

Inscriptional Evidence and the Origins of Poetic Form in Early China

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Abstract

While some authors have claimed that a conscious use of poetic devices and incipient versification may be traced back to Shang oracle bone inscriptions (cf. e.g. 饒宗頤 1992, 孟祥魯 1992, 譚家健 1995, 周錫韜 1998, 李爾重 1999, 陳煒湛 2002, 劉奉光 2002, 劉昕 2012, 楊艷梅, 趙敏俐 2015, Schwartz 2015), the first undisputed specimens of rhyming and rhymed texts in Early China are extant in the form of a corpus of several hundred bronze inscriptions from the Western and Eastern Zhou dynasties (王國維 1917, 郭沫若 1931, 真武直 1959, 白川靜 1967, 陳世輝 1981, Jao Tsung-Yi 1982, 陳邦懷 1985, 家井真 1986, 喻遂生 1993, 羅江文 1994, 1995, 1996, Behr 1996/7, 2009, 2017, 陳仕益 2006, 徐新亮 2011, 陈夏楠 2013, Tharsen 2015). The talk will review the evidence for the earliest instances of alliteration and end rhyme outside the transmitted literature, present a diachronic sketch of the rise of regular tetrasyllabic meters towards the beginning of the Springs and Autumns period (cf. Behr 2004, 施向東 2016) and take a fresh look at other devices of early versification, such as line-internal and feminine (a.k.a. 'long tail' 長尾) rhyming (cf. 陸子權 1980), or the use of reduplication (e.g. 鄭剛 1996, 沈寶春 2002, 揚明明 2006, 陳美琪 2007, Smith 2015) etc.

While arguing for the usefulness of such data for an understanding of Early Chinese morphology, the external relationships of Chinese and the dating of pre-Qin accretional texts, problems in the detection of rhyme and its interdependence with models of phonological reconstruction will also be highlighted.

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