THE STUDY OF SONG YU

Abstract

Every year in the fifth month of the lunar calendar, millions of Chinese sing a mournful elegy in commemoration of the death of Qu Yuan, the patriotic poet who drowned himself in the Mi Luo River over two millennia ago. However, Song Yu, who was the successor of Qu Yuan seems to have been entirely neglected. Some scholars even hold him in contempt, though others have admired him and compared him to Qu Yuan. But Song Yu's life story is still wrapped in mystery. This paper attempts, first, to examine and clarify his somewhat mystical and contradictory life history; secondly, to appraise and comment on his personality, and, finally to determine which parts of his allegedly literary works are genuine. As only by so doing can his status in the circles of the studies of Chu Ci and his position and standing in the history of Chinese literature be established.

However, the study of Song Yu is extremely difficult because we lack a formal biography. The impression we have about Song Yu has always been very vague. Although there is quite a large number of relevant material and folk stories about Song Yu, they are mostly trivial and jumbled, and to a certain extent contradictory. In addition, scholars, past and present, give different interpretations to these materials that confuse the readers.

In order to have a more objective, clear and accurate picture of Song Yu, the authenticity of the material will have to be determined, and the accuracy of the documents and historical records examined.

This paper comprises, basically, three sections. The first section investigates into the life proper of Song Yu and the relevance of his life time to the turbulent historical events which he had experienced. Furthermore, the dates of his birth and death, the course of his life experience,
under which King(s) of Chu he had served as an officer? his
official career, his family background and his relationship
with Qu Yuan etc will also be explored.

The second section is an overall evaluation of the
character of Song Yu. By analysing and criticising the two
extreme viewpoints, praise and censure about Song Yu, the
similarities and differences in the thinking and the literary
spirit and style between Song Yu and Qu Yuan may be distin-
guished. Only then can an all-round and just conclusion of
Song Yu's conduct be drawn.

Being the principal body of this paper, the third
section deals with the literary compositions of Song Yu. The
scope of this section is so wide that it is sub-divided into
three interrelated parts. The first part delves into the
question of genuineness or falsification of his fourteen
existing literary compositions. This is an extremely diffi-
cult task owing to the discrepancy of opinions prolifically
expressed by different scholars. It will lead one to nowhere.
Apart from the discernment of the authorships of "Jiu Bian"
and "Zhao Hun", other compositions under the name of Song Yu
will also be scrutinized.

The second part examines the ideological content and
artistic skills of his literary works so as to reveal his ta-
lent. This is largely based on his reliable, representative
work — "Jiu Bian", in the Chu Ci. As for other compositions
under Song Yu's name, we are uncertain about their genuine
authorships. The most we can do is to be complacent with
those whose authorships are less controversial.

The third part emphasizes his remarkable success in
literary creation and the significance of his contribution
to and the impacts he has made on Chinese literature.