An Offering to the Prince: Wang Bo’s Apology for Poetry

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In an essay titled “The Significance of the fu in the History of T’ang Poetry” published a dozen years ago, Paul W. Kroll made this poignant observation on the dismal state of Tang fu studies:

Of the 1,600-plus T’ang fu currently available to us, very few have been seriously studied. One can count on just two hands and feet—and still have some digits to spare—the number of T’ang fu that have been translated into English during the past century. This is not due to a paucity of such works, nor is it due to any lack of variety or style among our existing specimens.1

This neglect, Kroll went on to remark, stems rather from the unexamined supposition that after the fall of the Han dynasty, which was the universally acknowledged golden age of the fu genre, no fu written thereafter could be good enough to warrant the attention of literary connoisseurs or scholars, especially when there are so many artistically superior, technically inventive, and—better yet—far more accessible gems in the shi form to keep everyone occupied well beyond the foreseeable future. “But to snub the medieval (Wei-Chin-Nan-pei-ch’ao and T’ang) fu,” Kroll reminds us, “is to consign ourselves to not only willful ignorance of what was during that period a prevalent and still vital genre of verse; it also guarantees a one-eyed view of the shih itself.”2

This warning applies equally to the study of individual poets, not least to the one who occupies my attention in this essay: Wang Bo 王勃 (649–676) of the early Tang. To omit consideration of Wang Bo’s fu in any critical account of his œuvre likewise “guarantees a one-eyed view” of his literary career if not an impoverished understanding of early Tang conceptions and uses of poetry. Yet despite the study of medieval Chinese literature having in other respects advanced in the decade following the publication of Kroll’s essay, such that scholars have begun to “look beyond accustomed ambits” in order to “recapture portions of a vanished world that have been blurred, and texts that have lain

2 Ibid.
unread, for too long a time,” we have not seen a significant surge in scholarship on Wang Bo’s or other Tang  

Indeed, Wang Bo studies in general have fared poorly. I have commented recently on the scarcity of books and essays offering any careful or sustained analysis of Wang Bo’s literary output. The least attention is given to his fu, even though Wang Bo boasts the largest extant corpus in this form among early Tang writers—twelve compositions in all, representing approximately one-tenth of the surviving corpus of early Tang fu. A search on WorldCat yields only one article exclusively focused on Wang Bo’s fu, written in Chinese by a Korean scholar. There are of course treatments of Wang Bo’s life and literary career that include some discussion of his fu, but with few exceptions they are perfunctory and platitudinous.

In this essay, I reveal something of what we miss by not giving Wang Bo’s fu more than the scant attention they have so far attracted, taking for my example his “Cailian fu” (Fu on Picking Lotus). This piece would seem to merit more study on biographical grounds alone, for it was the last fu that Wang Bo wrote, and it seems clearly enough to convey the state of mind he was in during what would prove to be the final year of his life. But even in this regard, as in others, what meanings and what poetic effects Wang Bo meant to convey have not at all been clear to scholars. At the lexical and syntactic level, for example, this fu puts on display Wang Bo’s trademark technical mastery, and his prodigious learning is showcased in its dense tapestry of literary allusions and bor-

3 Ibid, 104.
5 This statistic is noted on the first page of Paek Sŏng-sŏk’s (Bai Chengxi 白承錫 in Chinese) “Wang Bo fu zhi tantao 王勃賦之探討, Shehui kexue zhanxian 社會科學戰線 1995.2: 207–14 (hereafter “Wang Bo fu”). The same essay is published also in Jiangsu shehui kexue 江蘇社會科學 1995.2: 11–16.
6 This is the above-cited essay by Paek Sŏng-sŏk, author also of the unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, “Chu Tang fu yanjiu 初唐賦研究 (Taiwan guoli zhengzhi daxue, 1994).
7 The exceptions are Paul W. Kroll, “Tamed Kite and Stranded Fish: Interference and Apology in Lu Chao-lin’s fu,” T’ang Studies 15-16 (1997-98): 41–77, which offers critical analysis of Wang Bo’s “Xun yuan fu” (Fu on a Tamed Kite), written to match a fu of the same title by Lu Zhaolin (70–74); and Tim Wai Keung Chan, “In Search of Jade: Studies of Early Tang Poetry” (Ph. D. diss., University of Colorado, Boulder, 1999), which treats of the lyrical mode employed by Wang Bo in “Chunsi fu” (Fu on Thoughts of Springtime), 142–47, complemented by a fully annotated translation of this piece in an appendix, 292–310.