ABSTRACT

This study is to compare Sikong Tu's poetic criticism and Shi-pin to see their similarities so as to see the probability of Sikong Tu being the author of Shi-pin.

Sikong Tu (司空图) is a famous poet-critic who lived at the end of the Tang (唐) Dynasty. His poetic criticism such as his Four Letters on Poetry Criticism, "After Reading Liu Zongyuan's works" (《题柳柳州集后序》) and Shi-pin (also known as Er-shi-si Shi-pin 《二十四诗品》) are the most widely read of Sikong Tu's works rather than his poems. The main basis of Sikong Tu's literary reputation is the Shi-pin, consisting of 24 poems in the archaic four-syllable line form. These 24 poems of Shi-pin are not only statements about the nature and function of poetic art, but also imaginatively successful poems in their own right.

In the past, nobody has ever suspected Sikong Tu as the author of Shi-pin. But in the year 1994, Wang Yonghao (汪涌豪) and Chen Shangjun (陈尚君) brought up in their essays that Sikong Tu might not be the author of Shi-pin due to:

a) The earliest comment on Shi-pin was written in late Ming (明) Dynasty by Mao Jin (毛晋).

b) Another version of Shi-pin was found in a book Shi-jia-yi-zhi (诗家一指), written by Yu Ji (虞集) in the Yuan (元) Dynasty, which is suspected to be the original copy of Shi-pin. Wang and Chen believe that those who had seen Shi-pin could be a copy of this, where Sikong Tu was ascribed for certain reasons as the author of Shi-pin.

These facts show that over the period of 400 years after Sikong Tu's death, nobody has mentioned or noticed that Sikong Tu had written Shi-pin. This, in some sense, indicates that Shi-pin may have been fabricated in toto at a later stage and ascribed to the author of the Tang period. Recently, in the year 1996, Wang Yonghao wrote another essay to discuss this matter by comparing Shi-pin and Sikong Tu's other works and concluded that Shi-pin has different poetic ideas from the works of Sikong Tu. This further supports Wang's argument that Sikong Tu was not the author of Shi-pin. Wang's essay consists of several pertinent arguments which are deliberately shaped to suit his point of view. One main reason for writing this thesis, in which an unbiased study is carried out to investigate the true facts on the relation between Sikong Tu's works and Shi-pin, is in fact to discuss the doubtful findings in Wang's essay.
In this study, the author compares various aspects of Sikong Tu and Shi-pin's poetic ideas, such as:

1) the ideas of poetry appreciation;
2) the theory of poetry composition and
3) the styles of interpretation.

To further show that Shi-pin is a piece of work probably written in the Tang period, the author also compares Shi-pin with the literary works of writers in the same period. A short account of the maturity on Shi-pin's poetic ideas is made to see its place in the history of poetry criticism from the practices of Tang and Song (宋) period in the literary context.

The results of the comparative study show that the poetic ideas of both Shi-pin and Sikong Tu shared a great deal of common ground. The level of maturity reflected in Shi-pin also goes in line with that reflected in Sikong Tu's various areas of poetry criticism. It is due to the similarities between Shi-pin and other literary works of Tang writers that the author feels that it is most appropriate to regard Shi-pin as a literary work of the Tang period rather than other periods. In conclusion, Shi-pin's poetic ideas match the poetic ideas of Sikong Tu and the chances of Sikong Tu being the author of Shi-pin are very high.

In order to decide whether Sikong Tu is the author of Shi-pin, much research awaits specialists in this field of learning. The scanning of all manuscripts of the Song Dynasty in order to check if anyone had seen Shi-pin or mentioned that Shi-pin was written by Sikong Tu, though it is the most important source of evidence, is a tedious work. A full examination of the manuscripts cannot be undertaken until the texts have been published in facsimile, thus it is impossible to complete in a short time. Before any record of Sikong Tu as the author of Shi-pin could be found, textual and linguistic analysis of Shi-pin and Sikong Tu's poetry criticism is urgently needed to determine Shi-pin's authenticity.

Research in this subject demands more than work within the confines of literary method, and must take due account of theories evolved in other disciplines such as the philosophical thoughts and the literary development of the Tang Dynasty. This thesis has not touched on these related areas other than poetic ideas as they are not the main objectives of the topic studied. As it is impossible to treat individual aspects of Chinese history in isolation, the study of the above mentioned related areas is absolutely useful in justifying Sikong Tu as the author of Shi-pin.