Literary Collections in Tang Dynasty China

Christopher M. B. Nugent
Williams College

Keywords
Tang Dynasty, poetry, collections, manuscripts, compilation, circulation

With the substantial amount of Tang dynasty poetry available to us today, from surviving Song printed editions to computerized databases, it is easy to overlook the vast divide that separates us from this literature as it was produced and circulated in the Tang itself. Poetry in the Tang existed in many forms, from songs on the lips of singing girls to poems meticulously copied out and stored on scrolls of paper. Yet the singing girls are long dead and, with the exception of a small number of poetic works from the finds at Dunhuang, the scrolls are lost. We have almost no access to poetry as it existed and was experienced in the Tang itself. And this is no trivial matter. Every Tang poem that we read today was by definition composed and circulated during the Tang before its long

*) I would like to thank Wilt L. Idema and Sarah M. Allen for their careful reading and useful criticisms of drafts of this article. I presented a portion of this study at the workshop “The Early Development of Print Culture in China” (Fairbank Center for East Asian Research, Harvard University, Cambridge, Mass., April 20, 2005) and benefited greatly from the many comments by the participants. I would also like to thank the anonymous referees for T’oung Pao for a number of helpful suggestions, editorial and otherwise.

1) For a comprehensive treatment of the poetic texts found at Dunhuang, see Xu Jun 徐俊, Dunhuang shiji canjuan jikao 敦煌詩集殘卷輯考 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 2000). The physical evidence provided by limited Dunhuang poetic manuscripts provides a different, if equally important, perspective on Tang poetic production and circulation. They do not, however, tell us much about Tang literary collections per se, as the finds include no complete collections of this sort. I will examine some of the important poetic manuscripts from Dunhuang in a forthcoming article focusing on textual variation in multiple copies of a number of Tang poems.
and circuitous path to the present. If we do not understand how Tang people composed, experienced, and circulated their poetry, then we are missing something very fundamental about the literature in its original contexts.

In this article I examine one of the key means of preserving and circulating written poetry during the Tang: literary collections consisting of the works of a single author. Literary collections were not new in the Tang, but in the course of the dynasty they reached a level of popularity that was previously unknown. Thanks to the wide availability of paper and an increasing understanding of the importance of such collections in establishing a writer’s reputation, both in the present and in the future, the compilation of individual literary collections became the norm rather than the exception. I will argue here that individual literary collections, especially by the Mid- and Late Tang, were read widely and constituted one of the primary means of access to the works of poets from earlier in the dynasty. Perhaps more importantly, these collections, along with the Tang anthologies for which they were the source texts, ultimately formed the basis for Song printed editions, the primary avenue through which Tang poetry survived into later periods.

Inspired by the increasing volume of excavated manuscripts that differ, sometimes significantly, from the received textual tradition,