

## The End and the Beginning of Narrative Poetry in China

The “epic question” in early Chinese literature is perhaps a dead issue, but the “question of narrative poetry” is of a somewhat different tenor and quite alive. The few studies of Chinese narrative poetry have focused mainly on the Han and Six Dynasties periods, especially on *yüeh-fu* 樂府 (Music Bureau) poetry of the early medieval centuries.<sup>1</sup> Here I argue that narrational elements (and even the lack of them) in the earliest poetry, the *Shih ching* 詩經 (ca. 1000–600 B.C.), help us to understand the later problems of narrative poetry, whose earliest forms and transformations spelled the

<sup>1</sup>Of the studies in the West, Hans Frankel's essays on the “balladic” structures in *yüeh-fu* poetry are perhaps best known, especially his “The Chinese Ballad ‘Southeast Fly the Peacocks,’” *HJAS* 54 (1974), pp. 248–71. In Chinese the critical literature begins in the early 1900s with essays by Liang Ch'i-ch'ao 梁啟超, Hu Shih 胡適, and Chang Wei-ch'i 張為騏. The opening chapters of Hu Shih's *Pai-hua wen-hsueh* 白話文學史 (1928; rpt. Taipei: private edn., 1969) set the tone for most subsequent studies, which culminated in Ch'iu Hsieh-yu's 邱燮友 lengthy review of the material in his *Chung-kuo li-tai ku-shih-shih* 中國歷代故事史 (Taipei: San-min, 1969). A discussion of this scholarship can be found in my Ph.D. dissertation, “Early Chinese Narrative Poetry: The Definition of a Tradition” (U. of Washington, Seattle, 1982). Dore Jesse Levy's dissertation, “A Study of Chinese Narrative Poetry from the Late Han through T'ang Dynasties” (Princeton U., 1982), is valuable for its focus on literary *shih* instead of *yüeh-fu* poetry.

While the study of narrative in Chinese poetry does not begin until the turn of the century, there is one early, isolated, reference to narrative poetry by Liu K'o-chuang 劉克莊 (1187–1269), *Hou-ts'un hsien-sheng ta ch'uan-chi* 後村先生大全集 (SPTK edn.) 163, p. 5b, which says that two Six Dynasties *yüeh-fu* poems have a “narrative form” (*hsü-shih t'i* 敘事體). The whole question of the meaning of narrative is, of course, central to this as well as any other study of Chinese narrative poetry. To facilitate the discussion here I have adopted a relatively narrow, even simplistic, definition of a narrative poem: a narrative poem is one that tells a story; furthermore, that story is the major semantic and structuring element of the poem's text. By this definition poems can contain a story (a narrative) and not be narrative themselves if that story is not central to the meaning of the poem. I intend to discuss narrative poetry, not narrative *in* poetry. Those who have studied narrative, especially Tzvetan Todorov, have described in detail the difficult question of what constitutes a “story.” I would suggest that a story exists only as much as a reader feels that a series of causally and temporally linked events progress because of and in pursuit of a solution to a “problem,” what Todorov calls a “disequilibrium.” Without movement we have lyricism, and without this sense of solution we have reportage. Finally, there is a basic question in the Chinese essays that discuss *hsü-shih shih* 敘事詩 and *ku-shih shih* 故事詩 (the most common terms for “narrative poetry”): are these terms identical with what we understand as “narrative”? Certainly there is a great deal of overlap between the Chinese and the English terms, but there also seems to be a fundamental difference, especially with *hsü-shih shih*, which seems to emphasize the externality of events rather than their movement. Levy's discussion of *fu* 賦 (enumeration) deals with this in slightly different terms (pp. 29–33, and *passim*).

kind of struggle it faced throughout Chinese literary history. This study begins in familiar "epic" territory, but in the end explores the virgin interior of narration as an important part of early poetry.

Lyricism in early Chinese literature, including poetry, myth, and historiography, has been addressed by a number of critics, such as Wen I-to, Chen Shih-hsiang, Andrew Plaks, and Wang Ching-hsien.<sup>2</sup> They agree generally, if not explicitly, that although lyricism is already well established in the earliest known Chinese poetry, there may have been a more narrative literature predating it, the residual traces of which can be uncovered in the *Shih ching* poems. Several critics have focused their attention on those texts involving early Chinese myths, especially Poem 245 of the *Shih ching*. I begin my discussion with this poem, after which I turn to another, quite different poem, No. 58. While Poem 245 may represent a residual narrative quality of the early Chinese literary tradition, Poem 58 suggests the developments that evolved in the narrative poetry of the following millennia.

"SHENG MIN," NO. 245

"Sheng min" 生民 (No. 245), from the "Ta ya" 大雅 section of the *Shih ching* (a section containing a number of poems in which legends, especially of the Chou, play a prominent role), stands at the beginning of Wang Ching-hsien's reconstructed "Weniad" — itself composed of five "Ta ya" poems. This poem presents the most unified and earliest narrative based on the life of the first ancestor and most important hero of the Chou royal house, the mythological Hou Chi 后稷 (Lord Millet).

Pre-Han Sources

Hou Chi appears in several other pre-Han sources, including *Shih ching* poems 258, 275, and 300. In this group, Poem 258 contains only a passing reference to our hero, while Poem 275, which belongs to the oldest group of poems in the *Shih ching* (the "Chou sung" 周頌), is a panegyric praising Hou Chi and his agricultural gifts. Poem 300, which tells an abbreviated version of the Hou Chi myth as part of a longer story of the Chou ancestry,

is lacking some of the narrative detail found in "Sheng min," but is stronger in its catalogue of Hou Chi's agricultural achievements. The pertinent passage reads:

This is the one who gave birth to Hou Chi,  
Who brought down the hundred blessings to them,  
Glutinous millet, panicked millet, the green and ripe grains,  
The early season and late season, pulse and wheat.  
Widely he possessed all the country,  
Having the people plant and reap.  
There was panicked millet, there was glutinous millet,  
There was rice, there was black millet.  
Widely he possessed the land,  
Continuing the work of Yü.<sup>3</sup>

In the context of the entire poem, these lines are merely introductory to lengthy passages in praise of Hou Chi's royal descendants, King Wen 文王, King Wu 武王, and the Duke of Chou 周公 of the tenth and eleventh centuries B.C. The "Sheng min" poem, on the other hand, celebrates primordial Hou Chi, isolated from any later historical figures. In fact, there is no reference in "Sheng min" to the Chou people at all; only through other sources, such as Poem 300, do we know that Hou Chi was claimed as the first ancestor of the Chou. Poems 300 and 245 may be roughly contemporaneous, as suggested by their inclusion in the "Ta ya" and "Lu sung" 魯頌 sections respectively, but their contents may represent quite different ages.<sup>4</sup>

We also find important references to Hou Chi in one of the early oratorical-historical texts, the *Shang shu* 尚書, but each of these depicts Hou Chi in more mundane terms than those used in the *Shih ching*. Thus he appears generally as an official charged by the emperor with certain agricultural duties. Hou Chi in the *Shang shu*, and in most later texts, loses much

<sup>2</sup>For the sake of consistency I have supplied my own translations, but these are heavily indebted to previous scholars, especially to Arthur Waley, Bernhard Karlgren, and most of all to the notes of Ch'ü Wan-li's 屈萬理 *Shih ching shih-i* 詩經釋義 (Taipei: Hua-kang, 1975). While I recognize the persistent philological questions surrounding the language of the *Shih ching*, I am not prepared to go beyond the work of these sinologists, except in the rare occasions discussed below. All poem references use the Mao numbers.

<sup>4</sup>The dating of the individual *Shih ching* poems is, of course, highly problematic; see, for example, W. A. C. H. Dobson's "Linguistic Evidence and Dating of the *Book of Songs*," *TP* 51 (1964), pp. 322-34. C. H. Wang (Wang Ching-hsien), *The Bell and the Drum* (Berkeley: U. of California P., 1974), pp. 48-49, suggests that the "Lu sung" and "Ta ya" poems are closely related.

<sup>1</sup>Wen I-to 聞一多, *Wen I-to ch'üan chi* 聞一多全集 (Shanghai: Kai-ming, 1954), vol. 1, pt. 1, pp. 181-90. Chen Shih-hsiang, "The *Shih-ching*: Its Generic Significance in Chinese Literary History and Poetics," in Cyril Birch, ed., *Studies in Chinese Literary Genres* (Berkeley: U. of California P., 1974), p. 11. Andrew Plaks, *Archetype and Allegory in the Dream of the Red Chamber* (Princeton: Princeton U.P., 1976), p. 22. Wang Ching-hsien, "The Weniad: A Chinese Epic in the *Shih ching*," in Chan Ping-leung et al., eds., *Essays in Commemoration of the Golden Jubilee of the Fung Ping Shan Library (1923-1982)* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong U.P., 1982), pp. 105-42.

of his mythical demeanor; he is merely legendary, if not historical, as seen in this passage from the "Lü hsing" chapter:

Then the emperor charged the three princes with being zealous in their meritorious work for the people. Po I offered the regulations that controlled the people; these were the penal laws. Yü pacified the flooded lands, and took charge of naming the mountains and rivers. Hou Chi offered and promulgated the plantings; he cultivated the fine grains.<sup>5</sup>

This "humanization" of Hou Chi can be viewed as part of the widespread hero "euhemerization" identified by Derk Bodde in his study of Chinese mythology.<sup>6</sup> Thus, portrayals of Hou Chi as a political figure or legitimizing ancestor should be understood as derived interpretations of his original nature. I would suggest that "Sheng min" represents an older version of the Hou Chi story, while No. 300 reflects a later elaboration. This would be supported by the arguments made by Wen I-to and Andrew Plaks concerning the early loss of a narrative quality (Wen's historicity) of the pre-Chou poem and myth, and would fit well with Bodde's ideas. Thus, following all pertinent arguments, this makes the "Sheng min" poem the oldest extant narrative of the Hou Chi myth.

*The Poem and Its Plot*

*Sheng min, 245*

1. In the beginning she gave birth to our people;  
And she was Chiang Yüan.  
And how did she give birth to our people?  
Skilled at prayer, skilled at sacrifice,  
With these she avoided childlessness.  
She danced upon the toe-print of God,  
Then she was joyed and grew large.  
She was moved and it was soon.  
She gave birth, she nourished him;  
And he was Hou Chi.
2. Thus it was she filled her months,  
And the first one was born like a lamb,  
With no ripping, no tearing done,

Without damage, without harm.  
This made clear his magic.  
God was greatly pleased;  
He found her sacrifices satisfying,  
And therefore she gave birth to this child.

3. Thus it was they placed him in a narrow lane,  
There the cattle and sheep protected him.  
Thus it was they placed him in the wooded plain,  
There he was found by men cutting those woods.  
Thus it was they placed him on the cold ice.  
There the birds covered him with their wings.  
Then the birds left him alone  
And Hou Chi began crying.  
Truly long and truly loud,  
His voice filled the air.
4. Thus it was he truly began crawling.  
He was wise and he was knowing,  
Therefore he sought food for eating.  
He planted these, the large beans,  
The large beans grew long and lush.  
Millet in rows with ears heavy and hanging.  
Hemp and wheat full and flourishing.  
Melons with young melons thick and thriving.
5. Thus it was that Hou Chi's husbandry  
Possessed the Way of promoting growth.  
He cleared away the dense weeds,  
And planted there the fine grain.  
Truly it sprouted, truly it took root,  
Truly the shoots thickened, truly grew long,  
Truly it rose, truly it formed ears,  
Truly it was firm, truly it was good,  
Truly it hung down, truly it was ripe.  
Then he made his home in T'ai.
6. Thus he brought down the good seed.  
There was black millet, there was double millet,  
There were red shoots, there were white shoots.  
He sowed the black and double everywhere,  
These were harvested and measured by the acre.

<sup>5</sup> *Shang shu*, in *Shih-san ching chu-shu* 十三經注疏 (Taipei: I-wen, 1976), vol. 1, p. 298.

<sup>6</sup> Derk Bodde, "Myths of Ancient China," in Samuel Noah Kramer, ed., *Myths of the Ancient World* (Oxford: Oxford U.P., 1961), pp. 372-76. Note that Bodde is using the term euhemerization in a meaning opposite to its original one.

He sowed the red and white everywhere,  
Shouldering these, carrying them on his back,  
He returned home to begin the sacrifice.

7. Thus how is it that we sacrifice?  
Some pound and some scoop,  
Some sift and some tread.  
We wash the grain, swish-swosh,  
We steam it, vapors rising.  
We make plans, we ponder these,  
We gather wood to cook sacrificial meats,  
We gather rams for the god of travel,  
We roast them, we broil them,  
In order to bring in the New Year.
8. We fill up the wooden vessels,  
In wooden vessels, in earthen vessels.  
The aromas begin to rise high,  
God is now feasting,  
The fine aromas are just right.  
Hou Chi began these sacrifices,  
Without mistake or flaw,  
They have come down to us.

While all the poems mentioned here have been offered as possible examples of early narrative poetry from the *Shih ching*, this poem is on everyone's list — usually at the top. Liu Ta-chieh 劉大杰, for example, offers this relatively conservative evaluation of the poem's narrative quality:

Although there are quite a number of poems in the *Shih ching*, these are, except for the sacrificial and banquet pieces, mostly short lyrics. There are only the "Sheng min" . . . [and Nos. 236, 237, 241, 250] whose form is somewhat different. They record the history and legends of the people's heroes and do so in a somewhat narrative form. Since they do in the end revert to the same type of sacrificial hymns as seen in other pieces, they still cannot be considered pure narrative poems.<sup>7</sup>

Perhaps Liu is right in that these poems are not "pure" (*ch'un-ts'ui* 純粹) narrative poems, but the "Sheng min" poem is certainly the best example we have in early Chinese literature.

<sup>7</sup>Liu Ta-chieh, *Chung-kuo wen-hsüeh fa-chan/ta shih* 中國文學發展/遠史 (1941; rpt. Taipei: Chung-hua, 1976), pp. 182-83.

The narrative strength of the "Sheng min" poem lies in the sequential movement of Chiang Yüan's 姜嫄 pregnancy and Hou Chi's birth and growth, which are narrated in the third person for the first six stanzas of the poem, and in the first person in the final two stanzas. Third-person narration (especially of the omnipresent but not omniscient type) is an integral part of many narrative poems simply because it does not readily allow a narrator the interiority that so dominates lyric poetry. If that is so, what about the last two stanzas of the poem with their first-person point of view? In fact, the narrative strength of "Sheng min" degenerates precisely in these stanzas as they turn to a panegyric in praise of Hou Chi. The opening line of the penultimate stanza, "Thus how is it that we sacrifice?" introduces a new perspective on the poem as a whole — the poem becomes not a mere narrative, but rather a narrative that ends in a celebration of this sacrifice. Thus, when Liu Ta-chieh said that the poems in his list could not be considered pure narrative poems because they always "revert back to the same type of sacrificial hymn as seen in other pieces," he certainly had this type of mutation in mind. Be that as it may, the narrative quality that the "Sheng min" poem exhibits in its early stanzas is able to sustain itself through this nonnarrative closing.

The "Sheng min" poem opens with a two-line summary of the story to be told: "In the beginning she gave birth to our people; / And she was Chiang Yüan." The third line of the poem then gives direction to the narrative, introducing the problem to be resolved with the question, "How did she give birth to our people?" The first six stanzas of the poem are basically a narration of that answer, just as the final two are a reply to the very similar question that begins them, "Thus how is it that we sacrifice?" The plot of the first six stanzas is in four movements: (1) Chiang Yüan becoming pregnant, (2) her giving birth to Hou Chi, (3) Hou Chi's growth, and (4) his agricultural work. As we would expect, these events are sequentially linked and causally ordered; yet there are also gaps and aberrations in this plotting to which we need to pay special attention. The distinctive quality of Chinese narrative poetry is found as much in how the plot hesitates as in how it proceeds, in the way it fails our expectations as much as in the way it satisfies them.

#### *The Marvelous*

From the four movements of the plot we can see that the story told in "Sheng min" is not just the story of Hou Chi; it is also that of Chiang Yüan, his mother, for she is the one who "gave birth to our people." Of the many events in this narrative, the most fascinating, and the one that has caused

the most controversy in critical studies, is that which brings about Chiang Yüan's pregnancy: her so-called dance upon the toe-print of God (1:6-7). Chiang Yüan's supernaturally induced pregnancy is fitting — she had originally set out to obtain a child by prayer and sacrifice — and it reinforces the miraculous birth of Hou Chi, a type of marvelous event seen in many "epics" with similar supernatural narrative sequences.<sup>8</sup> Tzvetan Todorov has argued that because of its limitless range of actions, marvelous intervention is better than other narrative structures in breaking the established equilibrium (or disequilibrium) that lies at the beginning of a potentially narrative series of events.<sup>9</sup> That movement out of stasis is the essence of narration, and this is just what the supernatural event does for Chiang Yüan and for the narrative in the "Sheng min" poem as a whole. It moves her out of childlessness, and begins the story of Hou Chi. The marvelous events found in the poem are not limited to this conception; Hou Chi's birth is also marvelous (2:1-5), as is the intervention of the animals in his trials (3:1-8). Finally there is a superhuman, if not supernatural, quality to the speed of his maturation and the extent of his agricultural feats. In the latter, Hou Chi accomplishes near magic as seen in the catalogue of his deeds (4:6-10, 6:1-3).<sup>10</sup>

<sup>8</sup> If the "Sheng min" poem is the beginning of the "Weniad" epic, as suggested by Wang Ching-hsien, the "God's toe-print" sequence shares affinities with other heroic poems in which the hero is of supernatural birth. The identity of *ti* 帝 (here translated as God) has, however, not been without question. The earliest commentary claims the term refers not to God, but to Chiang Yüan's mortal spouse, Emperor K'u 嚳; this is not, however, accepted by the standard Han commentary (see *Mao shih cheng-i* 毛詩正義, p. 587 [vol. 2 of *Shih-san ching chu-shu*], where the Mao commentary glosses it as Kao-hsin-shih 高辛氏, but Cheng Hsuan glosses it as *shang ti* 上帝). For a review of the crucial literature on this point see Wang, "Weniad," p. 111, n. 21. The reading as *shang ti* is now the preferred one. Wen, *Wen I-to ch'üan-chi*, vol. 1, pt. 1, pp. 73-79, has suggested that this reading results from the "mystification" of the romantic activities associated with primitive agricultural festivities. I have discussed this argument in my "The Myth Studies of Wen I-to: A Question of Methodology," *Tamkang Review* 13.2 (1982), pp. 150-51. Under the influence of Wen's remarks I have translated *lü* 履 (usually "to tread on") as "to dance upon."

<sup>9</sup> Tzvetan Todorov, *The Fantastic: A Structural Approach to a Literary Genre*, trans. Richard Howard (Cleveland: Case Western Reserve U.P., 1973), p. 165.

<sup>10</sup> On this relationship of the narrative and the marvelous, Todorov argues further that the supernatural is not only ideally suited to narration, but is in itself a kind of narration: "Every time in which the supernatural occurs is a narrative, for the supernatural event first of all modifies a previous equilibrium . . . but not every narrative includes supernatural events, even though an affinity exists between them" (ibid., p. 166). The supernatural events of which Todorov speaks are especially those of intervention such as found in the "Sheng min" poem, not only that of God, but also of the animals who protect Hou Chi. Thus, following Todorov's understanding, the "Sheng min" poem is essentially, if not "purely," narrative.

Todorov's comments on the supernatural event in narrative lead one to note that classical Chinese poetry is bereft of such events; but we do see more of the supernatural in the prose literature of China, including early histories, and especially in medieval tales and later novels.

In summary, the first tension (Todorov's "disequilibrium") in "Sheng min" is Chiang Yüan's "childlessness"; the resolution of that is in the conception and birth of Hou Chi. Yet this is superseded by another problem: "How did she give birth to our people?" After the birth of Hou Chi, which resolves one problem, a series of tensions and resolutions is introduced wherein the "birth of our people" is further addressed as the advent of agriculture (3:1-6). This series of events ends with Hou Chi solving the "abandonment" problem by beginning his movement that leads quickly to his maturity and his agricultural work.

### *The Gift of Agriculture*

The narration of the series of agricultural events in the middle stanzas of "Sheng min," from the "seeking of food" to the harvesting of the "fine grain," is not merely another part of the narrative; it is, in the last analysis, also an answer to the question of how Chiang Yüan gave birth to the Chou people. Certainly Hou Chi's birth was the immediate answer to that question, but ultimately it was Hou Chi's gift of agriculture that gave rise to the Chou, and ultimately Chinese, civilization. The concluding two stanzas of the poem, in which the autumnal sacrifices are celebrated, are then an affirmation of the importance of Hou Chi's agricultural gifts.

The successful completion of Hou Chi's agricultural tasks — the enumeration of his activities and the crops in stanzas four, five, and six — is ultimately a dual resolution of the narrative problem posed in the third line of the poem, "*sheng min ju ho*" 生民如何, which can be interpreted in two ways, depending on one's understanding of the verb *sheng*. The easiest and certainly most immediate understanding of *sheng* is "to give birth to," as I have translated it above. There is, however, an extended meaning of the verb that is also possible in this line; that is, "to nurture." This meaning is attested to in the *Chou li* 周禮, where, referring to the six principles that were the model duties of the prime minister, it says: "The sixth is the principle of service by which he enriches the state, gives work to the various officials, and nurtures the myriad people (*sheng wan min* 生萬民)." Obviously, *sheng wan min* here cannot refer to giving birth to the people, but rather must

Should this dearth of supernatural elements be considered the result of, or the cause of, the relative scarcity of narrative poetry in China? Just as we see the avoidance of certain other potentially narrative themes in early Chinese poetry (the battle, for example), perhaps the supernatural was not a theme well suited to the Chinese concept of poetry. As the supernatural might be ideal for the narrative tale, it would not be for the lyric poem, where the acts of gods would overshadow the very important reflections of the lyric mind.

mean "to give life to," in the sense of nurturing.<sup>11</sup> This also may be the meaning of several other occurrences of *sheng* in the *Shih ching* poems. The most likely other example is in No. 255, where the word occurs in the line "Heaven nurtures the many people" (*t'ien sheng cheng min* 天生蒸民). That these two usages in the *Shih ching* are so similar to that in the *Chou li* is certainly no coincidence, no more than is this close association of *sheng* with the object *min* (people).

This meaning of *sheng min*, to nurture the people, then gives Poem 245, and the entire Hou Chi myth, its logical and satisfying narrative conclusion. As Wang Ching-hsien has said, "It is unmistakable in the poem, too, that life is Hou Chi . . . , as manifest in the variety and profusion of crops in China."<sup>12</sup> The question, which can now be rephrased, "How did she nurture our people?" is answered; she gave them (through her son) agriculture. Thus, the title of Poem 245, "Sheng min," is itself replete with meaning, and that meaning leads us past Hou Chi to the true founder of Chinese civilization, Chiang Yüan, a mortal woman selected by God to bring agriculture, which meant civilization, to the Asian land mass. That Chinese agriculture is, in the last analysis, a woman's gift is both archaeologically and emotionally satisfying; that that gift is now more closely associated with her male proxy is perhaps as understandable as it is regrettable.

#### *Patterns of Narrative Disruption*

The relatively directed narration of Hou Chi's birth and growth moves us on toward the final resolution of the poem, that is, the communal celebration of his agricultural legacy in the autumnal sacrifices. But before reaching that resolution we are faced with several noteworthy disturbances in this narrative line, disturbances that reveal the special provenance of the poem.

1. The first of these disturbances is the ellipsis that we find between the second and third stanzas, where an integral connection between Hou Chi's birth and his abandonment is left out. We know that his birth obviously

followed directly from the conception, which resulted from Chiang Yüan's "encounter" with God, which in turn was precipitated by ritual activities to cure her barrenness. Yet, we do not know why Hou Chi was exposed to the three trials. The presence of an ellipsis here is attested not only by our own sense of failed expectations, but also by Ssu-ma Ch'ien's 司馬遷 (ca. 145-90 B.C.) prose rendering of the myth. He says of Chiang Yüan, "Feeling that the child was an inauspicious one, she abandoned him in a narrow lane."<sup>13</sup> Whether this is a belated rationalization or not does not matter; in terms of the narrative, Ssu-ma Ch'ien's version of the myth has provided a logical step that the poem does not. This lacuna in the movement of "Sheng min" yields a narrative akin to what Northrop Frye has called the "and then" plot pattern, in contrast to the shift between the first and second stanzas (from pregnancy to birth), which is of the "hence" type.<sup>14</sup> If the mental construction of narrative out of nonnarrative elements is a basic form of reading, as Plaks suggests and Robert Scholes asserts, then this type of ellipsis forces the reader to "reconstruct" a narrative element that the text elides, just as Ssu-ma Ch'ien does in his version of the myth.<sup>15</sup>

2. The second disturbance we should note is one that operates primarily in the latter half of the narrative (in stanzas five and six), and to some extent in the final two, more lyrical, stanzas. This narrative form, which I call incremental narration, occurs when a series of actions is narrated in sequence, but with set phrasing — often with variations only in the verbs from one verse to the next. Such narration can be understood as a form of incremental repetition restricted to action.<sup>16</sup> The actions in such a series are related to each other, but that relationship need not be a mere causal-temporal one, but can be one more of parallel association. There seems to be an inherent need in the classical Chinese language for parallel structures; incremental repetition, and its verbal counterpart, incremental narration, are one answer to that need. In the "Sheng min" rendering of Hou Chi's activities we see hints of this type of narration in the two lines, "He cleared

<sup>13</sup>Ssu-ma Ch'ien, *Shih chi* 史記 (Peking: Chung-hua, 1959) 4, p. 111.

<sup>14</sup>Northrop Frye, *The Secular Scripture: A Study of the Structure of Romance* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard U.P., 1976), pp. 47-48. The "hence" narratives involve "real logic and causality," while the "and then" ones "move from one discontinuous episode to another."

<sup>15</sup>Robert Scholes, *Semiotics and Interpretation* (New Haven: Yale U.P., 1982), pp. 62-63, argues for the basic human urge to narrate that has the reader form sequences of temporality and causality out of discontinuous episodic structures. We must wonder how Plaks's theory of the denarratization of myth would fit here with Ssu-ma Ch'ien's [re?]narratization.

<sup>16</sup>Chen Shih-hsiang, "The *Shih-ching*," p. 40, has argued for the identity of the *hsing* compositional element and incremental repetition, which he sees as integral to the lyricism of the *Shih ching*. Hans Frankel, "Yüeh-fu Poetry," *Studies in Chinese Literary Genres*, p. 87, has described a similar poetic device in this later poetry as a "descriptive narrative series."

<sup>11</sup>*Chou li*, in vol. 3 of *Shih-san ching chu-shu*, p. 26, where Cheng Hsüan 鄭玄 glosses *sheng* 生 as *yang* 養 (to nourish). The term does appear in later poetry to mean merely "live people," as in the closing of Ts'ao Ts'ao's 曹操 "Kao li" 蒿里: "Only one in a hundred live people [people left alive], / Thinking of it breaks your heart" 生民百遺一 / 念之斷人腸. See Ting Fu-pao 丁福保, comp., *Ch'üan Han San-kuo Chin Nan-pei ch'ao shih* 全漢三國晉南北朝詩 (Taipei: Shih-chien, 1969), vol. 1, p. 120.

<sup>12</sup>Wang, "Weniad," p. 112. Wang includes a lengthy discussion of the heroic nature of Hou Chi, especially as a "vegetation deity," pp. 111-13. We could also note the similarity between Hou Chi and the famous Finnish hero Väinämöinen, whose dissemination of the "good seed" (in this case, barley) is the focus of the opening sections of the epic poem *The Kalevala*.

away the dense weeds, / And he planted there the fine grain" (5:3-4), but this technique is more evident in the lines that narrate the growth of this "fine grain," which we follow from sprout to fully eared (5:5-9). This type of incremental narration is also the primary mode of composition in the seventh stanza of the poem, where the people describe their sacrifices to Hou Chi, sacrifices that Hou Chi initiated and in which his gift of grain is prepared and offered to him in return.

Thus how is it that we sacrifice?  
Some pound and some scoop,  
We wash the grain, swish-swosh,  
We steam it, vapors rising.

(7:1-5)

The associative relationship that we see in these passages is even more pronounced in the third narrative variant of the poem.

3. The dividing line between incremental narration and the third type, what I call multifocal narration, is often blurred. Multifocal narration is formed when the actions surrounding an event or a person are recounted in number and detail such that a sense of multiplicity is achieved. In this type of narration the poet strives for a sense of completeness and universality in a set of actions, rather than sequential development — in spatial terms, more spherical than linear.<sup>17</sup> Only when these actions have some sense of direction and resolution do we have true multifocal narration; otherwise what we have is simply description.

While multifocal narration is not as evident in "Sheng min" as in other *Shih ching* poems, the sixth stanza exhibits the beginnings of it as the poem seeks to convey the wholeness of Hou Chi's agricultural accomplishments. The stanza opens with the transmission of the seed and passes through a multifocal narrative. ("There was black millet, there was double millet, . . . He sowed the black and double everywhere, . . . He sowed the red and white everywhere.") Then it concludes with the autumnal sacrifices initiated by Hou Chi (those carried on by the people in the seventh stanza). This type of multifocal narration is related to another rhetorical device seen in Chinese poetry, though not usually narrative poetry, that is, the enumerative

<sup>17</sup>This concept of narration is similar to that highlighted in John Bishop's often maligned "Limitations of Chinese Fiction," *Far Eastern Quarterly* 15 (1956), p. 241, where he refers to it as "the accumulation of incident rather than the careful selection of telling narrative details," and the "multiplicity of detail."

catalogue. A nascent form of such a catalogue (agricultural products) can be seen in the opening lines of this passage just cited, as well as in the fourth stanza where it is found mixed with incremental narration. These listings of material objects, especially as fully developed in the later *fu* 賦 genre, while not related to narrative action, do strive for an effect that is quite similar to that of multifocal narration. Accurate description is not important in the catalogue, just as simple narration is not the goal of multifocal narration; they both attempt to convey completeness, either a universe of material or one of deeds.<sup>18</sup>

In the enumerative catalogue we have a negation of narrative movement and an emphasis on static description. This stasis is so externally focused it is difficult to call it lyrical, but it shares with the lyric a disregard of time and change; it is more adjectival than verbal. In a very basic sense this is the distinction between the narrative and nonnarrative poem; one is verbally directed and the other is adjectival, and a distinctive trait of narrative poetry in China is its coloration by the adjectival quality that pervades its literary tradition.<sup>19</sup>

#### Conclusion

The rhetorical devices introduced above (ellipsis, incremental narration, multifocal narration, and enumerative catalogue) are, in my understanding, progressively less narrative. In the "Sheng min" poem these devices, especially the last three, occur mostly in the later stanzas, where

<sup>18</sup>For a discussion of the use of catalogues in the Han *fu*, see David R. Knechtges, *The Han Rhapsody: A Study of the Fu of Yang Hsiung* (Cambridge: Cambridge U.P., 1976), pp. 36-38. There are, of course, such catalogues in Western poetry, but they approach neither the density nor stature of these *fu* catalogues. A derivative type of catalogue, in which verbal action is the focus is also found in the *fu* genre, but here action is not so narrative as it is descriptive. An example of such a catalogue can be seen in these lines from Kuo P'u's 郭璞 (276-324) "Chiang fu" 江賦 (Hsiao T'ung 蕭統 [501-531], comp., *Wen hsüan* 文選 [Taipei: Cheng-chung, 1971] 12, pp. 169-70), which describe the river's actions with a series of "aqueous" verbs (verbs with water radicals).

The waters boil, swirl, churn, and surge, / Crash, slash, shake, and froth. / They flow, stream, rush, and charge, / Sweep, slide, slip, and gush. / The waves whirlpool, wend, ruple, and rise. / Rock, pulsate, tumble, and dance.

While such catalogues share multifocal narration's universe of motion, there is in them no sense of movement or progression. In "Sheng min" the beginnings of this second type of catalogue might be identified with incremental narration in the description of the communal sacrifice in stanza seven (7:2-9).

<sup>19</sup>Elsewhere I have even described some of Ssu-ma Ch'ien's biographical writing as "adjectival": "An Introductory Study of Narrative Structure in the *Shi ji*," *Chinese Literature: Essays Articles Reviews* 3.1 (1981), pp. 31-66.

they contribute to the weakening of narrative movement as the poem shifts from third-person narration of the Hou Chi myth to the first-person celebration of the hero's legacy, moving from what Dore Levy identifies as a reader's response to otherness of the world, to a response that draws on the reader's own experience — from the myth we observe to the sacrifice in which we join.<sup>20</sup> "Sheng min" begins in a strong narrative vein, as strong as can be found in the early part of the tradition, but by the end of the poem much of this narrative has faded into an appreciation of the spirit, not the story, of Hou Chi.

The "Sheng min" poem, and to a lesser degree the other poems in Wang's "Weniad," seem to be an auspicious beginning to the narrative poem in China. One would suppose, as happened in other cultures, that this poetry had developed out of an earlier, more panegyric type (such as No. 275) toward an epic. If that were the case, while these poems would hold the vestiges of the panegyric, we would expect a development away from these, toward a more narrative form. In China, however, we have quite the opposite; the "Sheng min" poem stands at the beginning, but separated from the development of later Chinese narrative poetry.

I believe Wen I-to was right when he suggested that there existed at the dawn of Chinese literature a type of poetry that was much more narrative than we now find, but at the earliest point of known Chinese literary history the movement was already away from narrative, not toward it. Only much later in the Han dynasty when China had become an empire with close ties to non-Chinese cultures, was there a resurgence of narrative poetry. Even then there is no sense of the "epic spirit" in the poetry, but rather its affinities lie with the other side of the narrative poetry spectrum, with the ballad. The next poem to be considered anticipates that new emphasis, thus moving us closer to the mainstream of Chinese narrative poetry.

#### "MANG," NO. 58

The other *Shih ching* poem to be considered here, "Mang" 氓 (No. 58), exhibits characteristics distinctive of many Chinese narrative poems of the early tradition. Whereas "Sheng min" may represent the end of an early, but lost, type of narrative poem, "Mang" as a younger poem stands firmly

at the beginning of a tradition, a tradition often identified with the ballad. This poem has many descendants, both stylistic and thematic, in the following centuries of Chinese literary history, each taking on characteristics special to its own age, but each also sharing fundamental elements with this poem.

The functional origins of "Mang" are quite different from those of "Sheng min." The difference is similar to that identified by Frye between two basic literary forms, the mythic and the fabulous.

Every human society, we may assume, has some form of verbal culture, in which fictions, or stories, have a prominent place. Some of these stories [the mythic] . . . help explain certain features in that society's religion, laws, social structure, environment, history, or cosmology. Other stories [the fabulous] seem to be less important, and of some at least of these stories we say that they are told to entertain or amuse. This means that they are told to meet the imaginative needs of the community, so far as structures in words can meet those needs.<sup>21</sup>

Frye suggests that the differences between these two literary forms encompass only those of authority and function, and do not extend to the structural, for "if we were concerned only with structural features we should hardly be able to distinguish them at all."<sup>22</sup> This evaluation should apply to poetry as well as prose, but it does not entirely account for the differences between "Sheng min" and "Mang." Along with certain shared structures, these two poems have significant structural differences, some of which are only coincidental to the cases here; others seem more essential. The most significant are related to the lyrical transformation then occurring in poetry — a transformation unique to Chinese narrative and one that these two poems seem to straddle.

One major structural element that sets "Mang" apart from "Sheng min" is its first-person narrator. While in "Sheng min" the first-person point of view is confined to the final, relatively nonnarrative stanzas, in "Mang" it pervades the entire poem, and strongly influences the movement throughout the narrative. In the middle stanzas of "Mang," as in the final stanzas of "Sheng min," the narrative is overshadowed by lyricism, but unlike "Sheng min," this poem leads the reader back toward the narrative in its closing stanzas.

<sup>20</sup> Levy, "Chinese Narrative Poetry," esp. p. 20.

<sup>21</sup> Frye, *Secular Scripture*, p. 6.      <sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 8.



*The Poem and Its Plot**Mang, 58*

1. That guy all jolly and joking,  
Carrying cloth to barter for silk,  
He came not to barter for silk,  
Rather he came to bargain for me.  
They escorted you fording the Ch'i,  
Then on to Tun-ch'iu.  
It was not I who was amiss,  
Rather you had no go-between.  
I hoped you would not be angry;  
Setting autumn as the time to meet.
2. I climbed that high wall,  
Gazing off to watch for your return;  
Yet I did not see you returning,  
And my tears ran in flood.  
Then I saw you returning,  
And we laughed, and we talked.  
You divined with bone, divined with stalks.  
The responses had no ill words.  
Then your carriage came  
To carry me and dowry off.
3. The mulberry has not yet shed,  
Leaves soft and supple.  
Oh, dove, please,  
Do not eat the mulberry fruit.  
Oh, ladies, please,  
Do not find sport with men.  
That a man would sport,  
This is a permissible thing,  
That a lady would sport,  
This is not.
4. The mulberry has now shed,  
Leaves yellowed and fallen.  
Since I moved in with you —  
Three years of meager pickings.  
The waters of the Ch'i were brimming then,

They soaked the curtains of my carriage.  
This lady has never been improper,  
But that man had faithless ways.  
That man has lost all restraint,  
His virtue has been inconstant.

5. Three years I had been your wife,  
Never tiring in my household chores.  
I rose early, and was up late into the night;  
Nor had I any morning rest.  
All my promises I kept,  
Yet I suffered this abuse.  
My brothers did not understand,  
They laughed and giggled away.  
Without a word I ponder this,  
Grieving over my fate.
6. We were to grow old together,  
Now age will bring only grief,  
The Ch'i River has its banks,  
The wetlands their borders.  
Young with my hair in tufts,  
We laughed and talked most pleasantly.  
Our oaths were sworn in earnest,  
But I shall not dwell on their breaking.  
Broken oaths, these I shall not dwell on:  
It's over, it's done.

This poem certainly “tells a story,” and the relationship between the events in that story constitutes the major structuring element of the poem, giving us the basic requirements for a narrative poem. Yet the presentation of that story contains variations from strict chronology that identify the poem as particularly Chinese. Although complicated by nonnarrative overlays, the story in the “Mang” poem might be outlined as follows: \*

- A. Courtship
  1. The woman is courted (with schemes).
  2. After initial trouble, the marriage is arranged (for autumn).
- B. Marriage
  1. The man returns in the autumn.
  2. The woman is taken to the man's home, that is, the marriage.

## C. Rejection

1. After three years she is deserted.
2. She returns to her parents' home.
3. She laments, but is resigned to her fate.

As we shall see, these seven movements of the narrative are distributed throughout the six stanzas of the poem in varying degrees of detail and sequential verisimilitude.

The first four lines of the poem narrate the approach of the suitor, introducing his thematically important "schemes." The next four lines specify the activity that is generalized in the first four (his approach), and expand on his negligence: "It was not I who was amiss, / Rather you had no go-between." The tenth line of the stanza then refers to the second development in the narrative (A.2, from outline above), as a date is set for the marriage, and this propels the reader on to the second stanza, where the marriage will take place. Thus, we can see that the first stanza is quick to answer the requirements for a viable narrative — the reader senses that there is a problem to be solved. Like Chiang Yüan's need for pregnancy in "Sheng min," here the woman "needs" to get married, and the first stanza gives direction to the satisfaction of that need.

The second stanza then flows smoothly into the several movements that I have grouped under B. Especially effective are the first six lines, which center on a sequence of incremental narration, describing the woman's anxious wait and then the man's arrival (2: 1-6). This type of incremental narration, which we also saw in the "Sheng min" poem, is common in the more folk-oriented poems of the *Shih ching*, as in No. 76, where the negative imperative is used to describe as well as forestall a lover's advances. In "Mang" the incremental language is built around a formula found in many of the more lyrical, usually love, poems. This formula of not seeing, then seeing one's lord (*wei chien chün-tzu* 未見君子 . . . *chi chien chün-tzu* 即見君子) is, for example, central to *Shih ching*, No. 10.

Along the banks of the Ju  
I cut twigs and branches.  
Yet I did not see my lord;  
I had desire like morning hunger.

Along the banks of the Ju  
I cut branches and new shoots.  
Then I saw my lord;  
He did not desert me.

The bream has a reddened tail  
As if a royal house aflame;  
Although it's as if aflame,  
Mother and father are very near.

The affinities between this passage and the second stanza of "Mang" are obvious, but we should also note that in our poem this formula has been built into the general movement of a relatively complex narrative, whereas in Poem 10 the formula and incremental repetition remain almost purely lyrical. In "Mang" the concluding lines of the second stanza introduce another major event of the narrative — the actual wedding. The stanza's final two lines mark the beginning of the marriage that will end so tragically, an event introduced by divinations whose readings ironically "had no ill words." Thus, in these two stanzas the stage is set for the narration of the important marriage-desertion that is to follow, but what we find in the following stanzas is not exactly what we might expect.

*The Lyrical Interlude*

The third stanza does not continue the narration of the next events of the story, but rather offers a general lyrical statement about the dangers that await romantically involved women. The stanza is certainly related to the story of this deserted wife, but it is not in any way part of a narrative; it is instead a stasis where love and desertion are considered as theme (3: 1-10). The stanza functions as a lyrical interlude in the narrative, which will again rise to the surface in the later stanzas, but never to regain its former clarity. Although the next (fourth) stanza does introduce some events that are part of this specific narrative sequence, it too is generally lyrical, joined with the previous stanza by the central image of the mulberry tree.

That image of the mulberry tree is the subject of a study by Jean-Pierre Diény, who finds it intertwined with the feminine and the erotic throughout the early literature, consistently associated with sexual or suggestive activity that he feels may be the remnant of fertility celebrations.<sup>23</sup> Thus, it is entirely appropriate for the narrator to speak of the mulberry here in "Mang." The change between the opening lines of stanza three and those of stanza four is especially well related to the sentiments of the poem. The third stanza begins with the mulberry leaves full and lush with springtime, but in the fourth they are already "yellowed and fallen" in the autumn. This is an apt metaphor for this woman's situation: she was "lush" in the springtime when

<sup>23</sup>Jean-Pierre Diény, *Pastourelles et magnanailles: Essai sur un thème littéraire chinois* (Paris: Librairie Droz, 1977), pp. 63-85.

he came, and presumably in the "spring" of their marriage, but in the autumn (actual and conjugal) her "leaves" have, in his eyes, faded. Since the mulberry is so closely identified with the woman's sericultural duties, which are entirely vernal, its decline in the autumn is doubled, shunted by both nature and man.

Within the lyrical passages of the fourth stanza of "Mang" we do find two references to the story. The first is the "three years of meager pickings" and his "faithless ways," which refers to the marriage before the desertion. The second and more important reference is "The waters of the Ch'i were brimming then, / They soaked the curtains of my carriage," narrating events that would chronologically follow the conclusion of the second stanza (the wedding and departure for the groom's home). The crossing of rivers is a common image of a woman's marriage in the *Shih ching* poems, and here the reference is especially clear, for in the first stanza the man was escorted across the Ch'i when he came seeking a wife — its brimming waters mirror her belief in the "full" beneficence of this marriage.<sup>24</sup> This stanza therefore contains an essential event of the narrative, the wedding trip, but it is somewhat out of sequence and is submerged in a generally lyrical passage.

#### Fragmentation

The events in the remaining two stanzas, like those of stanza four, also contain several parts of the narrative, but they too are moved out of strict causal-chronological order. The fragmentation of the narrative seen in these stanzas results from a change in mode of presentation. Here the story is not being narrated as it was in the first two stanzas; rather it is being *recalled*; it is going through the filter of the narrator's recollection. True to the way recollection works, the elements of the story come back in associative, rather than sequential, manner. This associative narration is contrary to the basic requirement of narrative (the sequential linking of events), and it pushes the poem to the border of lyricism. "Mang" remains narrative because the strength of the first two stanzas carries readers over the lyrical interlude and into the last two stanzas where, as we shall see, they encounter events central to the story, but ones they themselves must integrate back into their logical sequence. As the sequential structure of the events is disassembled by the narrator's recollection, it must be reassembled by the reader's imagination. If there were not enough narrative material to effect such reconstruction

then the poem would remain lyrical and nonnarrative; however, that is not the case with "Mang."

Among the events recounted in the last two stanzas, the description of the couple's domestic life (5: 1-4), while not strictly narrative, does promote the general movement of the story by describing the woman's generally unhappy situation during those three years. This stanza also contains the most direct reference to the desertion itself, "this abuse," as well as the telling detail of her brothers' reaction: they cruelly "laughed and giggled away" (5: 5-8). The depiction of brothers in "woman distressed" poetry is a convention that rises here early in the tradition to remain associated with the theme throughout Chinese literary history. This unsympathetic reaction to the woman's predicament intensifies the tragedy of her story — the brothers become the controlling males in the lives of these women once they are rejected and sent home. Such unsympathetic brothers are also seen in other poems of the *Shih ching*, where they are depicted as unreliable (No. 26) or frightening (No. 76). The unsympathetic brother will resurface in the later narrative poetic tradition where his reactions more directly affect the course of the woman's story; the most famous example is in the Six Dynasties "K'ung-ch'ueh tung-nan fei" 孔雀東南飛.<sup>25</sup> Even here in "Mang" the brothers' reaction is not completely divorced from the narrative movement. Their reaction to the "abuse" suffered by their sister helps define what that abuse is. They would not become involved in her life if she were not compelled to return to her parents' home, and she can only be forced to return home by a husband who no longer wants her.

The last stanza of "Mang" also contains elements of the story that are drastically out of sequence. The two lines "Young with my hair in tufts, / We laughed and talked most pleasantly" (6: 5-6) should refer to the lovers' activities before their marriage. This is probably the same event that is referred to in the second stanza, "And we laughed, and we talked" (2: 6), where it appears in proper sequence. Likewise, the line of the last stanza (6: 7), which speaks of oaths "sworn in earnest," must refer to a time during their courtship. All these events are being recalled by the narrator as she faces her rejection by her husband; thus they flood into her mind quite out of sequence. The thought of her abandonment brings the image of the Ch'i River, representing her husband's original matrimonial commitment to her. The full river then reminds her of their youthful happiness and her naive

<sup>24</sup> On the crossing of rivers in the *Shih ching* see Marcel Granet, *Festival and Songs of Ancient China*, trans. E. D. Edward (New York: E. P. Dutton, 1932), pp. 127-30, 134.

<sup>25</sup> For a discussion of the narrative role of this brother, see Allen, "Early Narrative Poetry," pp. 393-94.

hope before marriage, which brings her to the oaths first sworn, but in the end broken. Finally, the narrative seeks to conclude its movement by the narrator's refusing to think about, therefore to narrate, her story. Just as her story became one narrated through mental reflection, so it is ended by a determined mental act. She declares "It's over, it's done."

#### *The Theme Reconsidered*

With this in mind we can now return to the actual plotting of the story told in "Mang." The table, "Plot of 'Mang,'" represents a more elaborate reconstruction of events of the poem, with their logical sequential order compared to their actual stanza and line occurrence. The reconstruction clearly shows that the basic story line of "Mang" has been disturbed in its plotting; not only do some events appear out of their logical sequence, we can also see that large blocks of the poem contribute little to the narrative line. Whereas over half of the events in this reconstruction come from the

#### *Plot of "Mang"*

Event sequence	Stanza: line
I. Approach and courtship	
1. Man's approach	1: 1-6
Fording the Ch'i	1: 5-6
Schemes revealed	1: 3-4
2. Woman's refusal	1: 7-8
3. Date set, autumn	1: 10
II. Wedding and marriage	
1. Waits, he does not come	2: 1-4
2. He comes	2: 5
3. They talk and laugh	2: 6; 6: 6
4. Divinations	2: 7
5. Oaths	6: 7
6. Return to his home	2: 9-10
Crossing the Ch'i	4: 5-6
7. Three years of marriage	4: 4; 5: 1-4
III. Desertion and return	
1. Unfaithfulness	4: 8-10
2. "Abuse"	5: 6
3. Return home (brothers)	5: 7-8
4. Grief and resolution	5: 10; 6: 8-10

first two stanzas, there is no event from the third stanza and only three from stanza four. Moreover, the real time sequence of the seven narrative events found in the last two stanzas, in contrast to those of the first two stanzas, shows progressive disorder as we move into the more reflective, lyrical sections of the poem. Thus, while the rejection-desertion of the woman is the central theme of the poem, this theme is not well developed in the narrative proper. Her rejection is alluded to five times, but these are vague references, occurring in the less narrative sections of the poem (see III in the table). These references *are*, however, central to the significance of the poem — they are the reason her marriage is "over" and "done" — but the desertion occurs in an elided narrative. It is an event found only in the more lyrical parts of the poem.

Chinese narrative poetry, especially in its early history, consistently leads the narrator and reader back to an appreciation of the theme. The significance of the story, for example, often lies not so much in the narrative itself, as in the way those events evoke a response in the narrator. In poetry with narrative potential this means that the semantic identity of the poem can easily revert to the narrator's reflection, which often is facilitated by a first-person point of view, marked or assumed. In such cases the "story" loses significance, and the narrative dissolves into lyricism. This is what happens to "Mang" when the most important event, the rejection, receives the briefest narrative treatment, while the two secondary movements are more fully treated in the narrative. It is precisely because the desertion-rejection is the theme of the entire poem that its treatment falls in the lyrical sections of the poem, and is eclipsed in the narrative.<sup>26</sup>

From this perspective we now can reconsider the closing stanzas of the "Sheng min" poem (those describing the harvest sacrifices in honor of Hou Chi). My discussion above suggests that those final stanzas digressed from the poem's primary concern, the story of Hou Chi; yet we should note how that argument assumes the centrality of the narrative, and how that assumption perhaps reflects my Western bias. We could argue instead, parallel to our reading of "Mang," that the story of Hou Chi is actually only an

<sup>26</sup> Chen Shih-hsiang has claimed that composition by *hsing* 興 (which he calls the "soul of the lyric") establishes the general character of the *Shih ching*. Particularly interesting here is that those stanzas of "Mang" that I have designated most narrative — one and two, as well as five (which contains several significant narrative references) — are all classified by Chu Hsi 朱熹 (1130-1200) (*Shih chi ch'uan* 詩集傳 [Taipei: Chung-hua, 1976], pp. 37-38) as composition by *fu* 賦 (exposition, narrative, enumeration). The other stanzas are, however, designated either partly *hsing* or *pi* 比, its associated poetic device. This reinforces the argument that events that occur in the narrative *fu* sections, while integral to the movement of the poem, are not the events that speak to the real emotional issue of the poem — the woman's abandonment.

elaborate preface to these closing lines of “Sheng min,” which focus on the true significance of the hero:

Hou Chi began these sacrifices,  
Without mistake or flaw,  
They have come down to us.

Certainly that is the assumption behind Liu Ta-chieh’s evaluation that the poem “revert[s] to the same type of sacrificial hymn as seen in other places.” The term he uses to describe that movement, *kuei* 歸 (translated as “revert”), is a strong verb of return, one that really means “to go back to where one belongs / to return home.” With this, Liu implies that the closing of “Sheng Min” brings the poem back to where it is supposed to be: the narrative is diversionary, and the lyrical conclusion is the main thrust of the poem. In that, perhaps, lies Liu Ta-chieh’s Chinese bias.

#### CONCLUSION

Chinese narrative poems commonly display strong lyric overtones, and that is because the tradition deems that the “story” to be told is often not the story of external events, but the “story” of the external world reflected in the human mind. In Chinese poetry that reflection finds modes of expression that are naturally nonnarrative. Early poems that do qualify as narrative, such as “Sheng min” and “Mang,” do so because they successfully maintain their narrative natures against the pull of that lyrical environment. That these two poems, found together in the earliest stratum of Chinese literature, maintain their narrative nature in such different ways reflects their peculiar position in the transition from supposed narration to known lyricism. They are at the end of one lost poetic tradition and at the beginning of another known one.