
The Origin and Development of Western Sinologists' Theories of the Oral-Formulaic Nature of the *Classic of Poetry*

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Beginning early in the twentieth century, Western scholars have emphasized the oral origins of early world literature, including Chinese literature. With respect to the *Shijing* or *Classic of Poetry*, China's earliest collection of poetry, two proponents of this theory of oral literature have been particularly influential: Marcel Granet (1884–1940) and C. H. Wang. It is little known among Sinologists that Granet's *Fêtes et chansons anciennes de la Chine*, published in 1919 and perhaps the most important single Western contribution to the study of the *Classic of Poetry*, was heavily influenced by the early studies of Jean Paulhan (1884–1968). It is better known that C. H. Wang's *The Bell and the Drum: Shih Ching as Formulaic Poetry in an Oral Tradition* (1974), the second great contribution to this theory, was deeply indebted to the theories of Milman Parry (1902–1935) and Albert B. Lord (1912–1991). As a prelude to a broader study of recently excavated textual materials and their significance for the early history of the *Classic of Poetry*, in this article I examine the background of these two scholars' studies of the *Classic of Poetry*, and explore as well some of the influence that they have had in the scholarship of the last century.

Keywords: *Classic of Poetry*, oral literature, Marcel Granet, C. H. Wang, excavated manuscripts

In a recent article entitled “Unearthed Documents and the Question of the Oral Versus Written Nature of the *Classic of Poetry*,”¹ I have tried to show the considerable role that writing played in the creation of the *Shijing* 詩經 or *Classic of Poetry* (or simply *Poetry*) in all of the different periods of its creation: from the Western Zhou dynasty (1045–771 B.C.), when the first poems were composed, through the Han dynasty (202 B.C.–A.D. 220), when the collection that we have today took definitive shape. I first examined several recently discovered manuscripts—from the Shanghai Museum and Tsinghua (Qinghua 清華) University collections—with both systematic references to the *Poetry* and also early versions of individual poems to show that poems could be and were written no later than the Warring States period (480–222 B.C.). I then examined other evidence—less direct, to be sure—that strongly suggests that writing was involved in every step of the creation and transmission of the *Poetry*. Inscriptions on bronze vessels show that at least some of the social elites of the Western Zhou and Spring and Autumn periods were fully capable of writing texts very similar to the poetry we see in the received *Poetry*. Variants and errors seen in the received text of the *Poetry*, plausibly caused by changes in the script or in the idiom of usage over the course of the centuries before the common era, suggest that at least some of the transmission of the text was accomplished by copying from one manuscript to another over the course of the Eastern Zhou period (770–249 B.C.). And at least one case in which two separate poems were conflated in the Han dynasty suggests that editors were then working with a text written on bamboo strips. All of this evidence should suffice to remind readers that the *Poetry* was created within a fully literate context. Already by the end of the Western Zhou period, the period to which many of the poems are traditionally dated, scribes had been writing at the Shang and Zhou courts for some four hundred years.

This argument for the role of writing in the creation of the *Poetry* flies in the face of many recent pronouncements concerning the nature of the *Poetry*. Especially among Western Sinologists, there is a prevalent view that the poems in the collection were originally produced orally and to a considerable extent were also transmitted orally, at least through much of the Zhou dynasty. This is a view that has been stated, in one way or another, by many of the most

1 Edward L. Shaughnessy, “Unearthed Documents and the Question of the Oral Versus Written Nature of the *Classic of Poetry*,” *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies* 75.2: in press.