When the poet finishes his *Kuan chü* in praise of a girl by mentioning the bell and the drum, whose music delights her heart, he does not present her a manuscript, but a song. The last line of *Kuan chü* involves naïveté (in the sense used by Friedrich Schiller), for it is the line, buoyant and resounding, that betrays the mechanism of the poem, the mechanism of *Kuan chü* and of all other early Chinese poems. The poet sings, in accord with the pitch, tone, and rhythm produced by various musical instruments; the bell and the drum are used mainly in the case of *Shih Ching*.

Confucius heard the poem of *Kuan chü*, among others similar in type and value, sung by some music master in the sixth century B.C., and exclaimed: “How magnificently it filled the ears!” By then, the poem had been transmitted and probably polished and modified by the professional singer, the music master. By then, other instruments than just the bell and the drum were probably used in the performance. In Confucius’ time the poetry of ancient China, including *Kuan chü*, was taking its final, definite shape; its prototypical form, of great diversity and unity, was becoming for the Chinese in the following millennia the form of *Shih Ching*. The form of *Shih Ching* was the only basic form of *shih*, or poetry; and the content, which the form defines, embodies some of the most trenchant and surging themes to recur and vary throughout the Chinese poetic tradition. Recognizing that the poetic mechanism is qualified by the musical instruments, I attempt in this book to describe the form of *Shih Ching* by manifesting its mode of imaginative creation in an age of oral composition, and to identify some primary poetic conventions, in order to read the poetry of ancient China as it was heard by the girl of *Kuan chü* and by others in similar cultural circumstances.

By form, I refer to a discernible acoustic pattern which, in *Shih Ching*, is both dynamic and organic. The acoustic pattern is organic because it is determined essentially by the cadential unit of the bell and the drum, and other instruments. The cadential unit, of a
variety of types, proliferates and multiplies to constitute the pattern. The cadential unit, while in deference to a námos, is demonstrably protean, for it is the reflection of the poet's free operation of mind and imagination at a time when poetry, by definition, rejects prosodic stricture. On the other hand, the acoustic pattern is dynamic because it not only admits but invites stock phrases (which are called "formulas" in the present study) and type-scenes (which are called "themes") to achieve the totality of associations which the poet and his audience seek. The dynamic nature of the pattern is evident also in that the formulas are fluid and mobile: they contract, expand, and generate and define one another; and that the themes are now rigid and now flexible in the imagistic concatenation. The problem of form and its relation to content has entered the consideration of some traditional and modern students of Shih Ching. With few exceptions, however, they stop at the inspection of prosodic principles and rhetorical devices, thinking that these are the only legitimate components of the poetic form. In order to have the naïveté regained, I propose to investigate the Shih Ching poetry by constantly referring to its acoustic pattern, which I take to be the true meaning of form. By emphasizing the acoustic pattern in broad terms, instead of the metapoetic rules and findings, I am reiterating the theory that the poetry of Shih Ching has an oral origin. It is conceivably oral, and demonstrably formulaic. In view of the oral-formulaic nature of Shih Ching, I have joined with other Parryists in the fields of literary studies to demand a new method of analysis and a new criterion of evaluation in dealing with poetry of that particular nature; and I believe that, with this new attitude toward the classics, we will attain a new delight in the reading of naive poetry.

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