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The Derivation of *Shi-shi* in Mid-to-Late Tang as a Scholarly Inheritance

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Abstract

The term *shi-shi* 詩史 [poet historian/poem history] was first employed by Meng Qi 孟啟 in his book *Poetry of Capabilities*, a collection of stories about poets from the late Tang dynasty, to describe Du Fu and his poems. They were reflections of the political and scholarly climate in the Mid-to-Late Tang dynasty. During that time, Yuan Zhen 元稹 and Bai Juyi 白居易 studied Du's poems and acknowledged the historiographical attributes contained in Du's poems through depictions of social and political upheavals during the An Lushan Rebellion. Although Yuan and Bai had different opinions than Meng because of divergent political stances, they all agreed on the realistic quality of Du's poems. Building on the works of Yuan and Bai, the "Biography of Du Fu" in *New Book of the Tang* from the Song dynasty defined *shi-shi* from a perspective of contemporary affairs, which further broadened the word's connotation. Since then, *shi-shi* not only can refer to the narrative and realistic characteristics of Du's poems but also to the ethical and political ideologies involved: from narrating one's own fate to the fate of an era. Du's poem series such as "Three Officials" and "Three Farewells" have also been included as examples of *shi-shi*. Such is what constitutes our general understanding of the word *shi-shi* today, which constitutes a scholarly inheritance that combines the political, pedagogical and poetic traditions of Du Fu and Confucianism.

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Keywords

Du Fu – *shi-shi* – *The Spring and Autumn Annals* – interaction between literary language and history – contemporary affairs

Shi-shi 詩史 [poet historian/poem history] and *ji dacheng* 集大成 [epitome of great talents] are almost exclusively used to address Du Fu 杜甫 [712–770] as his honorific titles, which shows why his poems are regarded as classics. Between the two titles, *shi-shi* appeared earlier and is more influential. The modern day understanding of *shi-shi* is linked to the narrative and realistic features of Du's poems since they provide detailed depictions of the social and political situations of the Tang dynasty [618–907]. This was especially true for the poems he wrote regarding the social impact of the An Lushan Rebellion 安史之亂 [755–763], such as the groups of poems “Three Officials [*San li* 三吏]” and “Three Farewells [*San bie* 三別].” This demonstration of the ethos of realism is still highly praised nowadays. Although many scholars have carried out research to investigate *shi-shi* and its derivation in recent years, there is still a lack of study of the word's original meaning and context when Meng Qi 孟啟 (courtesy name Chu Zhong 初中, *jinshi* 875) used the term in *Benshi-shi*¹ 本事詩 [*Poetry of Capabilities*] in the late Tang. The aim of this essay is to restore the derivation of the word in order to clarify its ideological and poetic principles by probing into the complex facets in the early days when Du's poems gradually gained prestige among scholars.

1

Attested by the existing literature, the term *shi-shi* was originally invented by Shen Yue 沈約 [441–513] in his work “Biography of Xie Lingyun [*Xie Lingyun zhuan* 謝靈運傳]” of *History of Song of the Southern Dynasties* [*Songshu* 宋書], but it was Meng Qi who first employed the word to critique poems in the chapter “Grand Escapism [*Gaoyi* 高逸]” of his book *Benshi-shi* in the late Tang dynasty, bestowing new meaning into the word. Among the three stories in that chapter, there are two short introductions of Du Mu 杜牧 [803–852] and one about Li Bai 李白 [701–762], the latter of which mentioned the word *shi-shi*. Through telling the stories behind some of Li's creations, Meng depicted him as a brilliant poet with unparalleled eloquence and courage in pursuit

1 Meng Qi 孟啟, *Benshi shi* 本事詩 [*Poetry of Capabilities*], comm. Dong Xiping 董希平, Cheng Yanmei 程豔梅, and Wang Sijing 王思靜 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 2014).

of ancient wisdom, and with an unfettered state of mind. The truthfulness of the stories however remains an open question. For example, the story behind Li Bai's "Playfully Dedicated to Du Fu [*Xi zeng Du Fu* 戲贈杜甫]"² is deemed unreliable by scholars. While praising Li for his skills and capabilities (*benshi*, hence the name of the work *Benshi-shi*), Meng mentioned Du Fu and his poems four times. Reference to Du first appeared when Meng quoted He Zhizhang's 賀知章 [659–744] comment on Li Bai. The remarks were later included in Du's poem "To Li Shi'er Bai: Twenty Rhymes [*Ji Li shi'er Bai ershi yun* 寄李十二白二十韻]."³ Du Fu's name then is brought up again in Li Bai's poem "Playfully Dedicated to Du Fu," which teased Du for being *jushu* 拘束 [restrained] and Meng used him as a contrast in order to give prominence to Li's unconstrained poetic ideology. Meng mentioned Du one more time when quoting his poem "To Li Shi'er Bai: Twenty Rhymes," which provided a comprehensive and accurate summary of Li's life of ebbs and flow. Finally, Meng argued that Du's poem not only epitomized the life and essence of Li, but was also a faithful representation of Du's own life events. Meng further elaborated on this by quoting others' impression of Du's strong sense of current affairs as *shi-shi* to support the credibility of Du's poems.

In Meng's stories, prominence was given to Li Bai, and Du Fu was mentioned only as a foil. In addition, Meng criticized Du for being too restrained by quoting "Playfully Dedicated to Du Fu," the poem which Li Bai wrote to mock Du Fu, which reflects Meng may have disapproved of Du. Regardless of his exact attitude, by having Du's stories and poems interspersed in his narrative, Meng clearly aimed to disclose certain characteristics of Du's poems: they were a vehicle of *shi* 事 [things, stories, doings], capable of relaying the events of both Li and Du's lives. This kind of capability is suggested in the name of the book which intends to study and praise the skills of great poets, *Chushi xingyong* 觸事興詠 [*Composing lyrical poems inspired by events*], as in the examples of "To Li Shi'er Bai: Twenty Rhymes" and Meng's own commentary "Trekking the paths in Long and Shu, the displacement was fully captured in poems."⁴ Meng was explaining the meaning of *shi-shi*: on one hand, *shi-shi* encapsulated Du's narrative and realistic style in poem writing as he documented his daily life in his poems; on the other, the word was not referring to all of Du's creations but the ones that were composed during his time in Long-Shu.

2 Hua Wenxuan 華文軒, ed., *Gudian wenxue yanjiu ziliao huibian: Du Fu juan* 古典文學研究資料彙編·杜甫卷 [*Complete Classic Literature for Research: Du Fu*] (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1964), 2.

3 Stephen Owen, *The Poetry of Du Fu* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2015), 1:113.

4 Meng Qi, *Benshi shi*, 2.

Benshi-shi is a collection of novellas, stories of poets collected and edited by Meng Qi, thus they are not Meng's original. Wang Mengou 王夢鷗 [1907–2002] suggested Li's story was first included by some novellas that were published before Meng's book.⁵ In addition, the late unfortunate young scholar Zhang Hui 張暉 [1977–2013] discovered Meng deliberately included the description of Du and his poems to amplify Li's story.⁶ No further findings were made in Meng's other work and his life that can help us understand why he brought up the concept of *shi-shi*. However, considering Du's accelerating importance in the Mid-to-Late Tang dynasty, if Meng used *shi-shi* on purpose, then it is necessary for us to probe into the meaning and the context of the word.

2

Meng explicitly set the time of *shi-shi* as “contemporary”, which indicated that the concept of *shi-shi* must have been invented when Du was alive or not too long after he passed away. From this fact we can infer that Meng was not the first person to address Du Fu and his poem as *shi-shi*. Although this piece of evidence is thin by itself, the use of history [*shi* 史] for poetry analysis is definitely not a single event but a reflection of a literary tradition since Mid-Tang, i.e. *Wen Shi hudong* 文史互動 [literature and history integration].

The intricate relationship between literature and history in Chinese culture is an old topic that has been debated for centuries. Confucius said: “Where the solid qualities are in excess of accomplishments, we have rusticity; where the accomplishments are in excess of the solid qualities, we have the manners of a clerk.”⁷ Confucius made an academic comparison between the two ideas before each of them developed into individual genres of writing and formed their own discipline. While historiography generally focuses on the society and aims to keep its writing objective and unbiased, literature in essence revolves around personal experience and subjectivity. At first glance, the forms and properties of the two seem to be distinct. The origin of this separation started in the Han dynasty [206 BCE–220] when an abundance of cultural activities and writings surged into people's lives. Various writing styles gave birth to more classification. As a result, literary theories started to form to help differentiate writing styles and critique writings. Liu Zhiji 劉知幾 [661–721], a

5 Wang Meng'ou 王夢鷗, *Tangren xiaoshuo yanjiu* 唐人小說研究 [Research of Tang Novels] (Taipei: Yiwen yinshuguan, 1974), 31–28.

6 Zhang Hui 張暉, *Zhongguo “shi-shi” chuantong* 中國“詩史”傳統 [The Tradition of Shi-shi in Chinese Literature] (Beijing: Shenghuo dushu xinzhi sanlian shudian, 2012), 5–10.

7 Yang Bojun 楊伯峻, *Lunyu yizhu* 論語譯注 [The Exegesis of the Confucius Analects], 2nd ed. (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1980), 61.

historian in the early Tang, revised rules and standards for historical writing as in *yan wen* 嚴文 [strict writing] and *shi zhi fang* 史之防 [boundary of history].⁸ He claimed that “Literary writing can make history” [*wen zhi jiang shi* 文之將史], but disapproved of the overuse of rhetorical devices in writing history since the Southern dynasty [420–589]. It is safe to conclude that his distinction between literature and history is based on a deep understanding of the two genres, which in turn propelled the development of each. Literary critics have historically paid more attention to the poetic writings of the Tang including poems, *fu* 賦 [prosed poems], and *pianwen* 駢文 [parallel prose], while overlooking the important fact that history writings in the Tang also enjoyed a prosperous growth. For example, Xie Baocheng’s 謝保成 *History of the Sui and Tang Dynasties* [*Sui-Tang Wudai shixue* 隋唐五代史學]⁹ reported a vast number of *za shi* 雜史 [miscellaneous history], *za zhuan* 雜傳 [miscellaneous notes], and *biji xiaoshuo* 筆記小說 [novellas]. They were sub-categories of history according to the classification at the time, the majority of which were novellas with narrative styles.

Was Du Fu in favour of this distinction between poems and history? Like other poets, he also composed poems to pay tribute to past eras, but his poems stood out among others because at the heart of them there is a strong sense of history – an eternal contrast between a mortal and an infinite universe. Just as he wrote in “A Poem to Express Myself on a Night of Travelling [*Lüye shuhuai* 旅夜書懷]”: “What am I like but a lonely seagull drifting along the shore, between heaven and earth.”¹⁰ However, writing poems with a sense of history is not the same as writing strict history and Du was aware of the difference. Born after Liu Zhiji’s era, he had a clear understanding of the differences between poetry and history. For example, in “To Li Jiaoshu Twenty-six Rhymes [*Song Li Jiaoshu ershiliu yun* 送李校書二十六韻],” he wrote “At the age of fifteen I already had a command of history and literary language.”¹¹ He also praised court historians for writing faithfully and realistically. “Writing and recording events boldly and in a straightforward way.”¹² We can catch a glimpse of this way of “boldness and straightforwardness” [*zhishu* 直書] in his poems but otherwise there is no mention of his position on the debate or other historiographical arguments.

8 Liu Zhiji 劉知幾, *Shi tong* 史通 [Generalities on History], comp. Li Yongqi 李永圻 and Zhang Genghua 張耕華 (Shanghai: Shanghai guji chubanshe, 2008), 90.

9 Xie Baocheng 謝保成, *Sui-Tang Wudai shixue* 隋唐五代史學 [History from Sui-Tang to the Five Dynasties and Ten Kingdoms] (Beijing: Shangwu yinshuguan, 2007).

10 飄飄何所似，天地一沙鷗。Xiao Difei 蕭滌非, ed., *Du Fu quanji jiaozhu* 杜甫全集校注 [Complete Work of Du Fu with Exegesis] (Beijing: Renmin chubanshe, 2014), 3429.

11 十五富文史。Ibid., 1086.

12 直筆在史臣。Ibid., 3972.

Du's poetry serves as a mirror of his time and the retrospective *shi-shi* quality of him and his poems was only appreciated posthumously. Judging from the extant literature, his poems were already lauded when he was alive, and his fame slowly caught up with Li Bai's after his death. However, no evidence can be identified in literature to support any suggestion that *shi-shi* or similar concepts were used to describe Du other than *Benshi-shi*.

3

Writing poems instead of history is the job of a poet, but this does not mean the poet lacks awareness or reflection on his social and political circumstances. As scholar William Hung (Hong Ye 洪業, 1893–1980) stated: “Those who were born in the same era as Du Fu did not need to read his poems in order to learn the customs or contemporary affairs.”¹³ However, Du's poems gained historical significance as time went by because they epitomized the social situations of his time better than his peers. This explains why Meng Qi regarded Du's poems as *shi-shi*. However, there are surely other reasons why only Du's poems acquired this honor.

A broader picture needs to be viewed to fully understand why *shi-shi* became a focal point for Meng – i.e., Meng's inheritance of Confucian traditions. His entire book was dedicated to a direct demonstration of converging literary language and history, the classical argument mentioned previously. The preface of *Benshi-shi* indicated that the book was completed on the second day of the eleventh month of Guangqi 光啟 [885–888], which was right after the mid-Tang. Meng's way of reporting time was that of a historian's style. Similarly, on his wife's epitaph, Meng documented his failures in the Court Examinations¹⁴ and how he finally succeeded and his life unfolded in mainstream society, participating in cultural activities. Some scholars even consider *Benshi-shi* as the origin of poetic tales [*shihua* 詩話], a combination of fictional and non-fictional writing styles. In addition, Meng used poems to express feelings along with preaching moral standards, quoting “the four schools of *Shijing*'s interpretation” [*sishi zhi shuo* 四始之說] and he “wrote a preface which also acts

13 William Hung, *Tu Fu, China's Greatest Poet* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1952), 7.

14 Chen Shangjun 陳尚君, “*Benshi-shi* zuozhe Meng Qi jishi shengping kao 《本事詩》作者孟啟家世生平考 [Textual Analysis of Meng Qi: the Author of *Benshi-shi*],” in *Xin Guoxue* 新國學 [*Modern Study of Chinese Classics*], ed. Xiang Chu 項楚 (Chengdu: Bashu shushe, 2016), 6:99–111.

as introduction”,¹⁵ which shows a heavy influence from the Confucian classics such as *The Preface of the Book of Songs* [*Shi xu* 詩序] and *Han Yin's Notes to the Book of Songs* [*Han Shi waizhuan* 韓詩外傳]. This way of connecting poems with real life, particularly with political events, is traditionally integrated in the Confucian doctrine. Books such as the “Literature” chapter of *A New Account of Tales* [*Shi shuo xin yu* 世說新語] revealed an enrichment of cultural activities including poetry creation from the Wei-Jin period through the Southern and Northern dynasties [220–589]. When it came to the High Tang, Wu Jing’s 吳兢 [670–749] *A Concise Study on the Classic Titles of Ballads from Music Bureau Yuefu* [*Yuefu guti yaojie* 樂府古題要解] was another example of combining literary creation with historical description.

Meng Qi’s *Benshi-shi* inherited this tradition. His passion for poetry inspired him to probe into the capabilities of great poets to gain new understandings of their poems and the poets’ character. The book was also deeply influenced by *Spring and Autumn Annals* [*Chunqiu* 春秋] and historiography which were popular in Mid-Tang. The title of the book *Benshi* came directly from the classic chronicle book *Spring and Autumn Annals* and Meng’s comment on Du Fu “being able to extrapolate the subtlety”¹⁶ [*tui jian zhi yin* 推見至隱] referred to the *Spring and Autumn Annals’* commentary classic *The Commentary of Zuo* [*Zuozhuan* 左傳] which is known for revealing the subtlety of *Spring and Autumn Annals*. Therefore, it can be said that Meng Qi’s emphasis on *benshi* and his use of the concept of *shi-shi* is exactly the inheritance of the Confucian classic *Spring and Autumn Annals*.

Why was Meng in favor of *Spring and Autumn Annals*? Confucian doctrine and classics are historically the guiding principles for governing the country ever since Emperor Wu 漢武帝 [r. 141–87 BCE] in the Han dynasty abandoned a hundred schools of thought and put Confucianism on a pedestal. Although Confucianism continued its predominance in the Tang, Li’s empire was a multi-cultural pluralistic society and varied ideas as well as ethnic assimilation began to form. This induced a decline in the study of the Confucian classics. For example, Confucian theories suffered a shrinkage of concern in the orthodox government education in Tang. The imperial examinations heavily leaned towards the subject of a presented scholar [*jinshi ke* 進士科] which focused on the examinee’s ability at poetry, and the subject testing a scholar’s knowledge of the classics [*mingjing ke* 明經科] was overlooked. However, after the An Lushan Rebellion was quelled, a small group of scholars began to reflect on the cause of the upheaval in hindsight and often traced the root of the rebellion

15 Meng Qi, preface to *Benshi-shi*, 1.

16 Meng Qi, *Benshi-shi*, 2.

back to the diminished importance of Confucianism and its study. This rekindled scholars' interest in Confucianism. In the Mid-Tang, Yuan Zhen and Bai Juyi advocated a Confucian satirical poetic style [*mei ci shixue* 美刺詩學]; Han Yu 韓愈 [786–824] and Liu Zongyuan 柳宗元 [773–819] supported revitalizing traditional Confucianist and Taoist ideas for political application. Compared with early the Tang, the shift of scholars' attitudes was obvious. "Since Dali 大曆 [766–779] the study of the Confucian classics has regained popularity and new ideas have begun to sprout."¹⁷ This far-reaching ideological revival represented the transformation of thought and culture, and the study of *Spring and Autumn Annals* occupied a unique place in this movement. Founded by Dan Zhu 啖助 [724–770] and Zhao Kuang 趙匡, and through the development and dissemination of Lu Chun 陸淳 [d. 806], the study of *Spring and Autumn Annals* surpassed other classics and flourished in Mid-Tang. Chen Ruoshui's 陳弱水 research affirms that "*Spring and Autumn Annals* was the most favored classic to study" in the Mid-Tang.¹⁸ As part of the Confucianism revival, this predominating popularity of *Spring and Autumn Annals* was connected with a more complex social and political reform in the Mid-Tang – a major ideological, academic and cultural campaign which involved some of the greatest politicians and writers to various extents. The study of the classics and historiography both serve a utilitarian function which is to summarize experiences and solve the problems in real life. Before he wrote *Records of the Grand Historian* [*Shiji* 史記], Sima Qian 司馬遷 [145–87 BCE] said in his "Letter to Ren An [*Bao Ren An shu* 報任安書]": "I want to study the natural phenomena and their relationship with the human society; to master the law of change through the past and the present; and finally to establish a school of thought of my own";¹⁹ Li Han 李翰 [fl. 757] pointed out in his preamble to Du You's 杜佑 [735–812] *Comprehensive Statutes* [*Tongdian* 通典]: "In order to implement the best practice, we must review the good practices of ancient and modern times, and thoroughly study different systems from the beginning to end to master the gist before we can apply them to our time."²⁰ It can be concluded that the prosperity of the study of *Spring and Autumn Annals* and historiography was stimulated by the political

17 Ma Zonghuo 馬宗霍, *Zhongguo jingxueshi* 中國經學史 [*History of Classic Chinese Studies*] (1937; rpt. Shanghai: Shanghai shudian, 1984), 105.

18 Chen Ruoshui 陳弱水, *Liu Zongyuan yu Tangdai sixiang bianqian* 柳宗元與唐代思想變遷 [*Liu Zongyuan and the Ideological Shift in Tang*] (Nanjing: Jiangsu jiaoyu chubanshe, 2010), 145.

19 Ban Gu 班固, *Han shu* 漢書 [*The Book of Han Dynasty*] (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1964), 2735.

20 Du You 杜佑, preface to *Tong dian* 通典 [*Comprehensive Statutes*] (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1988).

situations of the Mid-Tang – a weak court and the independence of vassal states. The doctrine contained within those classics aimed to “respect the Zhou emperor and fight against foreign aggression” [*zunwang rangyi* 尊王攘夷], which satisfied the urgent need to revive the Mid-Tang and consolidate the government of the Li family. Finally, building on its profound historiographical tradition, the study of *Spring and Autumn Annals* triggered the advancement of historiography from the Middle to Late Tang, and they formed a joint force driving literary activities to thrive at that time.

In summary, the political turmoil caused by the An-Lushan Rebellion triggered a political reform, which in turn led to changes in the schools of thoughts, transformation of classic studies, and increased popularity of *Spring and Autumn Annals*. Meng’s citation of *Spring and Autumn Annals* in *Benshi-shi* and his personal sense of historiography is a reflection of this important academic transition.

4

In the process of the independent and vigorous development of literature and history, there must be mutual learning and referencing. The advancement of *Spring and Autumn Annals* studies and historiography in the mid-late Tang had an extremely complex impact on the writing activities at that time, which can be broadly categorized into two aspects.

Firstly, there was a phenomenon of “Writing will make history” – the emergence of a large number of novellas which combined the two styles of writing.

A new genre of stories called *chuanqi* 傳奇 [transmitting the strange] arose among a flourishing great number of other narrative literature genres including miscellaneous histories, miscellaneous biographies, and notebook fictions in the mid-Tang. Lu Xun 魯迅 [1881–1936] said: “The flourishing creation of *chuanqi* was a new phenomenon after Emperor Xuanzong’s reign of Kaiyuan 開元 [731–741] and Tianbao 天寶 [742–756]”,²¹ “From Dali to Dazhong 大中 [847–860] a large number of authors of *chuanqi* appeared and the new genre attracted considerable attention in the literary world”.²²

With a focus on poets’ lives and their creative process, novellas began to emerge in large numbers following this trend. Wang Yunxi 王運熙 [1926–2014]

21 Lu Xun 魯迅, *Zhongguo xiaoshuo shi lue* 中國小說史略 [History of Chinese Novels] (Shanghai: Shanghai guji chubanshe, 1988), 46.

22 Lu Xun 魯迅, preface to *Tang Song chuanqi ji* 唐宋傳奇集 [Collection of Chuanqi in Tang and Song] (Changsha: Yuelu shushe, 1995), 2.

and Yang Ming 楊明 believed that “Meng Qi’s *Benshi-shi* reflected the Tang people’s ubiquitous passion for poetry and was influenced by the development of Tang novels” and “*Benshi-shi* combined poems and novels which was affected by the reader’s preference at the time as people in the Tang loved to gossip about the stories behind the poems while reciting.”²³ The preface of *Benshi-shi* clearly states: “if the story came from a suspicious source or I doubt its truthfulness, I would disregard it.”²⁴ Meng Qi’s deliberate emphasis on documenting reliable stories is the best depiction of the influence of a historian tradition.

Secondly, there was an enhanced emphasis on the narrative function of poetry regarding people’s daily lives.

In the mid-late Tang many poems and *chuanqi* complemented each other and spread together, which shows that the writers and readers were more interested in real social events beyond reading. A large number of narrative poems depicting people’s real life began to emerge and this was the most noteworthy literary phenomenon of the time. The enhancement of narrative and documentary features of poetry was specifically manifested in the aspects such as the lengthening of the poems’ titles, the emergence of a large number of prefaces for the poems, using poetry and fiction as mediums to chant praise, an increasing amount of secular life and individual life being portrayed in creations, and a fashion to write poems as accessible and worldly as possible.

This Confucian rejuvenation permeated through the whole mid-Tang era in literature, politics and culture among Meng’s generation and it was in light of this retrospective awakening that he recognized the *shi-shi* quality of Du and his poems – Du’s poems that were created while he was “Trekking the paths in Long and Shu” were distinctively historical, factual, narrative and personal. In the second year of Qianyuan 乾元 [758–760], Du, who was almost fifty at the time, returned to Huazhou 華州 from Luoyang 洛陽, the eastern capital; in July of the same year he resigned his civil service job as a *sigong canjun* 司功參軍, and then took his family towards the west passing Qinzhou 秦州. After trekking over hills and mountains, he finally arrived in Chengdu at the end of the year and settled down. This year was an important turning point for his life and his poetry creation. Feng Zhi 馮至 [1905–1993] described this year as “the most difficult time” in Du Fu’s life, but it was also the same period that “witnessed the climax of Du’s career as a poet, especially the ‘San li,’ ‘San bie’ poem series

23 Wang Yunxi 王運熙 and Gu Yisheng 顧易生, *Zhongguo wenxue piping tongshi* 中國文學批評通史 [*The General History of Literary Critiques in China*], vol. 3: *Sui Tang Wudai juan* 隋唐五代卷 [*Volume of Sui Tang and Five Dynasties*] (Shanghai: Shanghai guji chubanshe, 1996), 736.

24 Meng Qi, preface to *Benshi-shi*, 1.

and some of his poems written while he was in Longyou.”²⁵ During this turbulent period, Du Fu wrote more than 120 poems in total, including 52 poems in 10 groups. These poems fully represented the difficulties that Du encountered in Qinzhou and Tonggu 同谷. At the same time, they portrayed the customs and people’s sentiments in Qinzhou as well as the dangerous and magnificent landscapes along the journey between Tonggu and Chengdu. The two groups of travel poems from Qinzhou to Tonggu and from Tonggu to Chengdu are the most eye-catching. Li Yindu 李因篤 [1632–1692], a scholar in the Qing dynasty [1616–1911] made the comment: “He travelled through thousands of miles, he trekked in mountains and rivers, and through the ups and downs of life there was a great amount of parting and reunion, with all the thick and thin tactfully weaved into his poems. Indeed, they are poems of history (*shi-shi*).”²⁶ These poems are not only different from traditional travel poems which emphasized lyricism but also from Du’s previous and subsequent creations which involved a heavy weight of lyricism and his expression of social and political concerns. The form of poetry groups and the historical, narrative and secular nature of these poems have gained the attention and appreciation of scholars of later generations, who not only enjoyed the magnificent mountains and rivers portrayed in the poems but also sympathized with the personal sufferings that Du Fu went through.

Meng Qi’s recognition of Du Fu’s poems during a specific phase as *shi-shi* not only demonstrated an emergence of a new fashion in academic studies and poetry creation but also affirmed the theoretical and poetic discovery based on such an emergence.

5

Later in the Song dynasty [960–1279], scholars widely adopted Meng’s idea of *shi-shi* but their understanding of the word was not the same. There are already an abundance of in-depth studies performed by modern day scholars looking into the academic development since the Song including how Du Fu textured his poems with this unique feature, how the rich Tang history was accurately and meticulously presented in Du’s poems, and how *shi-shi* impacted the study of poetry from the perspective of the word’s narrative and documentary

25 Feng Zhi 馮至, *Du Fu zhuan* 杜甫傳 [Biography of Du Fu] (Beijing: Renmin wenxue chubanshe, 1956), 35.

26 Yang Lun 楊倫, *Du shi jingquan* 杜詩鏡銓 [Exegesis of Du’s Poems] (1981, rpt. Shanghai: Shanghai guji chubanshe, 2014), 1:311.

attributions. Therefore, what we are emphasizing here is an enriched connotation of *shi-shi* and the change of its referent, i.e., how the meaning of the word was transformed into people's modern day understanding of it.

The concept of *shi-shi* was disregarded by the “Biography of Du Fu [Du Fu zhuan 杜甫傳]” in *Old Book of the Tang* [Jiu Tang shu 舊唐書] which basically copied Yuan Zhen’s “Epitaph Inscribed on the Tombstone of Du [Tang gu gongbu yuanwailang Du jun muximing 唐故工部員外郎杜君墓系銘].” Judging from the existing literature, Meng’s *shi-shi* was then first adopted in the “Biography of Du Fu, the Comment [Du Fu zhuan zan 杜甫傳贊]” chapter in *New Book of the Tang* [Xin Tang shu 新唐書] which was written in the fifth year of Jiayou 嘉佑 [1056–1063] in the Northern Song dynasty [960–1127]. Zhang Hui suggested:

The definition of *shi-shi* became complicated through the Song dynasty, but the *New Book of the Tang*'s definition was undoubtedly the most influential. This official history book was revised by the court scholars of the Song, hence it enjoyed a high reputation among literati and had a profound impact on them. If people of the Song used *shi-shi* to describe Du's poetry, it is most likely that they learnt the term from the *New Book of the Tang*.²⁷

On the other hand, Hong Ye argued there were “many errors”²⁸ in the *New Book of the Tang* about Du Fu. In addition, when Song Qi 宋祁 [998–1061], one of the authors of the book, and his peers made comments on Du, their understanding was a sort of montage: keeping the quality of *shi-shi* with the ideologies of Yuan Zhen and Bai Juyi grafted. This way of combining or synthesizing reflects a new understanding of Du and his poetry in the early Song era.

In 813 during Tang Xianzong's 唐憲宗 [r. 805–820] reign, Yuan Zhen made a comment on Du to state his importance in poetic history, and this was inscribed in the preface of Du's epitaph: “Du completely grasped the styles and characteristics of ancient and contemporary poetry. All the merits of his predecessors were integrated into him” and “Since *Shijing*, there has never been such a poet as great as him.”²⁹ He also compared Li Bai and Du Fu and judged that Du's poems “absorbed all the essence of great poems in the past”³⁰ with a return to the “elegant and correct” [*yazheng* 雅正] tradition of Qu Yuan 屈原

27 Zhang Hui, *Zhongguo “shishi” chuantong*, 25.

28 William Hung, *Tu Fu, China's Greatest Poet*, 353.

29 Zhou Xianglu 周相錄, *Yuan Zhen ji jiaozhu* 元稹集校注 [The Complete Work of Yuan Zhen with Exegesis] (Shanghai: Shanghai guji chubanshe, 2011), 1361.

30 *Ibid.*, 1361.

[ca. 340–278 BCE] as exemplified in his long poems, especially *pailü* 排律 [regulated verse], with “detailed descriptions elaborated, parallelism and tonal alteration applied.”³¹ In contrast, Bai Juyi focused on the ideological nature of Du’s poems. In the tenth year of Yuanhe, Bai Juyi wrote “Letters to Yuan Zhen [*Yu Yuan Jiu shu* 與元九書].” In it he went through the history of poetry since *Shijing* 詩經 [*The Book of Song*] and *Chuci* 楚辭 [*The Song of Chu*], described the gradual decline of Confucian satirical poetry [*mei ci shi* 美刺詩] in later generations, and believed that Du Fu was the best poet since the High Tang as the Confusion tradition of *feng ya bi xing* 風雅比興 (stylistic techniques originated from *Shijing*) was revived in his poems such as “The Officer of Xin’an [*Xin’an li* 新安吏],” “The Officer at Stone Moat [*Shihao li* 石壕吏],” “The Officer at Tong Pass [*Tongguan li* 潼關吏],” “Luzi Pass [*Sai Lüzi* 塞蘆子],” “Keeping Those of Huamen [*Liu Huamen* 留花門]” and through verses such as “Crimson gates reek with meat and ale, while on the streets are bones of the frozen dead.”³² Yuan and Bai may have different views but they both noticed the narrative and realistic properties in Du’s poems – a reflection of major social issues known as *shishi* 時事 [contemporary affairs]. Yuan and Bai’s realistic interpretation and their emphasis on the political function of Du’s poems are obviously influenced by the cultural and political movements in mid-Tang as mentioned earlier including the political reform, the resurgence of the study of *Spring and Autumn Annals*, and the realistic trend of poetic writing, which were the same background that gave birth to Meng Qi’s *shi-shi*. However, they have different intentions hence their emphases are not quite the same in the way they narrate the story of Du Fu. Yuan and Bai had their focus on the political turmoil reflected in Du’s poems with *shi-shi* capturing and revealing major political events, while Meng’s *shi-shi* sees more of the personal side of Du with depictions of his daily life and the mountains and rivers that he crossed.

With Yuan and Bai’s views in mind, the extension and change of *shi-shi*’s meaning in *New Book of the Tang* is now clear. First, the book affirms Yuan Zhen’s view “Du has such a masterly command of rhymes and rhythms that the momentum in his writing shows not even a slightest sign of fading no matter how long the poems are”³³ and adds “He is also good at presenting his contemporary affairs in his poems”³⁴ into *shi-shi*. As a conclusive remark, *shi-shi* represents that Du writes about his contemporary affairs in his poems with a mastery command of strict parallelism rules in long verses. According

31 Ibid., 1361.

32 Stephen Owen, *The Poetry of Du Fu*, 215.

33 Ouyang Xiu 歐陽修 and Song Qi 宋祁, *Xin Tang shu* 新唐書 [*The New Book of the Tang*] (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1975), 201.5738.

34 Ibid., 5738.

to Meng's definition, the word only refers to Du's creations during "Trekking the paths in Long and Shu." Now according to Yuan's new standard, only a few of Du's poems can be addressed as *shi-shi*, such as "Going from the Capital to Fengxian County, Singing My Feelings [*Zi Jing fu Fengxian xian yonghuai wubaizi* 自京赴奉先縣咏懷五百字]," "Journey North [*Bei zheng* 北征]," and "Writing My Feelings in Kui on an Autumn Day [*Qiuri Kui fu yonghuai fengji Zheng jian Li binke yibaiyun* 秋日夔府咏懷奉寄鄭監李賓客一百韻]," which are verses of considerable length that were extremely rare among Tang poems. Inheriting the ideas of Yuan and Bai, the connotation and referent of *shi-shi* continued to deviate. Unlike Meng's emphasis on Du's personal misfortune, Yuan and Bai returned to the Confucian doctrine of interpretation of political concern.

Second, *shi-shi's* meaning in *New Book of the Tang* was after Yuan and Bai hence was influenced by their own poetic philosophy. Yuan and Bai both praised and acknowledged that Du's poems followed the tradition of *feng ya* 風雅 [bearing elegance]. They also reached a consensus of the ethical and ideological values manifested in Du's poems along with the subsequent prestige bestowed. Bai Juyi is more explicit and specifies the Confucian doctrine and poetic origin he believes was contained in Du's poems as the Confucian satirical poetry – namely *feng ya bi xing*. This shows that instead of *Spring and Autumn Annals*, people started to compare Du's poems to another classic – *Shijing*. In the Tang, the prestigious ancient poetry book *Shijing* is often mentioned to make compliments to other works. For example, Li Bai in his "Fifteen Ancient Odes I [*Gu feng shiwushou* 古風十五首]" writes "Poems like those written in 'Great Elegy [*Da ya* 大雅]' (a section in *Shijing*) on the rise and fall of the governments have long gone";³⁵ Du Fu in his "Six Quatrains Done Playfully [*Xi wei liu jueju* 戲為六絕句]" writes "Imitating ancient classics and practicing in the tradition of *feng* and *ya*."³⁶ Du Fu also praised other people's poems carrying the spirit of *feng ya*. In his preface of "Accompanying Yuan Jie in Chongling [*Tong Yuan shijun Chongling xing* 同元使君春陵行]" he applauded the *bi xing ti zhi* 比興體制 [use of comparison and evocation]³⁷ in Yuan's poem. Same kind of fashion was returned to praise Du's style which was more relatable to *Shijing*. For example, shortly after Du's death, Fan Huang 樊晃 [ca. 700–773] compared Du's poems to "Masterpieces of great elegy"³⁸ in *A Preface to a Minor Anthology of Du Fu's Poems* [*Du gongbu xiaoji xu* 杜工部小集序]; Du Mu 杜牧

35 大雅久不做。Wang Qi 王琦, annot., *Li Taibai quanji* 李太白全集 [*The Complete Work of Li Bai*] (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 2001), 77.

36 別裁偽體親風雅。Xiao Difei, *Du Fu quanji jiaozhu*, 2511.

37 *Ibid.*, 4813.

38 Hua Wenxuan, *Gudian wenxue yanjiu ziliao huibian*, 7.

[803–852] described Du's poems as *fengsao* 風騷 [unrivaled] in "Visiting Zhao Gu on a Clear Winter Day in His Residence on the Western Street in Three Rhymes [*Xueqing fang Zhao Gu jiexi suoju sanyun* 雪晴訪趙嘏街西所居三韻]."39 Bai's comparison between Du's poems and *Shijing* is more comprehensive and precise. In his letter to Yuan, Bai elucidated the use of *feng ya bi xing* to write about contemporary affairs and appraised Du's poems such as "The Officer at Stone Moat" as an example. In addition, the word *shishi* is used in *New Book of the Tang* to define Du's *shi-shi*, which came from two keywords in Bai's letter to Yuan: "Essays should be made for the current era and poetry should be composed to represent real events."⁴⁰

Because of this newly established connection between Du's poetry and the *feng-ya* tradition and based on the *shishi* standard to be able to reflect current events, the referent of *shi-shi* takes a further shift – it is to neither the poems Meng Qi refers to during Du's drifting in Long-Shu, nor those long regulated verses recognised by Yuan and included by the *New Book of the Tang*, but the ones that are admired by Bai such as "The Officer of Xin'an," "The Officer at Stone Moat," "The Officer at Tong Pass," "Luzi Pass," "Keeping Those of Huamen," which contains verses depicting social issues such as "Crimson gates reek with meat and ale, while on the streets are bones of the frozen dead." As a result, the referent of *shi-shi* changed and its connotation has expanded to include the allegorical poems advocated by Yuan and Bai as well as the new *yuefu* 新樂府 movement they have produced. Yuan and Bai create new ballads and titles for *yuefu* [*xin ti yuefu* 新題樂府] which in their view is an inheritance of the traditional ethos in *Shijing* and *yuefu* of Han dynasty 漢樂府 for reporting and revealing issues in real life. The creation of new ballads indeed leads to the poetic fashion to reflect on contemporary social issues in mid-Tang. Although the An Lushan Rebellion has been quelled after Tang Suzong 唐肅宗 [r. 756–762], the social and political problems gradually aggravate, which brought public attention and cause people to contemplate. This has formed a trend among a generation of poets born after High Tang. Zhang Ji 張籍 [766–830] and Wang Jian 王建 [765–835] for example, have created such works. On the other hand, Yuan and Bai are more aware of the theories when they write, that is, they consciously follow the Confucian doctrine and are guided by its utilitarian principles.

The ethos of having social problems reflected in poems began to emerge before Yuan and Bai. After Li Shen 李紳 [772–846] named it new *yuefu*, Yuan and Bai promptly generated its writing paradigm and advanced the movement.

39 Ibid., 22.

40 Ding Rupeng 丁如朋 and Nie Shimei 聶世美, coll., *Bai Juyi quanji* 白居易全集 [*The Complete Work of Bai Juyi*] (Shanghai: Shanghai guji chubanshe, 1999), 648.

According to Yuan's interpretation, although the new style of new *yuefu* poems did not appear until Mid-Tang, Du Fu in High Tang was the founder of the movement and set Du and his poems as the role model. The reason why Yuan and Bai traced their origins to Du Fu was indeed influenced by Du's works and theory: Du clearly states in the preface of the poem "Accompany Yuan Jie in Chongling" that he wants to revive the *bixing* paradigm and requires poems to reflect people's hardships and problems in real life. Yuan and Bai regard Du's poems like this carry the same creed as their new *yuefu* poems and can be adopted to support their movement. Following this train of thought, *shi-shi* gradually altered its referent to the new *yuefu* poems that depict contemporary affairs and social issues.

After further elaboration in *New Book of the Tang*, *shi-shi's* meaning has altered again. While its documentary and narrative are preserved, Meng's original focus on reporting individuals' daily lives has been transformed into restoring major events that happened in contemporary societies – *shishi*. Hence *shi-shi* has gained new political and ethical values for critiques, i.e., whether a poem is concerned about the public interest and destiny of the country; poetry should be a vehicle for reporting important *shi-shi* instead of a narrow focus on mundane aspects of daily life. Therefore, Meng's implicit empathy towards Du's personal misfortune is eliminated in *shi-shi's* meaning and replaced by a communal understanding of Du's patriotic concerns. Some later interpretation of *shi-shi* associates it with the concept of *shibi* 史筆 [historian pen] which is in fact a misunderstanding because *shibi* is a specific writing style of historiography emphasizing objectivity. Huang Tingjian 黃庭堅 [1045–1105] and Yu Ji 虞集 [1272–1348] support the ethical connotation of *shi-shi*, while Lu You 陸遊 [1125–1201] suggests that *shi-shi* reflects Du's inheritance of *Shijing* through adopting the ancient Confucian tradition of writing history *chungqiu bifa* 春秋筆法 [the artistry of *Spring and Autumn*] in which poetry can act in place of history or they can be incorporated in order to serve important Confucian values and political purposes. *Chungqiu bifa* is not a mere stylistic technique. Instead, it focuses on *yin* 隱 [concealment] with author's intention hidden and attitude veiled. Mencius [372–289 BCE] states "*Shijing* faded after the rulers stopped collecting poems and songs from their people, and Confucius created *Spring and Autumn Annals* instead."⁴¹ He believes that history is preserved in poems, so the writings of history can continue to be based on poems. In addition, poetry can familiarise readers with the time period that the poets lived in and learn about the social and political situations related to the poems. The history

41 Yang Bojun 楊伯峻, *Mengzi yizhu* 孟子譯注 [A commentary of Mencius] (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 2012), 209.

mentioned here is not a history of one's own but a history of nations – *shishi*. This kind of national history not only contains particular values – political and ideological ideas – but also tells events, reflecting the narrating, documentary and realistic attributes of *shi-shi*.

From an uncherished poet drifting in desolation to a poetic hero treasured by thousands of people after he died, Du Fu has gradually gained importance and influence, and Meng's *shi-shi* stands as the first and most conclusive evaluation of him. The word then acquired new connotations in *New Book of the Tang*. In addition to the stylistic features of documentation and narration, political and ideological values were attached – so-called realism nowadays was also added to describe its content. The denoting targets of the words and their focus also changed. The focus shifted from depicting writer's own life to narrating *shi-shi* – historical events of the time, and the referents expanded from Du's poems written during “Trekking the paths in Long and Shu” to his other poems written before and after the time in order to fit in with the new title *Yuefu* genre and support the associated poetry movement. Such poems include Du's “San li” and “San bie” series, which are regarded as classical examples of *shi-shi*. All of the above has constituted our understanding of the concept today.

Translated by Wu Min 吳旻

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