

Introduction



Ssu-ma Hsiang-ju (179–117 B.C.), one of the earliest and greatest writers in the *fu* or rhyme-prose form, left no statement as to what he thought the characteristics of the form ought to be or how it should be employed.¹ It is probable that, like many artistic creators of genius, he allowed his works to find their own form, without undue worry as to whether in doing so he was abiding by or departing from patterns set by previous writers. There would seem to have been few important works in the *fu* form before his appearance on the literary scene—only one in my selection, Chia Yi's "Fu on the Owl," is certainly earlier—and in many respects he is its virtual creator. Nearly all the themes of the typical Han *fu*—the great hunts, palaces, and ceremonies of the capital; rivers and mountains; birds, beasts, flowers, and trees; beautiful women and musical instruments; journeys or meditations on the past—can be traced back to some passage in his works. As the reader will observe when he comes to the "Sir Fantasy" *fu*, Ssu-ma Hsiang-ju adorns his works with an almost endless profusion of scenes and objects, any one of which might be borrowed by a later writer and made the subject of a single poem.

The *fu* in its early form generally consists of a combination of prose and rhymed verse (hence the English term "rhyme-prose"), prose serving for the *hsü* or introduction that explains the genesis of the piece, as well as for occasional interludes, verse taking over in the more rhapsodic and emotionally charged passages. The verse employs a variety of line lengths, from three-character to seven-

character or more, arranged usually in blocks of lines of a uniform length that alternate with one another. A strong preference for the four-character and six-character length is apparent, and many poems are made up almost entirely of such lines. The poem often concludes with a summary in verse called a *luan* or reprise. End rhyme is used throughout the verse portions, as well as frequent alliteration, assonance, and other euphonic effects. Rhetorical devices such as parallelism and historical allusion abound, and the diction is rich with onomatopoeias, musical binomes descriptive of moods or actions, and lengthy catalogues of names, often of rare and exotic objects, that are calculated to dazzle the reader and sweep him off his feet. The *fu*, in fact, though it is a purely secular form, owes much to the shaman songs and chants of the folk religion, incantations empowered to call down deities or summon lost or ailing souls, such as are found in the earlier *Ch'u Tz'u* or *Songs of the South*. The works of Ssu-ma Hsiang-ju in particular seem capable of bewitching one with the sheer magic of rhythm and language, and it is not surprising that Emperor Wu, when he had finished reading one of them, announced that he felt as though he were soaring effortlessly over the clouds.²

It was this very exuberance and wildness of language that in some quarters occasioned reservations about the value of works in the rhyme-prose form. The historian Ssu-ma Ch'ien, author of a biography of the poet, reports that when Ssu-ma Hsiang-ju's "Sir Fantasy" was presented to Emperor Wu and his court, objections were voiced that it "overstepped the bounds of reality and displayed too little respect for the dictates of reason and good sense."³ Ssu-ma Ch'ien himself approves the poem on the grounds that it concludes with a plea for greater frugality in government, and accordingly deserves to be regarded as a *feng*—a work of satire or veiled reprimand. But the fervor with which he argues the didactic

worth of Ssu-ma Hsiang-ju's poems suggests that there were many who questioned it.

One of the most important critics to express such doubts was the philosopher Yang Hsiung (53 B.C.–A.D. 18). In his youth he wrote ornate works in the *fu* form descriptive of imperial hunts and outings in the manner of Ssu-ma Hsiang-ju, whom he admired and took as his model, laboring so fervently over one of them, we are told, that he brought on a nervous collapse and was ill for a whole year.⁴ But later, as he reports in his *Fa yen* or “Model Words,” section 2, he abandoned the writing of *fu*. He felt, it seems, that the *feng* or element of reprimand, which was held up as the justification for such works, was too often lost in the torrent of verbiage, and that the effect was often quite the opposite, actually lending encouragement to the Han rulers in their costly and luxurious ways.

The word *fu* had many meanings in ancient Chinese. Among other usages, it was employed as one of a group of critical terms in discussions of the *Shih ching* or *Book of Odes*, where it denoted those songs or parts of songs that were primarily descriptive and straightforward in nature, as opposed to those employing metaphor or allegory. The word *fu* also appears in pre-Han texts signifying a poetical “offering,” that is, a song or recital, either original or quoted from the *Book of Odes*, presented by the participants in a social gathering or a diplomatic meeting. Han scholars, with their passion for synthesis, understandably sought to pull together all these various meanings of the word. Yang Hsiung, in his attack on poetry in the *fu* form referred to above, contrasts the Han *fu* with the *fu* or descriptive passages of the *Book of Odes*, declaring: “The *fu* written by the poets of the *Book of Odes* are both beautiful and well-ordered; the *fu* of the rhetoricians are beautiful but unlicensed.”⁵ By “unlicensed” (*yin*) he no doubt meant both extravagant in language and of dubious moral and didactic value.

The historian Pan Ku (A.D. 32–92), author of the *Han shu* or *History of the Former Han*, utilized the same play on the different meanings of the word *fu* to defend the rhyme-prose form and to establish its respectability as a later development of the poetry of the *Book of Odes*. In the preface to his “*Fu* on the Two Capitals” (*Wen hsüan* 1), he describes the *fu* as “deriving from the poetry of ancient times,” and his discussion of the form in the *Yi-wen-chih* or “Treatise on Literature” of the *Han shu* elaborates this connection. (See Appendix I.) This passage in the “Treatise on Literature” represents the earliest extant attempt at a history of the *fu* form. In his eagerness to establish the antiquity of the form, however, Pan Ku in effect makes all pre-Han poetry a variety of *fu*, treating not only the *Book of Odes* but also the works of the late Chou statesman Ch’ü Yüan as though they were examples of early rhyme-prose. Thus, while he forcibly links together in one process of development a number of ancient usages of the word *fu*, he completely obscures the actual evolution of the *fu* form in late Chou and early Han times, creating confusions that unfortunately have carried over into many later descriptions of the form.

Why would a historian attempt to pass off on the world such an unhistorical account of the origin of the *fu* form? The answer would seem to be that, as a writer of *fu* himself, Pan Ku hoped in this way to reconcile his literary endeavors with his Confucian conviction that literature should offer instruction and moral uplift. By tracing the beginnings of the *fu* form back to the *Book of Odes*, which had supposedly been edited by Confucius himself, he could argue that the works of men like Ssu-ma Hsiang-ju, lacking as they seemed to be in didactic value, represented no more than late aberrations, departures from the original intention of the form.

If Pan Ku and those who shared his convictions were not, like Yang Hsiung, to give up *fu* writing entirely, they obviously had to

find some way to restore the form to what they saw as its earlier high purpose, to instill true instructional worth into their compositions. They began by eliminating the element of fantasy and hyperbole that had been found objectionable even by Ssu-ma Hsiang-ju's contemporaries. Exponents of rationalism, the main intellectual current of the day, they quite naturally frowned on poems on imperial hunts that pictured the emperor and his attendants flying through the air in their chariots, and substituted more realistic themes and manners of treatment in their own works. Their impulse was probably a wise one. For, even if they had wished to, it is unlikely that they could have successfully recreated the old air of fantasy and verbal magic that had permeated the *fu* of Ssu-ma Hsiang-ju, or the works of Ch'ü Yüan and his followers from which Ssu-ma Hsiang-ju drew his inspiration.

Some of the difficulties these men encountered when they tried to produce edifying works in the rhyme-prose form may be perceived in Pan Ku's already mentioned *Liang-tu fu* or "Fu on the Two Capitals." It is cast in the form of a debate between exponents of the two Han capitals, one speaking in praise of Ch'ang-an, the capital of the Former Han, and the period in history which it represents (206 B.C. to A.D. 8), the other in praise of Lo-yang and the Later or Eastern Han, the period of the writer. In the first section, on Ch'ang-an, the poet allows himself to write in the grand manner of Ssu-ma Hsiang-ju, sparing no eloquence in his portrait of the gorgeous palaces and sumptuous ways of the Former Han court, for all this effulgence is to be censured later in the poem. But when he comes to the second section, in praise of his own ruler and time, he is hard put to create a picture that in interest and richness will even match, much less appear superior to, that of the former age. We are meant to condemn Ch'ang-an's sensuality and applaud the sober mores of Lo-yang, but the language of the poem

works against such aims. As so often in literature, vice turns out to be more attractive than virtue, and one can hardly help preferring Ch'ang-an to the bleak and austere classicism of Lo-yang, whose inhabitants

Are ashamed to wear clothes of fine, sheer-woven fabric,
Who look down on rare and lovely things and do not hold
them dear.

The same problems faced Chang Heng (78–139), the leading *fu* writer of the second century A.D., when he imitated Pan Ku's poem in his *Liang-ching fu* or "Fu on the Two Metropolises." Borrowing heavily from his predecessor and expanding the descriptions of the two Han capitals to twice their former length, he labored to invest the Lo-yang section with additional interest so that it would provide a better balance to that on Ch'ang-an. Thus, in contrast to Pan Ku, who focused almost exclusively on the pomp of the court, he introduces a lively description of a ceremony believed vital to the life and well being of the city as a whole:

Then at year's end comes the Great Exorcism
To expel and drive out a host of ills.
The Exorcist seizes his halberd,
Male and female shamans brandish stalks,
With ten thousand good girls and boys,
Vermilion-capped, clad in robes of black;
From peachwood bows, arrows of mugwort
Issue in ceaseless volleys;
Showers of flying pebbles pelt like raindrops
Till the toughest demon is certain to be slain.
Torches, flaming, speed like shooting stars,
Chasing the red pestilence beyond the four borders.
Later the celebrants cross the Lake of Heaven,
Pass over floating bridges,

Destroying *li-mei* devils,
 Felling the *hsü-k'uang*,
 Cutting down the *wei-t'o*,
 Braining the *fang-liang*;
 They imprison the "plowing father" under Ch'ing-ling waters,
 Drown the "woman-witch" in the Sacred Pond;
 They slaughter the *k'uei* and *hsü*, the *wang-hsiang*,
 Kill the *yeh-chung*, crush the *yu-kuang*.
 Because of them the spirits of the eight directions pale and
 tremble—
 How much more so the *chi-yü* elves and the aging *pi-fang*!
 And on Mount Tu-shuo each evildoer
 Is eyed by Yü-lü,
 Shen-shu to assist him;
 One at each arm, the victim is bound with rushes;⁶
 Sharply they peer into cracks and crannies,
 Seizing and arresting every malicious sprite,
 Till the houses of the capital are purified and clean,
 Not a one left unsanctified. (*Wen hsüan* 3)

Again, in his description of Ch'ang-an, Chang Heng has tried to add variety and a touch of greater realism, deserting the palaces and royal gardens that are the center of earlier *fu* and conducting the reader into the market place to show him

The hundred tribes of merchants and vendors,
 Men and women for whom each sale brings a pennyworth's
 gain,
 Peddling good merchandise mixed with bad,
 Swindling and hoodwinking the country folk;

or the city's self-appointed rhetoricians and doctors of debate

Gabbling on street corners, arguing in alleys,
 Ferreting out every good and evil,
 Analyzing down to the tiniest hair,

Probing more than skin-deep, drawing ever finer lines. (*Wen hsüan* 2)

In another work in what, with the reader's indulgence, might be called the urban *fu* category, the "Fu on the Southern Capital," Chang Heng demonstrates a similar interest in homey and realistic detail. This time he moves into the suburbs of Wan in Nan-yang, the city which is the subject of the poem, to show us a typical Han farm:

From the streams
Tunnels have been bored that lead the rushing current
Flowing into these rice fields,
Where channels and ditches link like arteries,
Dikes and embankments web with one another;
Dawn clouds need not rise up—
The stored waters find their way alone,
And when sluices are opened, they drain away,
So that fields are now flooded, now dry again,
And the winter rice, the summer wheat
Ripens each in its proper season.
In the broad meadows
Are mulberry, lacquer trees, hemp, and ramie,
Beans, wheat, millet, and paniceled millet,
A hundred grains, thick and luxuriant,
Burgeoning, ripening.
In garden plots
Grow smartweed, fragrant grasses, turmeric,
Sugar cane, ginger, garlic,
Shepherd's purse, taro, and melons. (*Wen hsüan* 4)

Both the devotion to realism and the fondness for cityscapes evident in these works of Chang Heng reached their logical culmination in the gigantic "Fu on the Three Capitals" by Tso Ssu (fl.

A.D. 300). In a lengthy introduction, translated in Appendix I, the author criticizes not only Ssu-ma Hsiang-ju but Yang Hsiung, Pan Ku, and Chang Heng as well, for exaggerations or errors of fact in their descriptions of cities. He, on the other hand, he assures us, has carefully researched the geography of the capitals he intends to depict, has investigated their flora and fauna, studied their folkways and mastered their history, so that he will not be guilty of similar inaccuracies. But though his poem may be factually impeccable, and was apparently much admired by his contemporaries, it fails, it seems to me, on structural grounds. Ssu-ma Hsiang-ju in his "Sir Fantasy" describes three great hunts, those of the feudal lords of Ch'i and Ch'u, and that of the Han emperor; but he is careful to make the descriptions of varying length and complexity so that, as the reader moves from one to another, the poem will build to a climax. Tso Ssu, on the other hand, allots approximately equal space to all three capitals, detailing the same aspects of each and in the same order. As a result, his poem plods along without variation in tempo or intensity, devoid of any real core of interest.

The same tendency toward greater realism is seen in treatments of the travel theme in the *fu* form. David Hawkes, in his illuminating article "The Quest of the Goddess" (see bibliography), has identified the *itineraria* or journey, usually of a magical nature, as one of the characteristic themes of the *Ch'u Tz'u* or *Songs of the South* attributed to Ch'ü Yüan and his followers. We have noted how it is carried over in the works of Ssu-ma Hsiang-ju, in which emperors travel through the sky in carriages. In later works in rhyme-prose form, however, the journey becomes no longer a fantastic aerial flight but a sober progress on land. Thus the "Northern Journey" of Pan Piao (A.D. 3-54), the father of Pan Ku, embodies an account of an actual trip made by the writer as he fled north from Ch'ang-an, though it is given an added dimension

in time through the skillful use of historical allusions woven about the various stages of the itinerary. The “Eastern Journey” by Pan Piao’s daughter Pan Chao—one can see that it was a very literary family—is even more restrained, hardly venturing beyond a straightforward description of the trip interspersed with expressions of uneasiness appropriate to a well-bred lady and rounded off in Confucian pieties.

With increasing realism came a more personal and subjective note, a turning away from the great public themes of palace, hunt, and royal garden to expressions of private moods and concerns. True, works of this type appear to have been written in earlier times as well, treatments of the *tristia* or disillusionment theme, the other important element which, as Hawkes points out, was taken over by the *fu* writers from the *Songs of the South*. Chia Yi’s “*Fu* on the Owl,” the second poem in my selection, certainly has as its starting point a very personal experience and predicament, though it moves on to the enunciation of general philosophical principles. And other works, attributed to Tung Chung-shu and Ssu-ma Ch’ien though of doubtful authenticity, express the disgruntlement of the authors at the failure of the world to recognize and make use of their matchless talents, surely as subjective and melancholy a theme as one could find in all *fu* literature.

But so long as the showy, court-sponsored works of Ssu-ma Hsiang-ju and Yang Hsiung continued to attract admirers and imitators, these more modest and personal works remained to some extent outside the mainstream of literary development. It was only when authors, because of moral scruples, rejected the writing of poems that might be construed as encouragements to luxury and lavish spending in government, or when they no longer felt capable of creating viable works on the former grandiose scale, that they began to use the *fu* form with increasing frequency for the expression of personal feelings and experiences.