E Bruce Brooks

The People in the Poems

AAS/NE October 2012

Literary sensibility can be dangerous, especially when it inclines us to accept Dzwŏ Jwàn stories as true. But literary virtues are necessary for reading any text correctly. I will illustrate this with examples from the Shī, or Classic of Poetry, and will focus on three literary patterns: the decade structure, the two-stanza form of a single poem, and the common line which repeats identically in more than one poem. These together can perhaps tell us something about the formation process that led to the Shī collection which we now possess.

I. The Decade

The Yă and Sùng divisions of the Shī are grouped in ten-poem decades 什. This is not simply a scribal convenience; it is a performance unit.

Kennedy pointed out that Shī 220, at the end of a decade, is really two poems pushed together: a solemn one describing guests at a sacrificial feast, and a rowdy one describing them when they are drunk. Why were the poems pushed together? Looking at the content of that decade (**Handout #1**), we find that Shī 219 is thematically intrusive in the decade. I infer that it was added after the decade was complete, and the last two poems were then combined to keep the decade at ten. If so, we are here observing a moment in the formation of the Shī collection, a process in which the addition of Shī 219 is a late event.

Note that the second of our poems, 220b, provides a comic conclusion to an otherwise serious decade. Is there more of this? There is. In **Handout #2** we have Shī 210, from the end of the previous decade. It is prosodically lighter than the preceding 209. It also widens the historical vista: it goes beyond the Jōu ancestral spirits of 209 to the more ancient sage ruler Yŭ. This cadential device can also be seen in a modern recital, which ends with a lighter or more reflective piece. The decades were then performance units, with certain conventions of ending. Once we realize this, we can begin to see them as the court musicians saw them: something to be gotten ready for next week's diplomatic banquet.

Then in terms of Shī evolution, Shī 219 < [is later than] 211-218, 220a/b. The consecutive Shī 220a/b share a common first line: 賓之初筵, a pattern which we also see elsewhere in the Shī. It is very likely that the takeoff was written after the thing it makes fun of, hence Shī 220a > 220b.

II. The Template (2-Stanza) Form

The point here is that simple folk forms get developed into more conventional literary forms.

People complain of the indecent "Songs of Jvng," meaning the poems of the Jvng section of the Shī. How bad are these? Answer, pretty bad. Shī 87, **Handout #3**, is one of the worst, in which a girl, so far from being faithful to the husband someone else has found for her, is telling the guy across the stream that if he won't splash over to court her, she will find somebody else. To put it indelicately, she means to get laid, and the question of **by whom** matters to her not at all.

Recovering from our shock at this promiscuous behavior, we note that the poem is not confined to the usual 4-syllable line; indeed, it is not really a poem at all, but a recipe for improvisation. It seems to have two stanzas, but the second merely defines a framework. The framework is a template which repeats exactly except for changes in the rhymewords. The poem, or we might better say the teasing process, goes on as long as the singer can find new rhymes. This template structure is common in the socially improper Shī, and in poems which imitate them literarily. Another two-stanza example is Shī 138 from the Chvn section (**Handout #4**). It is less scandalous, but still implies looseness of contact between the sexes. The singer, a male, doesn't need some grand lady to marry; a humble one will do. This is not exactly a compliment to his girlfriend, and to that extent, 138 is also a teasing song. What the girl might have answered when her turn came, the record does not show. What it **does** show is editorial disapproval of these light banterings. This takes the form of a stanza added on top of the basic two.

How do we know it was added? Because it does not follow the template form, it is different in tone from the template stanzas, and it expresses an ideal agreeable to conventional taste. It thus gives a different tone to the other stanzas. This is one way that the later Shī writers neutralized the effect of the older, and to them, indecent, Shī.

Turning from love to war, we again find two-stanza poems. One is Shī 36 (**Handout #5**). It is easily recognizable as a marching song. The commentary reads it as an expression of loyalty to the ruler, but the original more likely expressed resentment of the drill sergeant. The response to this poem, as we might have guessed, was to write new poems expressing devotion to the cause. One reply to the unwilling draftee poem, Shī 36, was a willing volunteer poem, Shī 133 (**Handout #6**). It is wildly unrealistic: soldiers did not furnish their weapons; those were government issue. But it does embody the feeling which the state wanted to find among the people. Adding this poem to the court repertoire was one way of getting it.

The state was not the only supplier of new poems for the Shī. There were also the philosophers, some of whom, like Mencius, believed that a good ruler would win, not by killing, but by attracting populace from the badly governed state next door. Behind this idea lies the Myth of the Mobile Population. One of its most beautiful expressions is the long poem Shī 184 (**Handout #7**). Though long, it has only two stanzas. Why two stanzas?? Because it was known that the two-stanza form was characteristic of folk poetry, and so elite poets who wanted to give their work the character of a popular expression would sometimes use it.

III. The Common Line

There are 305 Shī poems. There are in all 253 lines or groups of lines which occur, identically, in more than one Shī poem. It is obvious, by arithmetic, that the interweaving of the Shī material is pervasive. What does it mean? Let's begin with some poems we have already looked at.

First, recall the most shocking line in Shī 87 (**Handout #1**), where the girl reminds her hesitant suitor that there are plenty of other guys around: 豈無他人. That line also turns up in Shī 120 (**Handout #8**), a slightly reformed love poem where the girl insists that though there are other people, she loves only him, thus showing more emotional fidelity than her sister of Shī 87. The line turns up in a still more proper context in Shī 119 (**Handout #9**). This is a poem of sympathy for a woman who has married far from her home, and lacks the support of kinsmen. In these poems, we have a series of increasingly conventional sentiments.

Now take another indecent poem, Shī 122 (**Handout #10**), where successive stanzas involve fewer and fewer clothes on the participants. He says to her, How can you say you have no clothes: 豈曰無衣. And she answers, but not like yours. From seven, they work down to six, and the rest is left to our imagination. One suspects that the story ends with one party snuggling in the warm bedclothes of the other. So far Shī 122. Its opening line is turned to another use in Shī 133 (see again **Handout #6**), where the context is military. That military poem was typologically later than the folkish Shī 36 (see **Handout #5**), and probably also later in literary borrowing terms than the indecent Shī 122.

These are simple examples. I will end with a more complex one, a common line occurring five times, which I will follow from its beginning in the folk erotic literature, to its end in the fake-folk war literature.

In Shī 117 (**Handout #11**), we have a girl who praises the ardor of her lover, symbolized by the "hot" image of the pepper plant. The line in question here, 彼其之子, might be translated, "Oh, that man of mine." This line (Common Line #54, as it happens) is reused in 4 other Shī. Let's look at them. Next in order of conventional decency would come Shī 108 (**Handout #12**), enthusiastically describing a lover, but this time at least comparing him with elite males, and with a reassuringly greater interpersonal distance: in this poem, they are not actually doing it. Shī 108 is thus once removed from a folk context. This shows up in an awkwardness of construction: the transition from the first two lines to the third is not entirely smooth, and Waley, sensitive as always, has supplied a verb to improve things (there is none in the original). There is thus a bump at the point where the common line occurs in the poem. It often happens that a borrowed line is not literarily comfortable in its new surroundings, and this lack of fit is one indication of directionality.

In Shī 151 (**Handout #13**), an elegant lover has betrayed a girl, and she complains that he has no right to his fine clothes. The association of this line with elegant and amorous gentleman is established in these two poems; it is not suggested by the line itself. That association is taken for granted in Shī 68 (**Handout #14**), where soldiers complain of the stay-at-home sissies who are not out there on service with them, defending the state. This baggage of previous associations suggests that 68 is later than one or both elegant lover poems, 108 and 151. Last comes Shī 80 (**Handout #15**), from the Jvng section, where the man is praised not for beauty, but for devotion to his lord. The common line here no longer has effete associations, but has been assimilated to a later type. The patriotic note is sounded in many poems which on other evidence can be shown to belong to late strata of the Shī. The argument for lateness here is not exclusively vertical (from common line relations), but also horizontal, from typology: the behavior of other poems of the same subject type.

At the opposite end of the literary spectrum, the indecent poems, it seems to be collectively true that in cases where a literary judgement seems possible, an indecent poem is always the donor in a common-line relationship, and never a recipient. We then leave the Jvng section with the observation that it now contains very early poems (like the indecent Shī 87) and very late ones (like the patriotic Shī 80).

IV. The Táng 唐 Section

Four of our examples are from the Táng or Jìn section, Shī 114-125. As with the Yă (**Handouts #1 and 2**), some, but not all, sections of the Gwó-fvng 國風 have ten poems each. For the 12 poems of the Táng section, see **Handout #16**. Some have no common lines. Of those that do, we have determined some directionalities. We see that the Táng poems go both ways: like Jvng, the section includes both original and derivative Shī, and was thus built up over time. At one point, did Táng, like Chí and Chín, or Wèı and the Royal Domain, have ten poems? If so, which two poems pushed the section over that limit? For lack of time, I leave that question open.

V. Conclusion

Stepping back from these details, we can ask a more general question. Why these indecent poems, and why are they the earliest Shī? The answer is contained in the Dzwŏ Jwàn story (Syāng 29:13) about the visitor from Wú for whom the Shī were performed. He comments on each section in terms of the moral health of that state, and its potential for survival. The Shī, it appears, were first compiled precisely as a measure of the moral health of the several states. The more indecent poems obviously belonged to the states that would perish first.

We have learned from Granet that some of the folk poems in the Shī correspond to still observable folk customs; they are not, or at least not entirely, the invention of some Warring States poet. They came from observation of actual people. Why was it important to observe actual people? Because in the 05th century, the lower social level mattered, as it had not in Spring and Autumn. This was because Warring States armies were drawn not only from the military elite, but also, and mostly, from the subject population. Their moral health, their willingness to serve, had predictive value for the statesmen of the time. As years passed, and the Shī came to serve a second purpose as a set of moral exemplars, positive poems were added. Thus the enthusiastic soldier entered the Shī alongside his unwilling older brother; the devoted wife sat down beside the free-love floozy. But it is the original purpose of the Shī which the Dzwŏ Jwàn story still remembers. The unification wars were the whole point of life in the Warring States. The Shī evolved along with that purpose, from poems of protest to poems of loyal assent.

The People in the Shī end by being willing soldiers in the wars of their rulers.

My colleague ended her paper with the comment that the Chūn/Chyōu offers exciting opportunities for new research. I would say the same of the Shī. And I would add this: The total amount of work to be done, in tracing literary relations and recovering editorial procedures, is enormous. *But it occurs in small modules*. One person can do a module, and contribute it to the larger effort. I conclude by noting that our journal is available as a repository for such Shī modules: a dissemination point for the rest of the analytic community. Full information is available on the web page given at the end of the handout. Please feel free.