DATA ON THE CHU-KUNG-TIAO

A Reassessment of Conflicting Opinions

BY

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Introduction

The chu-kung-tiao 諸宮調 or "all keys and modes" originated as a genre of performative literature in the final decades of the Northern Sung dynasty, flourished during the Chin dynasty and had disappeared from the stage by the second half of the fourteenth century. By the sixteenth century, even the name of the genre had been forgotten and the only representative of the genre that was completely available in print, viz. Tung Chieh-yüan's 董解元 version of the romance of Student Chang 張生 and Ying-ying 龍女, was referred to by a great variety of names (Sung 1989; 2). Only in the twentieth century, by Wang Kuo-wei in 1912, this text was again identified as a chu-kung-tiao. The study of this genre begins with Cheng Chen-to's comprehensive paper "Sung Chin Yuan chu-kung-tiao k'ao" of 1932. Usually, the chu-kung-tiao is studied as an instance of popular performative literature, a link in the development of prosimetric storytelling, mainly distinguished by its peculiar musical organization and the preponderance of song over prose.

Materials for the study of chu-kung-tiao are very rare. Apart from Tung Chieh-yüan's Hsi-hsiang-chi chu-kung-tiao 西厢記諸宮調 of ca. 1200, other texts in this genre have only been preserved incompletely. Of the early twelfth century Liu Chih-yüan chu-kung-tiao 劉知遠諸宮調, originally in twelve chüan 卷, only the equivalent of four chüan has been preserved. Of the T'ien-pao i-shih chu-kung-tiao 天寶遺事諸宮調 by Wang Po-ch'eng 王伯成 (second half of thirteenth century) only isolated songs and song-sets have come down to us. Of possibly the most popular chu-kung-tiao of those days, an adaptation of the romance of the student Shuang Chien 雙齋 and the courtesan Su Hsiao-ch'ing 蘇小卿 by Chang Wu-niu 張五牛 and Shang Tao 商齋, we only have a new introductory song-set by a certain Yang Li-chai 楊立齋. Data in contemporary sources about the genre—its characteristics, authors, performers, public—are
scarce and scattered. These data have often been interpreted in quite conflicting ways. In this article I intend to survey our available information once again, focusing on those issues that have given rise to controversy. I will argue that the chu-kung-tiao as a genre was distinguished by its satiric intent, that it only appealed to a rather limited public, and that this latter fact is reflected in the very circumscribed number of known texts and performers.

K'ung San-chuan

For the final decades of the Northern Sung dynasty we have only two nearly contemporary works that refer to chu-kung-tiao, and very briefly at that. The first is Wang Cho's Pi-chi man-chih (Random notes from Ch'eng-tu; preface dated 1149), a short treatise on tz'u (poetry with lyric meters). In contrast to the modern tendency to discuss the chu-kung-tiao in the context of the development of prosimetric literature, Wang Cho discusses the genre in the context of the development of tz'u poetry. The passage containing the reference to chu-kung-tiao is translated here in full to bring out the context in which it occurs. After an extended discussion of the qualities of a number of Northern Sung lyricists, Wang Cho continues:

The custom of writing satirical and mischievous (ku-chi-wu-lai) works in the form of tz'u originated during the Chih-ho period (1054–55); but by the Chia-yu period (1056–63) it had not yet become rampant. During the Hsi-ning and Yuan-feng periods (1068–77 and 1078–85, respectively) Hermit Chang (Chang Shan-jen 張山人) from Kun-chou outshone everyone in the capital by his humor and would produce one or two stanzas at every opportunity. Professor K'ung San-chuan (孔三傳) from Tse-chou was the first to create old tales in all keys and modes (chu-kung-tiao ku-chuan 諾宮調古傳), and all the gentlemen and officials knew them by heart. Wang Chi'i-sou 王齊叟 of the Yuan-yu period (1086–93) and Ts'ao Tsu 曹祖 of the Cheng-ho period (1111–17) were both accomplished writers; whenever they produced a tz'u poem everyone would recite it. Wang Chi'i-sou created quite a stir in Ho-shuo [i.e., present-day Hopeh and Shansi] with his satirical works. Ts'ao Tsu was unsuccessful in life and down on his luck, but he wrote several hundred stanzas to [the tune] Hung-ch'uang chiung 紅窗曲 and various other melodies; whoever heard them fell over [laughing]. He was the champion of the satirical and mischievous.

1 San-chuan, or “Three commentaries,” probably refers to the three commentaries to the Spring and Autumn Annals; however, in vernacular literature it became a nickname for a self-taught man or a man that common wisdom pronounces to be wise—much as the term “professor” is widely and ironically used in English literature.