

Preface

When Walter Pater produced his famous dictum: "All art constantly aspires towards the condition of music", he might well have had the Chinese *tz'u* 詞 poetry in mind. More probably than not, he had never heard of this form of versification. But *tz'u*, in fact, was written to music, and to be sung; the word itself means "song words" in Chinese. Scholars disagree as to the exact date when *tz'u* originated and the manner in which it came into being. It would not be wide of the mark, however, to say that these "songs", or "lyrics" (as they are sometimes referred to in English), began to take shape and develop their characteristic style in the T'ang dynasty, although the very first piece in this genre could be traced further back. At that particular juncture, three streams of music coexisted: the songs collected by the Music Bureau beginning in the Han; the folk songs preserved since the time of the Wei, the Chin and the Six Dynasties; and the popular songs introduced into China mostly from Central Asia through Turkestan. Some of the songs came from as far as India and Burma. *Pu-sa man* 菩薩蠻, one of the most popular tunes, was actually a song in praise of the hairdresses of the Burmese empresses of the time.¹ From the literature and source materials available to us today, we can assume that the literary aspect of *tz'u* was derived from the five-syllable and seven-syllable lines of the regulated verse, or *shih* 詩, which reached the peak of its splendor in the T'ang dynasty, while the musical aspect of *tz'u* was the triumph of popular foreign songs over traditional native songs, which had grown too stereotyped to excite continued interest. Because of its musicality, the appeal of *tz'u* was not confined to the intellect and the imagination, nor for that matter did it find favor among only the educated and initiated. Instead, this form of poetry-making spread far and wide, reaching everyone who had an ear for a pleasant tune.

The neglect of the musical aspect of *tz'u* often leads to questionable conclusions. Professor Kojiro Yoshikawa, the eminent Japanese scholar, for example, denies *tz'u* its rightful place in the development of Chinese literature. He wrote:

The rise and spread of the *tz'u* form, because it represented a new development in the history of Chinese poetry, has been regarded as of great importance by recent literary historians. It is probable that they have in fact attached too much importance to the form. As its other name, *shih-yü* or remnants of *shih*, suggests, it is no more than an off-shoot of the *shih* form.²

For one thing, *shih-yü* 詩餘 is not the other name, but rather one of 18 other names for *tz'u* in its early stages.³ Then, again, the word *yü* should not be translated in the sense of off-shoot, remnant, left-over, branch off, annex or extension, all smacking of the derogatory. Several Ch'ing critics pointed out that *yü* should not be inter-

¹Hsieh Sung 謝菘, *Shih tz'u chih-yao* 詩詞指要 (The Essence of Shih and Tz'u), Hong Kong, Chung Hua, 1979, p. 91.

²Yoshikawa, Kojiro (Tr. B. Watson), *An Introduction to Sung Poetry*, Cambridge, Mass. 1967, p. 9.

³Liang Jung-chi 梁榮基, *Tz'u-hsueh li-lun tsung-k'ao* 詞學理論綜考 (上篇) (A General Survey of Tz'u Theories, Part I), *Kuo-li pien-i-kuan kuan-k'an* 國立編譯館館刊, (Journal of the National Institute for Compilation and Translation), Taipei, 1979, Vol. 8, No. 1, p. 31.

preted as 贖餘, *left-over*, but 贏餘, *surplus*. The crux of the matter is that the one interpretation is confined to the stylistical treatment of *tz'u*, while the other deals with the musical dimension in addition to the literary. Thus, the proper rendition of the word *yü* here is *overflow*, which embraces both the literary aspect and the musical aspect. When the grandeur of T'ang poetry could no longer express adequately the more refined and delicate feelings and the simple quatrains could no longer contain the spirit of song, it was natural for a new genre to emerge.

Perhaps the following description of *tz'u* would throw light on its *raison d'être*:

In composing *tz'u*, it would be unbecoming to pile color upon color; nor should it be just a plain sketch. There will be no substance if there is too much color and there will be no attraction if it is a plain sketch. *Tz'u* should be like a beautiful lady engaged in making herself up. Without the aid of pearls and jades, she looks bright and luxuriant by herself; without the aid of rouge and powder, she is yet fresh and elegant and has natural grace. That is how a good *tz'u* poem should look.⁴

This is a fitting description especially of the shorter *tz'u* songs, known as *hsiao-ling* 小令. When the cup of *shih* overflowed, *tz'u* came into existence, and in time matured and evolved into longer and more elaborate tunes of equal beauty.

T'ang Kuei-chang 唐圭璋's monumental work, *Ch'üan Sung tz'u* 全宋詞 (Complete Sung *Tz'u*), first published in 1940 and revised in 1964, collects more than 1,330 *tz'u* writers and 19,900 *tz'u* poems.⁵ They are a far cry from the 3,812 poets mentioned in Li O 厲鶚's *Sung-shih chi shih* 宋詩紀事 (Notes on Sung Poetry). According to Yü P'ing-po 俞平伯, if *shih* were to be compared to squares and circles, then *tz'u* would be polygons; if *shih* were to be thought of as straight lines, then *tz'u* would be curves, more diversified and multifarious than the regulated 5-syllable and 7-syllable *shih*. He further cites the *Ch'in-ting tz'u-p'u* 欽定詞譜 (Imperial Register of *Tz'u* Poetry), completed in 1715 during Emperor K'ang Hsi's reign, which lists 826 tunes, with 2,306 variations, and comments that it would not, therefore, be factually wrong to say that there are about 2,000 tune patterns.⁶ Thus, it can be seen that *tz'u* poetry has widened the scope and enriched the content of *shih* poetry—it has created another "world" in the poetic universe. Since its genesis, *tz'u* has become a major genre in its own right and has coexisted with *shih* down to the present day.

It is a pity that the popular *tz'u* compositions sung and enjoyed by the common people were not recorded in musical notations; they were so well known that there seemed no need to do so. As *tz'u* grew with time, it became more stylized and sophisticated and could only be mastered by the literati and the elite. It could no longer be composed and written by the uninitiated. In writing to the various

⁴Shen Hsiang-lung 沈祥龍, *Lun tz'u sui-pi* 論詞隨筆 (Notes on *Tz'u*) published in the Ch'ing dynasty.

⁵New edition published by Hong Kong, Chung Hua, 1977, 5 vols.

⁶Yü P'ing-po 俞平伯, *T'ang Sung tz'u Hsuan-shih* 唐宋詞選釋 (Annotated Anthology of T'ang and Sung *Tz'u*), Peking, 1979, p. 5.

tune patterns, the poet must observe strict rules regarding rhyme, the number of lines, the number of characters in each line and whether each should have an even or uneven tone. Gradually, the *tz'u* form itself became decadent and oblique so that the longer tunes with their esoteric idiom and pattern were more and more the products of a chosen few. Musically, they had grown to be even harder to record and, with only a few exceptions, what notations that might have existed are irretrievably lost. This state of affairs was made more difficult by the traditional Chinese musical notation which did not record the rhythm, but only the melody.

Even with its music all but lost to our ears, the musical aspect of *tz'u* can still be detected and felt today in its purely literary form. The *hsiao-ling* at their best are delightful, melodious and harmonious. The best long tunes, on the other hand, very much resemble chamber music, set in a minor key. In the three or four stanzas of a long tune, one hears a motif first introduced and then imperceptibly replaced by another motif. These motifs reappear in different guises or variations, by slight hints and the echoing of key words which appeared previously. The feelings are tightly interwoven and developed in themes just as a piece of music observes the rigid rules of counterpoint. The total effect of the best *tz'u* poem is endearing and haunting. It often lingers on and achieves in varying degrees what Pater describes as the effort "to obliterate the distinction between the matter and the form".

Scholarly interest in Chinese literature has been increasing steadily over the past years, and it seems timely to make available a volume of essays and translations devoted to *tz'u* as a separate literary genre. Besides dealing with *tz'u* in a comprehensive fashion, and with some of its individual exponents, such a treatise should lead to a better and deeper appreciation of the uniqueness of this poetic form, as distinct from the traditional *shih*, of which there are biographical and critical studies and anthologies without number. It was decided from the beginning that the approach to this collective study should be an intimate rather than a pedantic one. As John Minford, one of our contributors, puts it, "The purpose is to take the poetry-loving reader by the hand and welcome him into this new world."

Accordingly, the historical and explicative treatment is deliberately played down to allow space for as many translations of *tz'u* poetry as possible. Chinese texts are printed alongside the translations to enable students of Chinese language and literature to savor the original at the same time. It is natural that such a presentation does not permit the inclusion of all major *tz'u* writers. However, most of the essays in this volume deal with individual poets, while the remaining few discourse on *tz'u* in general; in each case there are copious citations from famous *tz'u* poems by way of illustration. Whenever a piece of *tz'u* is quoted in translation, the Chinese original is also given. We hope the essays would thus compensate for any unintentional omission. The reader is expected to find further delight in cross-referencing as much as possible while perusing the essays, since they are complementary to the independent groups of translations. He would also likely encounter a *tz'u* poem in the translations and the same poem, in quite different wording, in the essays. Translated by different hands, they might appear to be different works in the original. It is not our policy to adopt one unified version, as a poem is open to different interpretations by different readers, and sometimes even by the same reader at different times. This is especially true of *tz'u*, because

it is highly condensed and does not follow the usual grammatic structure. However, as the names of tunes, which used to be *tz'u* titles, are no longer associated with the content of individual pieces, they have, together with the names of authors, been romanized in the Wade-Giles system for the benefit of the readers.

The Editor takes great pleasure in introducing to the Western world for the first time four important contemporary *tz'u* critics, who are either scholars in this verse form or *tz'u* writers themselves. Of the four, Professor Ku Sui is the only one who has died. Professors Yü P'ing-po, Miao Yueh and Cheng Chien, though advanced in age, are very much alive and still engaged in writing and research. In their writings, we find a fusion of the traditional "*tz'u* talk" form of literary criticism and a modern sensibility tinged with Western influence. The pleasure is doubled when we see that the younger generation of *tz'u* scholars, whether from China or from the West, treat their topics with a reverence that bespeaks precious tradition and continuity.

In putting together such a volume, no one person could presume to be able to handle the work all by himself. It has to be a collective effort. First and foremost, I would like to pay tribute to Professor D.C. Lau of the Department of Chinese Language and Literature of our University, whose expertise and wise counsel contributed much to the gradual shaping of this book. His experience in translation and his sensitivity to both Chinese and English languages and to the niceties of *tz'u* endow him with that rare combination of sureness and lightness of touch which, so essential to the study of *tz'u*, has been invaluable to the present venture.

Professor Chia-ying Yeh Chao of the University of British Columbia has given me support and has involved herself in this project from the very beginning. Besides supplying the essay by her former teacher, Professor Ku Sui and one of her own, she has solicited articles and translations from her colleague and students. Their contributions in this volume are an eloquent testimony to her generous help.

Invaluable and continuous assistance, editorial and otherwise, has been received from my colleagues, Mr. Frederick Tsai, Dr. Ying-hsiung Chou and Mr. K.B. Wong. To them the Editor owes profound gratitude. Mr. C.H. Sheung, Head of the Chinese Department, has graced the pages of this volume with his calligraphy. Advice has been kindly given without reserve by Mr. M.J. So of the Chinese Department, Miss Louise Ho of the English Department, Dr. Bell Yung of the Music Department and Mr. T.H. Fok of the Philosophy Department. Mrs. Y.Y. Lo, my associate for many years, went over the final drafts of each article with meticulous care and planned the layout and the production with ingenuity. Without the support, encouragement and help from my colleague, Mr. George Kao, this volume could hardly have become a reality. It is also difficult to imagine embarking on such a project without assistance from many other quarters, especially the able staff at The Chinese University Press.

Finally, I would like to thank all my contributors, be they veterans or newcomers to the field, for their cooperation and patience in spite of my constant prodding. They have made the present volume as profitable an editing experience as, I hope, it will be an enjoyable and memorable one for the reader.

—Stephen C. Soong