Oral, Folk, and an Unwanted Feud

Professor Wai-lim Yip, in his "Vestiges of the Oral Dimension: Examples from the *Shih-ching*" (*TkR*, XVI, 1), refers to my 1974 study of the ancient anthology and raises a question. I suppose it is my responsibility to respond.

By computing some highly strained pieces of evidence, mostly external, Chu Tung-jun concluded in 1935 that the *Shih Ching* poems were composed by what Professor Yip now calls "poets of a ruling class." In other words, Chu believed that those poems were never "folk" as such. Ch'ü Wan-li, in 1963, suggested that the poems in the *Kuo feng* section, as we have them today, were probably not what they had been initially. One of the reasons that he tried to depart from the traditional interpretation was, as I recall, because he did not like the idea prevailing in the 1920's that the *Shih Ching* poems could be compared to the folk songs found among the ethnic minorities living in the Southwestern provinces. Ch'ü saw the sharing of common phrases and use of refrains and repetitions, among other traits, as characteristics of the transmitter's effort in polishing the original material. Despite their different conclusions, both Chu and Ch'ü did argue about an "aristocratic" or, more precisely, a "literary" quality in the poems. As to the reason that Ch'ü in particular should try to prove his point by calling our attention to those recurrent elements, which we sometimes call stock phrases or formulaic expressions, I suspect that it might be because most of us would often tend to regard the sharing of such elements as the use of allusions which, in turn, is evidence of deliberate literariness.

I did not think this particular aspect of the *Shih Ching* language could be expected to reach that conclusion, and I still don't. While I recognize the unique phraseology in such poems as Chi K'ang's "Ssu-yen shih-pa shou tseng hsiung hsiu-ts'ai ju chün" 嵇康：四言十八首贈兄秀才入軍 as indication of the poet's attempt to literary elegance, I believe the case of *Shih Ching* should not be explained away in the same, convenient way. In my 1974 study, *The Bell and the Drum: Shih Ching as Formulaic*

Composition in an Oral Tradition, which Professor Yip alludes to, I have given ample reasons as to the rationale and purpose why I would choose a new approach. Allow me to refrain from repeating myself! I shall point out just one thing here: my approach is supported by a defined method in formulaic analysis and by the time-honored knowledge in *Shih Ching* scholarship that there was definitely an oral tradition in the long period of time prior to the age of Confucius.

Therefore, the key words I really committed myself to use with confidence in my 1974 study are *formulaic, theme,* and *oral.* Unlike Professor Yip's reckoning eleven years after the publication of my book, I did not suggest, or ever touch at all, those notions like "folk," "tribal," and "primitive." I do not like the way Professor Yip presents C. H. Wang and Chu Tung-jun as two men in a "polarity," nor do I like the way he implies that Wang is now weighed down since Ch'ü Wan-li, too, has doubted if the poems retain the "original appearance of folk songs." I do not appreciate it because he misses the fact that whereas Chu and Ch'ü are concerned with the "folk" quality of the poems I, after all, have hardly anything to do with that important subject of scholarship. I am interested in the aesthetic of oral, formulaic composition, and I do not pretend to have an ambition to venture into the anthropological interpretation of the classics, in which Chu and Ch'ü, and presumably Professor Yip himself, are engaged in one way or another.

Professor Yip refers the reader to my words on page x in *The Bell and the Drum*, where the statement I make is actually as follows: "By emphasizing the acoustic pattern in broad terms, instead of the metapoetic rules and findings, I am reiterating the theory that the poetry of *Shih Ching* has an oral origin. It is conceivably oral, and demonstrably formulaic." He also refers to pages 46-47, on which, again, I discuss the criterion of *oral* poetry but not "folk" poetry. Besides, departing from Albert B. Lord's theory, I have suggested in my conclusion that a lettered poet may have "once had recourse to oral formulas during a 'transitional period'." In other words, the so-called "poets in a ruling class" (Yip's term) may sometimes very well be responsible for the creation of poems savoring of oral quality, i.e., poems comprised of a high percentage of stock phrases or formulaic expressions, et cetera. I have never said, as Professor Yip assumes I have, that the *Shih Ching* poetry is formulaic and therefore it is "folk" poetry. I say, let me repeat, that "it is conceivably *oral*, and demonstrably formulaic." As to such notions as "tribal" and "primitive," which Professor Yip cares about

greatly in his approach to the *Shih Ching* poems, I shall say that they have never entered my mind in the consideration of this Confucian anthology, and, furthermore, they are not really the topics Chu and Ch'ü wrote on.

I feel honored that a scholar like Professor Yip should find it necessary to make reference to my work in his goodly writing on a subject long within my field of research. Albeit the misunderstanding obviously is drifting in the context concerning my ideas, I realize that, if a man as conventional and straightforward as Fang Yü-jun can be identified in such a casual manner on the same page where I am hastily summoned, I shall not complain any further. I only hope that a scholar will not draft innocent names into a feuding which, though exciting in his own course of academic exercise, inspires more fatigue than heroism on others.

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