
WILLIAMS, Nicholas Morrow ed. *Reading Fu Poetry: From the Han to Song Dynasties*. Leeds, UK: Arc Humanities Press, 2022. Pp.184.*

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This edited volume consists of five independent articles that aim to introduce *fu* 賦 poetry, a unique but neglected genre in Chinese literary history. Each contribution concentrates on an overlooked piece from one of five major writers between the Han 漢 and Song 宋 eras, covering a wide variety of connected topics, such as their oral tradition, linguistic developments, their political influence, cross-genre impacts, gender related issues and more.

In the first article, titled “Inventing the *Fu*: Simulated Spontaneity in Sima Xiangru’s 司馬相如 ‘Great Man’ 大人,” Nicholas Williams explains that the fundamental difference between *fu* and other forms of writing was their supposedly unique context of composition: being improvised during a performance at court in front of a royal audience. By comparing the “Great Man” by Sima Xiangru (179–117 BCE) with the *Chuci*’s 楚辭 “Far Roaming” 遠遊 and the *Huainanzi* 淮南子, the author demonstrates the epideictic feature of the *fu*, and shows that its particular style, peerless diction and unbound prosody are intimately connected with its roots in oratory. The article ends with a detailed and annotated translation of the “Great Man” divided in nine sections.

In the second article, titled “Problematic *Fu* of the Western Han: The ‘Shu Du Fu’ 蜀都賦 Attributed to Yang Xiong 揚雄,” David R. Knechtges addresses an essential feature of this *fu*: its heavy use of *hapax legomena*. The author first examines the textual and intellectual history related to this piece, providing convincing evidence to support Yang’s (53 BCE–18 CE) authorship.

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Knechtges then explains that the reason why his own research had been delayed for nearly half of a century and why this piece has been ignored by scholars as well lies precisely in its use of unique and unusual words, alliterative binomial pairs, and the influence that the regional Shu pronunciation had on its rhyming patterns (making it hard for scholars to determine which lines rhyme). The last part of the article is an annotated translation the *fu*.

In the third article, titled “A Recluse’s Frustration? Reconsidering Yu Xin’s 庾信 (513–581 CE) ‘*Fu* on a Small Garden’ 小園賦,” Yiyi Luo 羅奕奕 introduces a new feature of *fu* that emerged during the Six Dynasties, that is an emotional expressiveness that allowed for a stronger presence of the poetic persona. By analyzing the historical context of this shorter *fu*, the author argues that the focus of this piece is not seclusion, but rather the poet’s personal frustrations and social concerns. The author provides an annotated translation and close reading in 13 stanzas and offers her analysis under each stanza.

In the fourth article, titled “*Yuefu* 樂府 and *Fu*: Wang Bo’s 王勃 New Prosody for ‘Spring Longings’,” Timothy Wai Keung Chan 陳偉強 illustrates how *fu* evolved by adapting features from other genres. Wang Bo (650–676 CE), a poetic prodigy from the Tang 唐 era strongly influenced by the rich *shi* 詩 and *yuefu* traditions, adopted their legacies in both form and content. He employed their diction, themes, rhetorical devices, and “stanza division” (essential to pentasyllabic *yuefu* songs), incorporated the trend of writing songs on military life, and imitated the poetry from the courts of the Qi 齊 and Liang 梁 dynasties in his *fu*. Picking up on abstract *fu* such as the “*Fu* on Autumn Inspiration” 秋興賦 by Pan Yue 潘岳 (237–300 CE), Wang’s writings demonstrate how lively the *fu* genre is, that it is not static but constantly being enriched by the poets’ drawing on contemporaneous trends in other genres. An annotated translation of this long piece is appended to the article.

In the fifth article, titled “Li Qingzhao’s 李清照 Rhapsody on Capture the Horse,” Ronald Egan brings the readers’ attention to a poem on a long-lost board game called “Capture the Horse,” composed by Li Qingzhao (1084–ca. 1150 CE). By comparing this *fu* with her *shi* on similar topics, the author argues that the major difference between these two preeminent genres of Song times was that the *shi* are more formal and rigid compared to the free and “expansive” *fu*. Employing the style of the latter allowed Li to freely and fully express her thoughts on military strategy, thereby conveying deep concerns regarding military warfare and policies within a seemingly innocent piece. The annotated translations of both the *fu* and *shi* are important contributions to the field.

Apart from David Knechtges’ numerous publications on Han era *fu*

poetry, English studies on this literary genre, and in particular its post-Han developments, are extremely rare. This edited volume is thus an important contribution as its articles introduce several *fu* that have not yet been studied, and that moreover offer new insights regarding the issues discussed in the *fu* of later periods.

The five Sinologists in this volume provide readers with a complete and detailed development of this important but understudied genre. Collectively they explain the literary developmental relationships within *fu*, so readers not only can learn how the genre evolved, but also how it was received in various time periods. Each of the five contributions shows how diligent and skillful translations better our understanding of ancient China, and afford great examples for how to make solid arguments based on a close reading of the source material. As the editor concludes, “This volume is intended not just as a contribution to the study of a major genre of Chinese literature, but also as an original venture in the art of close reading.” (Page xiii). They achieved it.