A Study of the Yueh Fu, Music-Bureau Poems of Han Dynasty

Yueh fu (樂府), literally means "Music Bureau", was an official agency of the imperial Han government. The Music Bureau was established in 120 B.C. by Emperor Wu (武帝). Its primary function was to provide songs and musical performances for the court's ceremonial occasions. These songs ranged from temple hymns and sacrificial odes to chamber songs for feasting and dancing. The most important of those is a group of folk songs (民間樂府) collected by the official envoys or musicians like Li-Yen-Nien (李延年) and Ssu-Ha-Hsiang-Ju (司馬相如).

Although the authors gave different treatments to subject matters, certain common characteristics in the ideology of Yueh fu can be discerned. They reflect the hopes, fears, joys and disappointment of the common people, grievous destiny of women and the chaotic situation of society. These range from the simple verse like "Chiang Nan" (江南), to the sophisticated verse like "Fighting South of the Castle" (戰城南), "Song of the Orphan" (孤兒行), "Song of Lo-fu" (陌上桑) and "Southeastward Flies the Peacock" (孔雀東南飛), a great narrative poem of 353 lines.

Though most of the Music Bureau poems were written in lines of varying length, most of them have a regular form of five words in each line, with rhymes of the even lines. This shows that
the five-syllable-line poems had attained full maturity during the Han Dynasty. This was an important development of Chinese poetry and an improvement over the four-word poems in the Classic of Poetry (詩經) since the addition of an extra word to each line made it much more flexible and melodious. The five-syllable-line poems also illustrate the compactness of the Chinese poetic language. The beauty of simplicity and directness is obvious in all these poems, especially in the verse of "The Peacock Flies Southeast" which shows the popular use of the five-word verse in the folk songs.

Therefore, the Han Yüeh fu makes invaluable contributions towards the development of Chinese literature. Their beautiful style, compact of language and their characters and vivid stories remained as heritages for the writers of the coming generations during the Three Kingdoms Period (三國), the Southern and Northern Dynasties (南北朝) and Tang (唐) Dynasty.