structures of Chou, Ch'in and Han) (Taipei, 1975), p. 91.
21. *Ancient China in Transition* (Stanford, 1965), p. 175.
22. Though a certain degree of reciprocity was involved, the ruling class was regarded morally superior to the ruler. Even down to the time of Han, Tung Chung-shu (董仲舒) still advocated the so-called "Three Classes of Human Nature." For a brief discussion of this hereditary discrimination against the ruled, see Lü Chen-yu (呂振羽), *Chung-kuo cheng-chih ssu-hsiang* (中國政治思想, Chinese Political Thought) (Peking, 1950), p. 251.
23. *Ancient China in Transition*, p. 176.
24. *Ibid.*, p. 177.
25. Ho, p. 3.
26. Ho Tzu-chuan (何茲全), *Ch'in Han shih lüeh* (秦漢史略, Brief History of Ch'in and Han) (Shanghai, 1955), p. 39. In 178 B.C. the land tax was reduced to one-thirtieth. From 177 to 156 B.C. the land tax was completely waived. And again from 167 to 157 B.C. the government did not collect any land tax at all. As for the corvee, Emperor Wen also changed the service to once every three years instead of once every year.
27. Ho, p. 49. Also see Ch'en T'eng-yüan (陳登源) *Chung-kuo wen-hua shih* (中國文化史, A Cultural History of China), reprint (Taipei, 1966) I, p. 230.
28. *Shih chi*, VII, p. 3002.
29. *Han Social Structure* (Seattle, 1972), pp. 63-159.
30. Hsü, *Chou Ch'in Han*, p. 154.

31. *The Literary Mind and the Carving of Dragons*, (New York, 1959), p. 45.
32. Lao Sze-kwang, *Chung-kuo che-hsüeh shih* ( 中國哲學史 , A History of Chinese Philosophy) (Hong Kong, 1971), II, p. xi.
33. Fung Yu-lan ( 馮友蘭 ), *A Short History of Chinese Philosophy* (New York, 1966), pp. 132-133. Sometimes when things did not go well, the Three Lords were used as scapegoats for they were charged with the harmonious relationships between Yin and Yang.
34. For a detailed discussion of the moral effect of music, see Hsü Fu-kuan, *Chung-kuo i-shu ching-shen* ( 中國藝術精神 , The Spirit of Chinese Art) (Taipei, 1973), pp. 12-15.
35. A discussion of the contrast between the ancient music which is rectifying but boring and the new music which is exciting but licentious can be found in Jean-Pierre Diény, *Aux origines de la poésie classique en Chine* (Leiden, 1968), pp. 17-40.