Heyue yingling ji and the Attributes of High Tang Poetry

Paul W. Kroll

Anthologies play a large role both in what and how we learn about literature, especially (though not only) literature from other times and traditions. This is particularly so when a literature has accumulated a considerable history or boasts more than a handful of touchstone texts. It is only the most obsessive of admirers or most dedicated of scholars who will read all the way through an individual poet’s complete works, much less the works of a particular period. Within the Chinese tradition, the longest continuous tradition of poetry in the world, anthologies have a prominent standing. Indeed they are there from the beginning, if we consider the Book of Odes as an anthology. In the Tang dynasty, which will be our concern here, the Wen xuan 文選, compiled in the 520s, was the anthology par excellence, learned and studied by prospective scholars with a devotion nearly equal to that expended on the canon of the (then) Nine Classics—often with a greater personal attachment to, and identification with, at least certain selections, depending on one’s own tastes.

In what follows, the focus will be on the so-called “High Tang” (sheng Tang 盛唐) period, coincident with the reign of the greatest of Tang-dynasty emperors (Xuanzong 玄宗), from 712 to 756. It is of course the most fabled period of poetry in China’s long history. Even if one knows only a few works of Chinese poetry or the names of just one or two poets, they are likely to date to this half-century. Here I shall focus just on shi-poetry. I have commented elsewhere about the importance of fu-poetry in Tang literary history, but our attention here will be restricted to shi 詩, which is the form that most people think of (and perhaps the only one that many of them are aware of) when they think of Chinese poetry. Let me say also at the outset that what I mean by “attributes” are those features that are usually spoken of as characteristic of High Tang verse, that are taken to define its “period style.” To provide more specificity I shall conclude with some particular remarks about Li Bo 李白.

For the past 250 years, most scholars have taken their first step into the field of Tang shi-poetry via the Tangshi sanbaishou 唐詩三百首, an anthology.

published in 1763 by Sun Zhu 孫洙 (1711–1778), partly in response to the restoration of poetry in 1757 to an important position in the jinshi 進士 exam, and originally meant for young students. The popularity of this text among advanced as well as beginning students has so surpassed that of the 300-plus anthologies of Tang verse produced before it and the equal number of Tang-shi anthologies produced after it² that Sun Zhu's individual prejudices have acquired the heft of customary wisdom. But examination of contemporary Tang opinions yields different and more complicated views, as we shall see.

The Tang was an age of encyclopedias and anthologies. Discussion of the encyclopedias, some comprising hundreds of chapters, is for a different occasion. As to anthologies, we know the names (though unfortunately that is sometimes all we know) of twenty poetry anthologies compiled during the Tang.³ The publication in 1958 of a modern type-set edition of ten Tang-time anthologies (or fragments thereof) of Tang shi-poetry⁴ made the study of these works, including the anthology we will be particularly interested in, called Heyue yingling jì, more convenient than it had previously been. Although some Chinese and Japanese scholars turned their attention to these anthologies, few Western scholars recognized their importance. Notable exceptions were Stephen Owen who refers to Yin Fan's anthology often in his book on High Tang poetry⁵ and, especially, Pauline Yu who in an exemplary article on poetry anthologies⁶ considered this work along with a handful of others in the context of canon development in medieval China. The publication in 1996 of a revised and expanded version of the 1958 omnibus collection⁷ spurred a renewal of interest in China that lasted for about a decade and seems now to be waning, but Western scholarship in general has still paid little attention to these contemporary anthologies and their usefulness in gaining a fuller understanding of Tang verse in its own time.

A precious source in this regard for the High Tang period is the anthology called Heyue yingling jì 河嶽英靈集 (A Collection of the Finest Souls of River and Alp). Completed in 753, just a few years prior to the catastrophic end of

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² See Sun Qin'ān 孫琴安, Tang shi xuanben liubaizhong tiyao 唐詩選本六百種提要 (Xi'an: Shaanxi renmin jiaoyu chubanshe, 1987).
⁴ Tangren xuan Tangshi 唐人選唐詩 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1958).
⁷ Tangren xuan Tangshi xinbian 唐人選唐詩新編, ed. Fu Xuancong 傅璇琮 (Xi'an: Shaanxi renmin jiaoyu chubanshe, 1996).