

Al-Iṣfahānī's Fandom in the *Kitāb al-Aġānī* (*The Book of Songs*): An Analysis of the Biography of Ibn Surayġ

Su, I-Wen

isu@nccu.edu.tw

Department of Arabic Language and Culture, National Chengchi University, Taipei, Taiwan

Abstract

This article examines the biography of the musician, Ibn Surayġ (d. c. 96/714), in the *Kitāb al-Aġānī*, with regard to how the compiler, Abū l-Faraġ 'Alī b. al-Ḥusayn al-Iṣfahānī (d. after 356/967), edits his source material (*aḥbār*) in order to articulate his admiration for the musician, Iṣḥāq b. Ibrāhīm al-Mawṣilī (155–235/772–850). Through an investigation of al-Iṣfahānī's repetition and juxtaposition of *aḥbār*, his fandom is revealed in the article on Ibn Surayġ, where al-Iṣfahānī shapes the narrative that problematizes a report unfavourable towards Iṣḥāq while elevating his musical achievement. Although the *Kitāb al-Aġānī*, as an *aḥbār* compilation, seems void of authorial voice, and, thus, of originality, examination of the compiler's editorial work shows his articulation of his own perspective.

Keywords: *Kitāb al-Aġānī*; Iṣḥāq b. Ibrāhīm al-Mawṣilī; authorial voice; *aḥbār* compilation; Abū al-Faraġ al-Iṣfahānī

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Introduction

The classical Arabic literary tradition, to a large extent, is shaped by transmission, rather than originality, “since the author himself, rather than expressing his views with his own words, hands down materials quoted from earlier authorities” (Leder 1998, 67). While there are exceptional cases such as poetry or *maqāmāt*, the majority of classical Arabic works comprise the collection of reports (*aḥbār*, sing. *ḥabar*), aphorisms, letters, orations, or eloquent expressions (Leder and Kilpatrick 1992). The unit of such a composite collection is a *ḥabar*, a report, narrated from an authority, identified in the chain of transmission (*isnād*) or remaining in anonymity. Numerous *aḥbār*, whether arranged in a particular way or not, form the narrative of a work. Thus, the authors of such works appear to be no more than collectors and compilers. Nevertheless, recent studies have shown that examination of a compiler's editorial intervention — selection, arrangement, juxtaposition, and reshaping of the material — can reveal authorial ingenuity. In such studies, a redactional analysis of *aḥbār* compilations is applied to specimens from different genres and generates thought-provoking conclusions: although the compilers' voice is often buried in the cited reports, their works consciously engage with issues central to their theological, sectarian, religious, literary, and historical views and values (Leder 1990, 1992; Donner 2001; Fahndrich 1973; Fedwa 1981; Frolow 1997; Stewart 2007; Newman 2000; Burge 2011).

The present study illustrates the usefulness of analysis of the compiler's repetition and juxtaposition of the *aḥbār* by examining how Abū al-Faraġ al-Iṣfahānī (d. after 356/967¹) edits reports to articulate his admiration for the musician, Iṣḥāq b. Ibrāhīm al-Mawṣilī (155–235/772–

¹ For the controversy over the date of al-Iṣfahānī's death; see: (Su 2016, 61–62).