INTRODUCTION

The most important literary achievements of the Yuan dynasty were in drama. Just as one acknowledges that the masters of lü-shih 律詩 and chüeh-chü 絕句 lived and composed their poems during the T'ang dynasty, one must likewise recognize that the prime literary product of the Mongol period was unquestionably the ch'ü 歇. Chinese literary historians are fond of making parallels between the cycle of China’s ruling houses and literary genres. They like to point to the fu 賦 of the Han, p'ien-wen 篇文 of the Six Dynasties, shih 詩 in the T'ang, tz'u 詞 in the Sung, and in the Yuan dynasty—ch'ü 歇. What is often overlooked in these too-perfect parallels between history and literature is that major literary forms never spring full-blown from the pens of men of letters, but are usually end products of long traditions of growth and development.

The ch'ü 歇 is a song form intimately bound up with music, but the melodies which once stirred the texts to life have not survived.
In this respect, the ch’ü is but one of many forms conceived as song but now looked upon largely as verse. Therefore I think it particularly valid to describe the prosodic features of the ch’ü as having been formed by the forces of music, not poetry. By such an approach I think it is possible to avoid many errors of past scholarship, and to bring to light new dimensions in ch’ü prosody which have heretofore been hinted at but never worked out to logical conclusions. I therefore hope that this study will stimulate others to take note of the role Chinese music has played in the development of many genres usually treated as pure literature. A reevaluation and adjustment of our obsolete perspectives on the common ground between literature and music is long overdue.

Although the tz’u and the ch’ü are major literary genres, unique and distinct in their own right in form, content and literary style, they are often linked together because they share a common heritage—long-short verse style (ch’ang-tuan-chü 長短句). This has been a prime factor in the failure to make clear distinctions between the two as literary forms. In pre-20th century writings Yüan-tz’u 元詞 is a common synonym for what we call Yüan-ch’ü 元曲. Titles of tune catalogues (ch’ü-p’u 曲譜) compiled as late as the mid-eighteenth century refer to Yüan-ch’ü as tz’u, as do many primary source materials on that subject. In T’ang times the reverse was the practice. In Ts’ui Ling-ch’ìn’s 崔令欽 Chiao-fang Chi 教坊記 1), well-known tz’u titles like Wang-chiang-nan 望江南, and Lang-t’ao-sha 落鴻沙 are catalogued as ch’ü titles (ch’ü-ming 曲名). Conversely, in Chou Te-ch’ing’s 調德清 rhyme catalogue Chung-yuán Yin-yün 中原音韻 2), references to tz’u are, in fact, comments on the ch’ü form. Chou’s well-known handbook for writers of ch’ü is entitled “A Documentary Treatise on the Ten Rules for writing Tz’u” (Tso-tz’u Shih-fa Shu-cheng 作詞十法疏證 3).

3) Chou Te-ch’ing 調德清 (fl. Yüan dynasty), Tso-tz’u Shih-fa Shu-cheng 作詞十法疏證 (Vol. IV: San-ch’ü Ts’ung-k’an 散曲叢刊, ed. Jen Chung-min 任中敏, Taipei: Chung-hua Shu-chü, 1964); Tso Tz’u Shih-fa is actually part of Chou’s Chung-yuán Yin-yün (note 2 above).