Beyond Border and Boudoir: The Frontier in the Poetry of the Four Elites of Early Tang

Timothy Wai Keung Chan

Introduction

Frontier poetry (biansai shi 邊塞詩) came into being as a genre in Chinese literary history only in the Southern Dynasties, reaching its heyday in the Tang. The early Tang, in particular, was a crucial period in the development of this genre, especially in the hands of the Four Elites of the Early Tang, viz., Wang Bo 王勃 (650–676?), Yang Jiong 杨炯 (650–94), Lu Zhaolin 盧照鄰 (ca. 634–84), and Luo Binwang 骆賓王 (ca. 626–84).1 The present study examines the Four Elites’ frontier poetry, focusing on the ways in which they developed the conventions laid out by their Southern-dynasties predecessors, and how they were constrained by these same conventions.

Due to the different experiences, moods, and tastes of each of the Four Elites, the image of the frontier is represented in a variety of ways in their poetry. Their idiosyncrasies, personal backgrounds, and attitudes towards literary tradition play a decisive role in the style and representation of their frontier imagery. Luo Binwang was the only one of the four who had actual experience of the frontier, but all of them wrote of the far west in their own distinctive styles. The landscapes depicted in these works were almost entirely determined by the historical and cultural traditions they had inherited.

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1 The Four Elites (sijie 四傑), also known as the “Four Talents” (si caizi 四才子), are first labeled as such in Xi Yunqing’s 鄭雲卿 (fl. early 8th century) “Luo Binwang wenji yuanxu” 駱賓王文集原序, in Chen Xijin 陳熙晉 (1791–1851), comm., Luo Linhai ji jianzhu 駱臨海集箋注 (Shanghai: Shanghai guji, 1985; hereafter, LLHJ), 337. The rationale behind this collective name is that the four sat for the civil service assessment together in 671. On this point, see my article, “Literary Criticism and the Ethics of Poetry: The Four Elites of the Early Tang and Pei Xingjian,” T’ang Studies 15–16 (1997–98): 157–82.
The hinge on which all this turns is the distinction between the truth of life and the truth of literature. To get a better grasp on this, we must look into the long, common practice of referring to frontier toponyms, especially those of the western regions (Xiyu 西域), in poetry, a practice that began in earnest with the Southern Dynasties. In the works of these earlier poets, who generally did not leave the southeast, we find only a handful of mentions of Jinling 金陵, but references to Chang'an 長安 and frontier toponyms occur quite frequently in these poems. This practice had a profound influence on Tang frontier poetry. Consequently, frontier imagery can appear strikingly realistic, even in the works of poets who had never traveled westward with the military, such as Yang Jiong and Wang Bo. Luo Binwang, who was familiar with both the actual frontier and its literary representation, was able to achieve a remarkable verismilitude in his frontier poetry. Lu Zhaolin, Wang Bo, and Yang Jiong drew on the yuefu 楽府 (Music Bureau) poetic tradition in order to construct a kind of virtual frontier: the old yuefu titles provided the three with ready-made themes, topics, topos, and modes of expression. A poet could easily “fall back on” these conventions if he had no actual frontier experience. Indeed, this tendency to make use of convention is precisely what others have called the function of “formulaic language.”

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3 By using the term “fall back on” (yibang 依傍), I refer to the restrictive role of literary convention, borrowing a phrase from Yuan Zhen’s 元稹 (779–831) description of Du Fu’s 杜甫 (712–70) new yuefu titles as “titling the work based on an event, and no longer falling back on [convention]” 即事名篇, 無復依傍. See Yuan Zhen’s “Yuefu guti xu” 楽府古題序, in Zhou Xianglu 周相錄, ed. and comm., Yuan Zhen ji jiaozhu 元稹集校注 (Shanghai: Shanghai guji, 2011), 23-674. Qian Zhixi 錢志熙 discusses this convention of “falling back on” and refers to one such practice as futi 賦題 or “composing on the [surface meaning of a given yuefu] title.” Despite its long tradition, Qian argues, the futi practice reached its zenith in the Qi-Liang period because of the loss of most hengchui 横吹 (transverse flute) lyrics. See Qian, “Qi Liang ni yuefushi futi fa chutan: jianlun yuefushi xiezuo fangfa zhi liubian” 齊梁擬樂府詩賦題法初探：兼論樂府詩寫作方法之流變, Beijing daxue xuebao (zhexue shehui kexue ban) 1995.4: 59–65; and “Yuefu guci de jingdian jiazhi: Wei Jin zhi Tangdai wenrenyuefushi de fazhan” 楽府古辭的經典價值：魏晉至唐代文人樂府詩的發展, Wenxue pinglun 1998.2: 71–72. Hans Frankel and Graham Williams, drawing on the Parry-Lord hypothesis of oral composition, maintain that yuefu poetry contain vestiges of formulaic language. Charles Egan, however, has argued against this view. Joseph R. Allen evades the issue of oral composition, and instead uses the term “thematic intratextuality.” However, all such application of Western theories to yuefu should be held with a degree of skepticism, since yuefu emerge out of a quite different literary tradition, with its own internal logic. See Egan, “Were Yüeh-fu Ever Folk Songs? Reconsidering the Relevance of Oral Theory and Balladry Analogies,” Chinese Literature: Essays, Articles, Reviews 22 (2000): 31–66.