Western Han Aesthetics
and the Genesis of the Fu

MARTIN KERN
Princeton University

According to any historical account, Han dynasty literature is dominated by the fu 篋.¹ No other genre comes to mind that might have rivalled the eminence of the fu during the four centuries of the Western and Eastern Han. The Hanshu 漢書 "Yiwen zhi" 藝文志 (Monograph on arts and letters), the first bibliography of the Chinese literary tradition, lists its section on songs (shi 詩) and fu 1005 pieces as fu and 314 as shi. This does not simply mean three times more fu than shi: the vast disproportion between the two genres becomes even more obvious as soon as we take into account that Western Han songs rarely exceed a dozen lines while a single

¹ See, e.g., David R. Knechtges, "Introduction," in Gong Kechang 龔克昌, Studies on the Han Fu (New Haven: American Oriental Society, 1997), p. 1: "The fu is in fact the genre most intimately associated with the Han. It is in many ways the essence of Han literature, which exerted a profound influence on the entire Chinese literary tradition." In the same

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fu can run through hundreds of them. Moreover, as noted almost fifty years ago by Hellmut Wilhelm in a short but influential article, the “Yiwen zhi” list of fu is not complete. Apart from the lack of any mention of Zou Yang’s 鄭強 (ca. 206-ca. 129 b.c.) literary work, there is the remark of Ban Gu 班固 (32-92) that Mei Gao 彭年 (fl. 130-110 b.c.), in addition to one hundred and twenty morally acceptable fu, also composed several dozen others “too frivolous to be readable” (you manxi bu ke du zhe 尤嫌難不可讀著). This note appears in Mei Gao’s biography and corresponds to a number of one hundred and twenty fu given under Mei’s name in the “Yiwen zhi”; evidently, the original compilers of the imperial catalogue, Liu Xiang 劉向 (79-6 b.c.) and Liu Xin 劉歆 (d. a.d. 23), had barred the “frivolous” pieces from even being registered.3

The “Yiwen zhi” catalogue incorporates in abridged form Liu Xin’s “Qi lue” 七略 (Seven epitomes) which itself is a condensed version of Liu Xiang’s “Bie lu” 別錄 (Separate listings). The “Bie lu” was the original catalogue of the imperial library, compiled after Emperor Cheng’s 成 (r. 33-7 b.c.) edict of 26 b.c. to collect and put into order the books from all over the empire.4 The brief his-

book, p. 52, Gong Kechang states that the fu “indeed is a genre that typifies Han literature. It is a literary form rich in creativity and achievement that truly manifests the character of the Han empire, and conveys the spirit of the Han imperial era.” For Western Han times (but not for later periods) Knechtges’ translation of fu as “rhapsody” is preferable over its common alternatives “chyme-prose” and “poetic exposition” because it emphasizes the performative aspect of the genre instead of its formal features. With regard to the early performances, Knechtges is fully justified in comparing the fu to the Greek rhapsody; see his The Han Rhapsody: A Study of the Fu of Yang Huaiqing (53 B.C.-A.D. 10) (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1976), p. 13, and compare Andrew Ford, “The Classical Definition of Rhapsodía,” Classical Philology 83 (1988): 300-307. However, translating a technical term from ancient Chinese into one from ancient Greek creates its own problems. As an alternative, I wish to submit that Sinologists do not need a translation for fu and that scholars of other literary traditions might be able to see the advantage of making the Chinese word part of our common lexicon of literary history, criticism, and comparison. (In this spirit, Knechtges himself no longer translates fu.) In the following, I will thus leave the term untranslated, especially as the present paper is meant to clarify the nature of the fu in its formative period, the Western Han.


3 For Ban Gu’s remark, see Hanshu (Beijing: Zhonghua, 1987) 51.2567. For the listing of Mei Gao’s fu in the “Yiwen zhi,” see 30.1748.

4 For the collection of books and Liu Xiang’s work in the imperial library, see Hanshu.

torical outline of the fu in the “Yiwen zhi” is mostly Liu Xin’s work. To this, Ban Gu added some remarks together with quotations from Yang Xiong 揚雄 (53 B.C.-A.D. 18), the most prominent literary author of late Western Han times who during the Wang Mang 王莽 interregnum (9-23) was employed as a collaborator in the imperial library.5 It is thus clear that the Hanshu account of Western Han literature, which has been granted highest authority in both traditional and modern discussions of the fu, is based directly on late Western Han sources.

During most of the twentieth century, the strongly pejorative view of the fu that can be traced back to Yang Xiong has not merely dominated but largely paralyzed the field of fu studies. Disparaged as a genre of empty formalism and meaningless verbosity, condemned for its intimate relation to elistist court culture and imperial representation, and charged with neglecting the sincere expression of genuine personal sentiment, the fu was anathema to modern literary criticism.6 The political exploitation of these values and ideals of the May Fourth movement during the first three decades of the PRC only worsened the situation, making it literally impossible for Chinese scholars to devote their efforts to a poetic genre that seemed to embody everything that was wrong with the literary tradition. More than any other major Chinese poetic genre of the past, the fu was rejected for purportedly having failed in both the expression of

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5 On Yang Xiong’s work as an imperial collaborator, see Hanshu 87B.3584; Franklin M. Doeringer, “Yang Huaiqing and His Formulation of a Classicism.” Ph.D. dissertation, Columbia University, 1971, pp. 198-201; David R. Knechtges, The Hanhu Biographies of Yang Xiong (53 B.C.-A.D. 18) (Tempe: Center for Asian Studies, Arizona State University, 1981), p. 60. Yang Xiong’s eminent stature as a scholar of the classical textual heritage is further apparent from the fact that he is credited with two dictionaries: the character dictionary Cong jie zuanruan 重說文, apparently a glossary to complement Li Si’s 李斯 (fl. 200 B.C.) earlier Cong jie 重說文 dictionary (see Hanshu 30.1720-21), and the dialect word compendium Fanyuan 方言 (see Suibi 祖微, 32.927). On the latter, see Paul Serruys, The Chinese Dialects of Han Times according to Fang Yen (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999); Knechtges, “The Liu Hsin/Yang Huaiqing Correspondence on the Fanyuan,” Monumenta Serica 33 (1977-78): 309-25. The Cong jie zuanruan is not explicitly listed in later bibliographies and was lost at an early date, certainly no later than during the Song dynasty.

6 See Knechtges, The Han Rhapsody, pp. 109-10.
the self and the reflection of social realities. It is only since the late 1970s that Chinese scholars have dared to rehabilitate the genre, and thus to legitimize their own scholarly pursuit of it.7

Since then, fu scholarship in the PRC and Taiwan has developed rapidly. So far, five international conferences have been held over the years, the most recent one in Zhangzhou 翔州 (Fujian) in November 2001. The published papers of the fourth conference, held in Nanjing 南京 (Jiangsu) in 1998, fill an 800-page volume and testify to the amazing achievements, vitality, and originality of current fu scholarship.8 Yet even in the less ideologically charged scholarly climate of the last two decades of the twentieth century, the core of the earlier reservations retained its presence. Ma Jigao, the prominent historian of the fu, submits that the tension between eloquence and dignity is not resolved in the Han fu, and that excessive verbal display diminishes, instead of enhances, the literary value of certain pieces.9 Jiang Shuge 姜書閣 holds that the Han “grand fu” (da fu 大賦), exemplified in the monumental works by Sima Xiangru 司馬相如 (179–117 B.C.), Yang Xiong, and others, succeeds merely in broadly arrayed description but fails in the expression of intent and emotion.10 Gong Kechang, while praising Sima Xiangru for his artistic achievement, states: “The major faults of Sima Xiangru’s fu include the rather narrow reflection of society and life, an insufficiently high degree of ideological content, the cataloguing and piling up phrases in the description, and the difficult and ornate quality of the language.”11 Echoes of such judgments can be found in numerous other works. They measure the fu against a distinct set of literary values and find it wanting. Explicit statements to the contrary are comparatively rare.12

While in line with May Fourth literary ideology, the concerns expressed by Gong Kechang and others can be traced back to Yang Xiong. The problem with this is not the respectable age of Yang’s criticism but its original context. In terms both political and cultural, the last quarter of the Western Han was a time of ideological contestation and reform extending over the whole imperial arena of ritual, literary, and political representation.13 In particular the period after, roughly, 50 B.C. was one of the great watersheds in early and medieval Chinese cultural history, a time when the imperial ritual system was thoroughly criticized and redefined in its values, goals, and display, and when Yang Xiong challenged the legitimacy of the very literary genre—the fu—that according to our accounts had dominated the literary culture at the imperial court since the reign of Emperor Wu 武 (r. 141–87 B.C.). From this perspective, Yang Xiong’s criticism that informs both the Hanshu 譯史 account as well as modern discussions of the Western Han fu is not

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7 As Ma Jigao 马积高, Fu shi 古史 (Shanghai: Shanghai guji, 1987). p. 10, notes, the only Chinese literary history that during the previous three decades had seriously discussed the fu was Liu Dajie’s 刘大杰 Zhongguo weixue fushan shi 中國文學發展史 (Shanghai: Shanghai guji, 1982) of 1982. Liu devotes more than thirty pages to the genre (pp. 128–60), most of which deal with the fu; a mere eight pages are given to the fu of later periods.


9 Ma Jigao, Fu shi, pp. 138–41.


11 Gong, Studies on the Han Fu, p. 152. Interestingly, Gong Kechang’s critical remarks about Sima Xiangru to some extent appear to continue the very didacticism he otherwise faults Yang Xiong and other Han classicalists for; see Studies on the Han Fu, pp. 78–92.

12 A notable exception can be found in the magnificent history of the fu by Guo Weisen 郭維森 and Xu Jie 許傑, Zhongguo cifu fushan shi 中國賦學發展史 (Nanjing: Jiangsu jiaoyu, 1996), p. 34, who insist that the fu should be judged on its own terms instead of being disparaged as falling short of the moral and political intentions that purportedly governed the ancient odes.

unproblematic. Dealing with the dominant genre of imperial court literature, it comes from a period of cultural upheaval, and indeed from one of the principal actors engaged in the critique and reform of imperial culture. As such, we can expect Yang's judgment to be not merely descriptive but prescriptive, providing not a distanced and unbiased record but an active, interest-driven intervention toward some fundamental cultural change at the time it was voiced. From this perspective, I wish to suggest that the established history and evaluation of the Western Han fu may be seriously compromised, if not outright distorted, that we need to reflect upon this fact, and that a different image of the genre, one that is less confined to its late Western Han criticism, is possible.

The following pages are intended to put Yang Xiong's views into their own historical context and to compare them with what other evidence we have for the nature and function of the Western Han fu. In a first step, I will revisit the established account of the fu to bring into focus the fundamental and unresolved tension between aesthetic expression and moral claims that governs so much of traditional and even present-day scholarship of the genre. To which extent is this tension indeed characteristic of the fu proper and not primarily a product of its historiography? This question leads to the consideration of a two-sided phenomenon: on the one hand, the multiple forms and functions of the Western Han fu resist the literary historian's attempt at a unified characterization and stable categorization of the genre. On the other hand, Sima Qian's Shiji 史記, a work that covers the historical period during which the fu achieved its prominence and that itself was

written in this very period, offers very little support for the traditional account of the early and mid-Western Han fu as presented by Yang Xiong, Liu Xin, and Ban Gu. In a departure from this account, the main part of the paper then offers a new view of the fu, presenting it as a performative genre of rhetoric, entertainment, and moral instruction. Because the fu so overwhelmingly represents Western Han literary culture, this discussion explores the core issues of third and second century B.C. aesthetic and rhetorical discourse, including its expression in recently excavated manuscripts. By embedding the fu and its inherent tensions in its contemporaneous context, its relevance for the cultural history of the early imperial state will become apparent.

THE TENSION BETWEEN AESTHETICS AND MORALITY

Despite its great prominence in its own times, we know preciously—and precariously—little about the actual phenomenon of the Western Han fu, its forms and contents as well as its modes of composition and reception. Of the 1005 fu listed in the Hanshu “Yiwen zhì,” only a few dozen are extant. In the analysis of actual literary pieces, we are thus left with some two or three per cent of the works mentioned in the earliest—itsself incomplete—catalogue. In addition, Yang Xiong's remarks on the nature and function of the fu consist of just a few laconic lines, and the received textual record does not include much from other sources. If there originally was any sustained discourse on matters of poetry and rhetoric among the Western Han elite—something one may very well doubt—it has mostly disappeared. Thus, while keeping the very limited nature

14 There is no question that Ban Gu's views on literature are based on the same classicism—including an orientation at the model of the ancient Odes—that stands also behind Yang Xiong's judgments. Like Yang, Ban was deeply engaged with the traditional canon, as is manifest in his imperially commissioned compilation Bāihu tongji 白虎通義 (The comprehensive meaning of [the discussions in] the White Tiger Hall) of the discussions on the Five Classics (wǔ jīng 五經) in A.D. 79–80. He shared with Yang the same pejorative sentiment about Western Han music (and aesthetics in general) as not being in accord with the ancient models, and he encountered with Yang's ambivalent stance on Qu Yuan's 鄱原’s Lushi 䖏賦 (fourth century B.C.) moral and literary qualities. Finally, he quotes with unqualified approval Yang's criticism of the fu. For a succinct account of Ban Gu's literary views, see Jiang Fan 江范, “Ban Gu de wenxue xueliao” 范的文學思想, Zhongguo gudai jindai wenxue yanjiu 中國古代近代文學研究 (Fujin baoxian shiliao 複印報刊资料) 1985.9: 67–75.

15 In this respect, early China—a culture replete with political argument and poetic expression—differs decidedly from the Mediterranean classical period. Nobody in pre-Han or Han China wrote anything even remotely comparable to Aristotle's Teknikē rhetorikē and Politeia, Cicero's De inventione and De oratore, Horace's Ars poetica, Quintilian's Institutio oratoria, or the anonymous Auctor ad Herennium. Instead, only some shorter treatises are known, e.g., the “Shui nan” 舍南 (Difficulties of persuasion) chapter in Han Feizi 韓非子 or the “Shun shui” 善水 (Smooth persuasion) chapter in Lushi chanqiu 鄱原春秋. One reason why there are no major early Chinese works on topics like rhetoric, grammar, and poetics might be that early China did not develop the professionalization and institutionalization of scholar-teachers, their disciplines, and their public arena in the way ancient Greece and Rome did. One treats sometimes related to early rhetoric, but of uncertain—and very possibly post-Han—origin,
of our received account in mind, Yang Xiong’s, Liu Xin’s, and, later, also Ban Gu’s contributions may well have been of particular stature, elevating them above and transmitting them beyond an otherwise more occasional and ephemeral literary discussion. The alternative would be to charge Ban Gu with substantial and systematic censorship in compiling the *Hanshu* from his existing sources, a stance I remain reluctant to take. Yang Xiong and his predecessor Sima Xiangru, both from the old southwestern region of Shu, are regarded as the pre-eminent Western Han authors of the *fu*. By the sheer number of their literary works neither man was among the most prolific writers of his time; but both are known to us as having defined and refined the aesthetics of the “grand *fu.*” Yang’s ambivalence about the genre is mirrored in his changing attitude to Sima Xiangru: while he first regarded Sima’s work as the foremost model to follow, he later used his forerunner’s compositions as the prime example to illustrate the serious shortcomings and ultimate failure of the genre. Yang Xiong’s criticism of the *fu* is presented in two different places: in his autobiography included in the *Hanshu*, and in his *Fayan* [論語], a work of brief philosophical statements modelled on the *Lunyu*. As Yang’s pronouncements on the *fu* are familiar to students of Han literature, I will here only summarize the salient points. According to Yang, the purpose of the *fu* is “indirect admonition” (*feng* 凡); yet by “adding analogies” (*tui* 推類), using “extremely gorgeous and lavish phrases” (*ji limi zhi ci* 极丽腻之辞), and grandly exaggerating its topic, the *fu* achieves just the opposite: its addressee indulges in its literary aesthetics while missing its moral message. Thus, with the ornate language overpowering the matter, “it is clear


16 See *Hanshu* 87A.3513.


18 Yang’s remarks on literature are found mainly in the chapter “Wu zi” 吾子 (*My master*); see Wang Rongbao 汪榮寶, *Fayan yishu* 論語自述 (Beijing: Zhonghua, 1987) 3.45-4.83.


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that the *fu* only encourages and does not restrain” (*fu quan er bu zhi ming yi* 與贅而不止明矣); due to its delightful appearance and lack of moral force, it is on par with the work of court jesters. Yang therefore concludes that he will no longer engage in the genre of the *fu*, the beauty of which he disparages as “merely a defect in a seamstress’ work” (*mü gong zhi du yi* 女工之蠹矣) and something not worthy of a grown man.19 His criticism culminates in the comparison of the *fu* as a recent literary genre with *fu* as a poetic mode of exposition in the ancient *Odes*:

The *fu* of the *Odes* poets are gorgeous and provide standards; the *fu* of the epicdric poems are gorgeous and lead to excess.20 If the followers of Confucius had used the *fu*, Jia Yi would have mounted the hall and Sima Xiangru would have entered the inner compartments. But they did not use the *fu*, so what of it?21

This conclusion is cited with approval by Ban Gu who adds this and other passages to Liu Xin’s historical account of the *fu* in the *‘Yiwen zhi’.* Taken together, Liu’s and Ban’s remarks, supported by the quotation from Yang Xiong, reveal which tensions were considered inherent in the genre.22 Beginning his outline with a quotation from an anonymous “tradition” (*shuan* 數), Liu Xin immediately connects the genre to the ancient practice of *Odes* recitation:

To recite without singing is called *fu*. He who climbs on high and can *fu* may become a grandee.23

20 For reasons that will become clear below, I believe that the sexually charged term *jin* 禁 (“excess,” but also “licentiousness”) here does not simply refer to literary style but also, and perhaps even primarily, to the effect of such literary style on the audience and its social behavior.

21 Wang Rongbao, *Fayan yishu*, 3.49-50. To “mount the hall” (*sheng tang* 升堂) and “enter the inner compartments” (*ru shi* 入室) refers to *Lunyu* 端論 1157, where both expressions refer to different stages of philosophical insight.

22 *Hanshu* 30.1755-56.

23 The line is perhaps deliberately ambiguous. It may well refer to ascending to a high position at court, yet the root metaphor is that of climbing a mountain; see *Hanshu* 124.71b, where Confucius addresses his disciples during a mountain tour: “When a gentleman climbs on high, he always sets out [his intentions]” (*junci* deng gao li *fu* 君子登高必試). See also Zheng Xuan’s 趙晉 (127-200) commentary to “Ding zhi fan zhong” 定之方中 (*Mao* 50) in *Mao shi zhengyi* 毛詩正義 (*Shisan qing zhushu* jinji 3.3-4.68b. Likewise, when the Qin First Emperor toured the mountains of the newly conquered eastern states, his officials “recited” (*song* 诵) his merits before carving these elegies (*song* 金) into stone; see Kern, *The Stele Inscriptions of Qin in Shih-huang: Text and Ritual in Early Chinese Imperial Representation* (New Haven: American Oriental Society, 2000), pp. 165-64. The homophone words “to recite” and “eulogy” are clearly cognate, and both relate to *fu* in the sense of “to display, to present, to spread out” (see below).
Fu as the practice of poetry recitation, well-documented in Zuo zhuan 左傳 and Guoyu 國語, is not primarily a matter of political admonition but one of coded communication among members of the cultural elite who on diplomatic and other occasions express their thoughts—intentions, desires, predictions, warnings—in this indirect fashion. With men of such talent, knowledge, and subtle expression (wei yan 微言), Liu Xin holds, one can contemplate important affairs; yet the decline of the Zhou after the Spring and Autumn period led to the demise of this cultural intercourse. As a result, scholars of the *Odes* were hiding among the common folk and “the *fu* of worthies not accomplishing their ambitions arose” (xianren shi zhi zhi fu zuo yi 賢人失志之賦作矣). Liu’s argument may perhaps be historically problematic, but it is certainly rhetorically elegant. On the one hand, Liu distinguishes between *fu* as a poetic presentation of a commonly known repertoire of songs and *fu* as a distinct poetic genre with its own theme and aesthetic features. On the other hand, he describes this difference as a result of historical change. The new literary genre arises because the old practice of literary communication has disappeared. Learned men no longer recite the inherited songs and thus create their own, new literary compositions to express their resentment. With this shift, the figure of the literary author and his personal motives appears:

The great *fu* scholar Sun [Xun] Qing and the Chu minister Qu Yuan, when encountering slander and grieving about their states, both created *fu* of indirect admonition which all contained the ancient *Odes* meaning of concealed pain.

At this point, Liu takes another sharp turn that brings him into line with Yang Xiong’s conclusion on the aesthetic excesses and moral shortcomings of the *fu*. Having praised Qu Yuan and Xun


25 *Hanshu* 30.1756. For *ce yao* 謀 Yao, *concealed pain* (versus the Mencian “sympathy”; cf. Mengzi zhusu 孟子注疏 [*Shisan jing zhusu fu jiaokan* ed. 38.27a (2A.6)]; see Liu Xiang’s *Jiu lan*, You ku 九歌, *Xiang* in *Hong Xing* 洪興祖, *Chuci bafa* 楚辭補法 (Beijing: Zhonghua, 1966) 16.300. It is clear that Qu Yuan and Sun Qing 孫卿 (i.e., Xun Qing 謀卿 [ca. 335–ca. 238 B.C.], the author of the *Xun* 謀卿) are mentioned here not as commiserating others but as being troubled by their own personal fate.

26 Chapter 26 of *Xenai* is entitled “Fu” 詩 and contains five poetic riddles; see Knechtges, “Riddles as Poetry: The *Fu* Chapter of Hsin-tzu,” in *Wis* *lin*, vol. 2, ed. Chow Tse-tung (Hong Kong: Chinese University Press, 1987), pp. 1–31. The word *fu* does not occur in the *Xenai* text proper but only as chapter title, given probably by Liu Xiang in his function as an imperial editor; see John Knoblock, *Xenai: A Translation and Study of the Complete Works* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1988–99), vol. 1, pp. 105–10. However, the riddles share important features with the works attributed to Qu Yuan as well as with some of the Western Han *fu*: rhyme and meter, a delight in words and sounds, an (albeit very simple) dialogic structure, and the literary tropes of the world upside down. Especially the last point may have inspired Liu Xin to mention Xun Qing together with Qu Yuan.


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the epideictic writers are gorgeous and lead to excess,” he distinguishes between the earlier, morally appropriate “exposition” that was used in the ancient Odes, and its recent immorality at the hands of the Western Han authors. Thus, while suggesting a direct relation between the ancient Odes and the recent fu, Yang all the more forcefully emphasizes their fundamental difference.

Following Liu Xin, Yang Xiong, and Ban Gu, and depending on their own positions of literary ideology, subsequent critics have emphasized either the admirable or the reprehensible aspects of the genre. “Poems and fu aim for gorgeousness” (shi fu yu li 詩賦欲麗), notes Cao Pi 曹丕 (187–226) in his “Lun wen” 論文 (Discourse on literature).33 “Giving form to the objects [it describes], the fu is clear and shining” (fu ti wu er liang 函體物而亮) writes Lu Ji 魯寂 (261–305) in the “Wen fu” 文賦 (Fu on literature).34 Zhi Yu 振虞 (d. 311) in his “Wenzhang luibie lun” 文章別論 (Discourse on the current and divisions of literature) provides a more substantial discussion, beginning with the—by his times well-established—equation of fu with fu ("to spread out"). He takes up Ban Gu’s phrase that the fu is “a class of the ancient Odes” but he does not follow the positive evaluation of the Western Han genre in Ban’s preface to the “Liang du fu.” Instead, he repeats the note from the “Yiwen zhi” that the prime examples of the fu are found in the works of Sun Qing and Qu Yuan and that thereafter, the genre suffered from excessive verbiety at the expense of the expression of genuine emotion.35 He quotes Yang Xiong’s condemnation that the Han fu is “gorgeous and leads to licentiousness,” and refers to a passage in Sima Xiangru’s Shiji biography which he understands as Sima Qian saying that he had censored the larger part of Sima Xiangru’s “Tianzi youli fu” 天子游遨賦 (Fu on the excursion hunt of the Son

32 Liu chen zha Wenxuan 52.9a. I translate 詩 as “poems” to distinguish the term from 歌 (“songs”).
33 Liu chen zha Wenxuan 17.6a.
34 Only fragments of Zhi Yu’s treatise—which originally accompanied a (now lost) literary anthology—have survived in the Tang and Song commonplace books Beiyang shuchao 北堂書鈔, Sui chang (early 7th century), Yiwen baigui 藝文背顧 (626), and Zhiping yuan 太平御覽 (984). For an annotated collection of these fragments, see Guo Shaoyi 郭少儀, Zhiping yuan cunwen xuan 中國歷代文論選 (Shanghai: Shanghai guji, 1980), vol. 1, pp. 190–204. An annotated translation can be found in Joseph Roe Allen III, “Chih Yu’s Discussions of Different Types of Literature: A Translation and Brief Comment,” Perseus 3 (1976): 3–36.

31 For an excellent discussion of the multiple aspects of fu and its relation to 歌 ("song"), see Cao Daosheng 曹道衡, Han Wei shuchao cifu 漢魏六朝辭賦 (Shanghai: Shanghai guji, 1989), pp. 1–16.

30 Reconstructions are taken from W. South Cobbin, A Handbook of Eastern Han Sound Glagases (Hong Kong: The Chinese University Press, 1983).
31 See Zhi Min 重民, Wenzhang luibie lun 文章別論 (Shanghai: Shanghai guji, 1989) 8.270–71; Ou Tianfan 袁天發, “Fu zhi mingshi kaoxue: fu zhi fen bi xing yi shuo” 詩之名史考論—詩之風格與意義, in Zhou Xuncha, et al., Cifu wenwu lunji, pp. 8–14; Knechtges, The Han Rhapsody, pp. 12–13. In the meaning of “to spread out; to promulgate,” 赋 is already used in the Odes; see “Zheng Min” 職民 (Mao 266; Mao Shi zhenyi 18.3.300–c). Furthermore, in the late Western Han manuscript of the “Shenwu fu” 神烏賦 (Fu on the spirit crow), discovered in 1993 in Yinwan 尹望 tomb no. 6 (Lianyangyang 連陽陽, Jiangou; tomb sealed ca. 10 a.c.), 赋 is written 作, likely to be taken as fu 作 (phu), another loan character for 賦, for a brief discussion, see Qu Xigui 曹希貴, “Shenwu fu (fu) chutan 神烏賦 (賦) 初探”, in Yamen Han mu jiaju zazhi 尹門漢墓簡誌, ed. Lianyangyang shi bowuguan 連陽陽市博物館 and Zhongguo wenwu yanjiusuo 中國文物研究所 (Beijing: Kexue, 1999), p. 7. Another early Zhou meaning of fu, “presentation,” I take to be a specific case of “presentation” rather than the original meaning of the word.

32 For the last point, see Zhou li shu 周禮疏 (Shisen jing shu fu jiaokan ji ed.) 23.138a; and the “Crest preface” (Da wu 大序) to the Mao Shi 毛詩, in Mao Shi zhengyi 1.3a.

From the various statements on the fu by Yang Xiong, Liu Xin, and Ban Gu, the unresolved tensions in the perception of the genre become readily apparent—tensions between eulogy and admonition, between entertainment and political engagement, and between literary aesthetics and moral norms. To some extent, these tensions result from the subtle conflation of three different meanings of the word fu in late Western Han usage. The term covers at once, and relates to one another, the Western Han poetic genre, the earlier practice of Odes recitation (i.e., presentation), and the poetic mode of “exposition” that as part of the triad fu, bi 比, and xing 興 appears in early discussions of the Odes themselves.32 While “to recite without singing is called fu” refers primarily to the performative recitation of an Ode, Eastern Han commentators have used the sense of “exposition” to define the genre of the fu by glossing the word fu 赋 (phu-) paraphonastically as fu 數 (phu), fu 錦 (phu), or fu 布 (phu-), all meaning “to spread out” or “to unfold.” In this understanding, the genre of the fu is defined by its characteristic mode of grand and profuse description. In other words, fu denotes both the performative external aspect of the genre and its internal mode of broad exposition of a given topic.32 When Yang Xiong says, “The fu of the Odes poets are gorgeous and provide standards; the fu of

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of Heaven) for its extremely hyperbolic and unreasonable wording. By contrast, Liu Xie (ca. 467-522) in his *Wenxin diaolong* offers a less conservative judgment. Acknowledging the Western Han compositions as outstanding examples of the *fu*, he declares that its characteristically elaborate language is not antagonistic to, but emerging from, the expression of emotion. Thus, the *fu* maintains the perfect balance between "gorgeous phrases" (*liu* 麗詞) and "correct and elegant principles" (*juyi* 雅義), multiple "patterns" (*wen* 文) and "substance" (*zhi* 質), "sensual appearance" (*se* 色) and what is "essential" (*ben* 本). Only in the final paragraph before formally eulogizing (*zan* 賞) the beauty of the *fu* does Liu Xie return briefly to Yang Xiong’s criticism, acknowledging that there could be cases where "profuse flowers damage the twig, and rich fat hurts the bone" (*fan hua sun zhi, gao yu hai gu* 紫蠶損枝, 肥顧傷骨). 37

**THE WESTERN HAN FU AS A PROBLEM OF LITERARY HISTORY**

The issues of these early discussions remain present through later writings of literary criticism. They make it clear that the Han *fu* cannot be reduced to a single intent or narrow set of contents. Obviously, the "frustration *fu*" has received particular attention from Yang Xiong onward. Yet Hellmut Wilhelm’s assertion that it should be regarded as the core of the genre because “almost all *fu* have a political purport, and, in addition, almost all of them deal with the relationship between the ruler and his officials”38 is at odds with the *fu* as eulogy, appreciated and practiced by Ban Gu. It also does not account for the *fu* as entertainment, a very prominent function the excesses of which are hinted at by the censorship of Mei Gao’s allegedly too frivolous compositions. Thus, as David R. Knechtges has put it, “the *fu* is somewhat illusory in that it existed in many different forms, and was constantly changing throughout the Former Han period. For this reason, it is virtually impossible to provide a succinct definition of the genre that would apply to all specimens of *fu*.”39 Knechtges proposes that “the notion of *fu* was extremely broad in Han times, and almost any long rhymed composition could be called *fu*.”40 Yet he also suggests that with Sima Xiangru, “the rhapsody became a mature and highly sophisticated genre, with clearly identifiable conventions.”41

The apparent multivalence of the *fu* is at least in part a problem not of history but of historiography and retrospective literary judgment. Yang Xiong’s emphasis on the political meaning of the *fu* contrasts sharply with the virtual absence of the genre in Sima Qian’s *Shiji*, as does the elaborate *Hanshu* account of literary activities at the Emperor Wu court. According to the *Hanshu*, the three decades after Emperor Wu’s ascension to the throne in 141 B.C. were the period during which the *fu* developed into the dominant literary genre at the Western Han imperial court. By the time Sima Qian received Sima Tan’s *司馬譜 (d. 110 B.C.)* deathbed charge to complete the father’s universal history, most of the leading *fu* authors of the Emperor Wu period were, or just had been, flourishing. But we know all this—like almost everything the literary and scholarly tradition holds about the Western Han *fu*—only from the *Hanshu*, not from the *Shiji*; we are reading the early and mid-Western Han *fu* almost exclusively through an Eastern Han source informed by late Western Han ideas. Thus, the principal critical voice remains Yang Xiong’s. While referring to Sima Xiangru’s work, Yang is

36 See *Shiji* 117.3043, parallel *Hanshu* 57A.2575. As quoted by the *Shiji* commentator Sima Zhen 司馬貞 (8th century), Yan Shigu’s 顏師古 (581-645) uncle Yun Youqiu 韋謙吉 (11th late sixth/early seventh century) maintained the same reading as Zhi Yu. The crucial question in this ambiguous passage is that of the subject implied in the expression *chanqu qí yao 削取其要* ("to cut something down and take up its essentials"). As several Tang commentators of both *Shiji* and *Hanshu*, including Yan Shigu, argue that Sima Xiangran himself, if all his fanciful descriptions, had in the final passage of his work "cut [his presentation] down to the essentials" of its ultimately moral message. The phrase “Tianzhi yu lei fu,” used in *Shiji* 117.3002 and *Hanshu* 57A.2353, refers to what in the *Wenxuan* is split into the "Zhou fu" 子虛賦 (Fu on Sir Vacuous) and the "Shanglin fu" 上林賦 (Fu on the imperial park). In the following, I stay with the phrase, although it is unclear whether or not it was the original title of Sima Xianguan’s work.

37 See Zhan Ying, *Wenxin diaolong zheng* 8.269-311. Note that in his description of the *fu*, Liu Xie uses the term *liu* 麗詞 ("gorgeous phrases") according to the meaning of it in previous *fu* criticism, and not in the more narrow sense of "parallel phrases" as in chapter 35 of the *Wenxin diaolong*.

40 Knechtges, *The Han Rhapsody*, p. 28.
41 Knechtges, *The Han Rhapsody*, p. 29.
consumed with the heritage of the Emperor Wu period in his own times.

The problem is that the *Shiji* narrative mentions the literary genre of the *fu* in only two chapters: in chapter 84, the joint biographies of Qu Yuan and Jia Yi (ca. 200–168 B.C.), and in chapter 117, the Sima Xiangru biography.42 Chapter 84 is a patchwork of various sources, betraying serious textual problems; chapter 117 is almost certainly a later interpolation into the *Shiji*, probably on the basis of the *Hanshu* account, that may have replaced an existing chapter whose original contents and form we do not know.43 Except for Sima Xiangru, none of the many mid-Western Han writers credited with dozens of *fu* in the *Hanshu* appears as a literary author in the *Shiji*.44 Most of these men are indeed mentioned in the *Shiji*, and some even have biographies devoted to them. We find information about their official careers and canonical learning, or—in the cases of Mei Sheng (d. 141 B.C.) and Zhuang Ji (d. 105 B.C.; in the *Hanshu* called Yan Ji)—see them mentioned as *yousui zhi shi* 游說之士 (wandering persuaders), that is, men of eloquent speech. In no case is any of them praised as a literary talent or author of a certain type of writings. Yet according to the later *Hanshu* account, they were the most active writers in the most prestigious, most widely-practiced literary form at Emperor Wu's court.

While the Sima Xiangru and the Qu Yuan/Jia Yi biographical chapters in the *Shiji* contain the two eminent moral and political claims that according to Eastern Han sources define the *fu*—the expression of personal frustration and the performance of indirect admonition—neither one of them is followed up anywhere else in the *Shiji*. This fundamental contradiction only adds to the serious questions of textual integrity and authenticity that surround chapters 84 and 117; neither one can thus be used without extreme caution. Yet in searching for the early *fu*, we also should not simply replace contemporaneous *Shiji* silence with retrospective and ideologically charged *Hanshu* verbosity; instead, the general absence of the *fu* in the *Shiji* suggests itself a fundamental question: how clearly defined was the genre of the *fu* at the Emperor Wu court, that is, in Sima Qian's and Sima Xiangru's own times?

Throughout Western Han times, the genre designation of *fu* was not stable with respect to individual pieces. Even the very few *fu* contained in the problematic *Shiji* accounts—not to mention the many titles known from later sources—form a very diverse group of texts: which literary features do "Huai sha" 儉沙 (Embracing sand), a poem attributed to Qu Yuan and designated *fu* in the *Shiji*;45 Jia Yi's "Fumiao fu" 鳳鳥賦 (Fu on the owl), and Sima Xiangru's "Tianzi youlie fu" 天子游離賦 that could make their common designation as *fu* appear meaningful?46 At the same time, throughout the Western Han, the terms *fu*, *ci*, *cifu* 美賦, *song* 歌, and *fusong* 歌頌 remained largely interchangeable. Not only were *ci*, *fu*, and *cifu* used indiscriminately,47 but the demarcation between "eulogies" or "odes" (*song*) and *fu* also was far from strict.48 Within the *Shiji*, what is once called Sima Xiangru's "Daren fu" 大人賦 (*Fu on the great man*) appears also as "Daren zhi song" 大人之頌 and "Daren fushuo" 大人賦."49 Similarly, Wang Bao's 王褒 (d. 61 B.C.) work called

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42 Outside of the narrative proper, the word *fu* in connection with literary composition appears once in Sima Qian's overall outline of the *Shiji*, the "Taishi gong xia" 太史公自序 (130.3317), where the phrase *daren fushuo* 大人賦誦 ("rhapsodic expositions on the Great Man") is used with reference to Sima Xiangru. *Fushuo* is not a genre designation in the narrow sense but seems to be pointing to the performative nature of Sima Xiangru's composition on the "Great Man." Finally, the word *fu* appears many times as "to present" or "taxonomy," yet always unrelated to the genre designation.


44 *Hanshu* 50.1747–49. For an excellent account on the literary climate at the Wudi court, and on the *fu* writers who were active there, see Knechtges, *The Emperor and Literature: Emperor Wu of the Han,* in *Imperial Rulership and Cultural Change in Traditional China*, ed. Frederick P. Brandauer and Chuan-chieh Huang (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1994), pp. 51–76.

45 See *Shiji* 84.2486.

46 See Knechtges, *The Han Rhapsody*, p. 28: "If one were to forget that 'The Owl' is called *fu*, he would probably classify it, along with Pope's Essay on Man, as a verse essay on philosophy... 'The Owl' represents a form of the rhapsody rarely seen in Chinese literature, and is almost an anomaly."

47 E.g., when Qu Yuan's works are called *fu* in his biography but *ci* in the "Taishi gong xia"; for the latter, see *Shiji* 130.3314.

48 On the instability of genre designations in relation to the *fu* during Han times, see also Xu Zongwen 徐宗文, "Ci, fu, song bianyi" 詩賦變異, *Jiufang xiexue* 藝術學集 1986.4: 123–36; Wan Guangzhi 萬光治, "Hanhai song zan ming zhen yu fu tongyi yiyong" 漢代頌詠結構與賦同體異用, *Shiyue kezi juyi* 社會科學研究 1986.4: 97–102. *Song* is not always a "eulogy" but often, in more neutral terms, an "ode," e.g., in Wang Bao's "Dongxiao fu."

49 *Shiji* 117.3056, 3063, 130.3317.
“Dongxiao fu” 洞簫賦 (Fu on the panpipes) in the Wenxuan is mentioned as “Dongxiao song” 洞簫頌 in the Hanshu. The case of the “Daren fu” is particularly interesting, as Yang Xiong had chosen this particular “eulogy” as the prime example for Sima Xiangru’s failed attempt of admonition “when the emperor was interested in gods and immortals.” It is in connection with the “Fu on the great man” that Emperor Wu is openly ridiculed as having entirely missed the message, indulging instead in megalomaniac delusion and feeling elated like “traversing the clouds” and “roaming Heaven and Earth.”

In addition to the conflation of fu and song, there are several other genres that by their formal characteristics are indistinguishable from the fu Sima Xiangru and Yang Xiong are celebrated for: the “staged discussions” (shelun 詩論) or “responses to questions” (duiwen 對問), the “sevens” (qi 七), the “sorrows” (sao 痛), and also the “lament” (diaowen 引文). Not all of these designations were necessarily used already during the Western Han dynasty, but they were common by Six Dynasties times. Where the Shiji notes that Jia Yi “made a fu to lament Qu Yuan” (wei fu yi diao Qu Yuan 為賦以吊屈原), the Wenxuan lists this piece not among the fu at the very beginning of the anthology but separately as a diaowen and only in its final chapter 60. Qu Yuan’s “Li sao” 獨澀, called fu in the Shiji, is categorized as sao in chapter 32 of the Wenxuan and chapter 5 of the Wenxin diaolong. Mei Sheng’s “Qi fa” 七發 (Seven stimuli), a seminal work in the development of the Western Han “grand fu” and probably implied in Yang Xiong’s discussion of the fu quoted above, not only appears under the category qi (“sevens”) in chapter 34 of the Wenxuan but already in Eastern Han times had inspired a series of other fu structured in seven distinct units. The shelun, represented with

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50 Liu chen zhu Wenxuan 17.15a, Hanshu 64B.2829.
51 Hanshu 87B.3575.
52 Shiji 11.3056, 3063, Hanshu 57B.2392, 2600, 87B.3575. For a comparison of these passages, see Kern, “The ‘Biography of Sima Xiangru’ and the Question of the Fu in Sima Qian’s Shiji.”
53 Shelun is the designation given in the Wenxuan, duiwen the one given in the Wenxin diaolong.
54 Shiji 84.2492.
55 A string of Eastern Han and Six Dynasties qi are quoted in the Yiwen leiju 散文類聚 of 624; see Ouyang Xun 散文類聚, Yiwen leiju (Beijing: Zhonghua, 1985) 57.1020-35. Altogether,

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Dongfang Shuo’s “Da ke nan” 答客難 (Responding to a guest’s objections) and Yang Xiong’s “Jie chao” 解嘲 (Dissolving ridicule) in chapter 45 of the Wenxuan, are like the qi defined by the major fu elements of a dialogical setting, the alternation of rhymed and unrhymed passages, and a language filled with binomes and synonyms.

As all of these works can be called either fu or something else, and as some appear under different designations as early as in Han times, it is clear that the word fu did not yet denote a clear and stable genre in the Western Han, but could be used for any type of longer verbal “presentation”—in the performative sense of fu—that was distinguished from plain speech or prose by its particular poetic form. This form included at its basis the elements of rhyme and meter, a certain length, and an intensified vocabulary, all drawing attention not only to the matter discussed but also to the language of this discussion itself. The extremely broad meaning of fu may explain the virtually complete absence of fu as a specific genre designation throughout the Shiji: not because there were no fu but, on the contrary, because any more or less substantial poetic creation was a formally marked “presentation.” According to our evidence, the very notion of literary “genres,” that is, a system of more or less strict descriptive and prescriptive categorization of literary texts according to formal and/or functional features, may not yet have developed by early and mid-Western Han times. In Han historical sources, the only genre designation to be juxtaposed to fu was that of ge 歌 (or geshi 歌詩 in the “Yiwen zhi”), denoting the short song. However, ge is a poetic form defined by two aspects only: it was relatively short, and it was sung. Liu Xin’s definition of the fu as “to recite without singing” (fu ge er song 不歌而論) focuses only on the performative aspect; it does nothing to restrict the general notion of fu in any other sense.

The broad and performative concept of fu may even have
embraced both a situative presentation of an argument and the representation of an argument as a piece of formalized writing. Such conflation can be demonstrated through two prominent cases. The first is the text that the received Chu ci anthology contains as “Yu fu” (The fisherman), a short dialogue, partly rhymed, and traditionally ascribed to Qu Yuan. With certain textual differences, the piece is also included in Qu Yuan’s Shi ji biograph y. 58 Here, compared to the Chu ci version, the phrasing at the beginning of the prose introduction is slightly different, the final “song” (ge 歌) together with its own prose introduction of twelve characters is missing, and a number of graphic and lexical variants appear throughout the text. The most fundamental difference, however, is that in the Shi ji the piece is not formally demarcated as a discrete literary work (while the immediately following “Huai sha” indeed is). Instead, the poetic dialogue is given as part of the narrative and constitutes the entire account of Qu Yuan’s wandering in the south. There are two ways to explain the difference between the Shi ji and the Chu ci representation of “Yu fu”: either the Shi ji author tried to integrate an existing literary piece into the biography to lend drama and authenticity to his narrative, or someone transformed the direct speech of this narrative into the literary text that we see in the Chu ci. I am inclined toward the first explanation because of the relatively elaborate literary form of the passage, structured by rhyme and meter. 59 Whoever compiled the Qu Yuan biography appears to have found it possible and legitimate to transform a literary text into the representation of an actual situation.

The second example concerns a text already mentioned, Dongfang Shuo’s “Da ke nan.” In Dongfang’s brief Shi ji biographical account, compiled by Chu Shaosun 褚少孫 (ca. 105-ca. 30 B.C.) and interpolated into the Shi ji chapter on “eloquent wits” (guiji 滑稽), 60 the larger part of what in later sources appears as the literary work “Da ke nan” is presented as an actual debate between Dongfang Shuo and a group of court academicians. 61 By contrast, Dongfang’s Hanshu biography includes a longer version of “Da ke nan,” separated from the surrounding narrative as a unified and discrete literary text. This dialogical text is formally introduced by the following note:

[Dongfang] Shuo thereupon composed a disquisition in which he set up a guest who raised objections to him. He used this as an illustration of how he counseled himself about his low position. Its phrases are: . . . 62

In Ban Gu’s Hanshu, “Da ke nan” is thus formally demarcated from its embedding narrative and identified as a “disquisition” (lun 论) that was “composed” (zhu 曹). The Hanshu version is slightly longer than, and occasionally different from, that of the Shi ji (although, on the other hand, some passages in the Shi ji text are missing in the Hanshu). The main difference between the two versions is similar to the case of “Yu fu,” if even more explicit. For “Da ke nan,” we are now informed about the act of composing, the purpose of composition, and the literary nature of the text: “Illustration” (yu 语) is a technical term of rhetoric, denoting an example or comparison. 63 In other words, “Da ke nan” is now recognizable as a literary artifact. As such, the text has been anthologized as a “staged debate” (shelun) in the Wenxuan and is briefly mentioned as an example of a “response to questions” (dawen) in the Wenxin diaolong. 64 We are not in the position to challenge the authenticity of the longer text preserved in the Hanshu. As in the case of the “Yu fu,” I assume that the literary composition was primary and was

58 Shi ji 84.2486.
59 Of course, this also means that any details we know about Qu Yuan’s banishment come from a poetic text that is ascribed to him but must be the work of a later poet lamenting Qu Yuan’s fate.
60 In Shi ji 126.3203, Chu Shaosun identifies himself here as the contributor. Dirk Bodde, China’s First Unifier: A Study of the Qin Dynasty as Seen in the Life of Li Su (2087-208 B.C.) (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1938), pp. 110-11, has argued that the whole chapter cannot come from Sima Qian.
61 Shi ji 126.3206-07.
62 Hanshu 65.2864.
63 In this sense, yu appears in the Western Han “Wu xing” 五行 (Five conductes) manuscript from Mawangdui where it is used in the discussion of the Shi ji song “Guan ju” 关雎; see Jeffrey Riegel, “Eros, Introduction, and the Beginnings of Shi ji Commentary,” Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies 57 (1997): 150-51, 164. Likewise, yu appears already on slip ten of the so-called “Kongzi shilun” 孔子論文 (Confucius’ discussion of the Ode) bamboo manuscript that probably dates from around 300 B.C.; see Ma Chengyuan 马承源, Shanghai bowuguan cong Zhangzhou Chu zhuwu 上海博物館藏戰國楚竹書, vol. 1 (Shanghai: Shanghai guji, 2001), p. 139.
64 In the following, I will stay with the more common designation shilun.
then used to dramatize the biographical narrative. However, it is instructive to witness the Shi ji’s historiographical representation of a literary text as a rhetorical “real life” performance, as this editorial move reverses the process that led to the poetic composition in the first place. In their dialogical structure, texts like “Da ke nan,” “Yu fu,” and indeed most Western Han fu are ostentatiously modelled on spoken rhetorical exchanges. Even as literary compositions (often explicitly fictionalized by the use of bizarre names like “Sir Vacuous,” “Master Improbable” or “Lord No-such,” a rhetorical pleasure familiar in particular from Zhuangzi 莊子), such texts repeat and exaggerate situations and conventions of oral disputation and the performance of face-to-face eloquence.

When Ban Gu incorporated “Da ke nan” into his Hanshu, he recognized the text as a literary composition and also assigned it a specific purpose. As Dominik Declercq has demonstrated, this understanding of Dongfang Shuo’s work goes directly back to Yang Xiong’s reading of the text. What did Yang do? He composed a text with the title “Jie chao” 解嘲 (Dissolving ridicule) in which he emulated Dongfang Shuo’s earlier work: in both texts, the author defends himself against accusations of not holding high office or of not seriously engaging in political affairs. In appropriating the earlier text as his model, Yang radically reinterpreted Dongfang Shuo’s initial message in his own terms. Dissociated from the performative context that is foregrounded in Chu Shaosun’s account—perhaps an original context that indeed may have prompted the literary text—“Da ke nan” now is turned into an isolated “frustration fu” with a political message. For Yang Xiong, the text was not the literary recreation of an actual debate but a written composition in which Dongfang expressed frustration about his low position, combined with a thinly veiled criticism of his ruler, Emperor Wu. All later readers of “Da ke nan” followed Yang in his understanding of this work. However, “Da ke nan” differed from the fu not by its form but through a particular set of contents; it probably was labeled as “staged debates” or “responses to questions” only in Six Dynasties times. Whether or not Yang Xiong perceived of it as a specific literary genre remains doubtful, even though he appropriated “Da ke nan” as the model of his own “Jie chao”—a work that later readers then came to regard as the second example of the particular genre that had originated with Dongfang Shuo. After Yang Xiong, and in full accordance with his view of “Da ke nan,” a number of Eastern Han and Jin writers—among them Ban Gu—continued to write in this genre of ostentatious self-defense according to the conventions now firmly established in “Jie chao.”

Another aspect of the Western Han fu that needs to be stressed is its function as imperial entertainment. Yang Xiong mentions this element in passing when comparing the fu to the practices of court jesters. More explicitly, Ban Gu notes that Mei Gao “was not well versed in classical learning but played the buffoon in the manner of the comedians and delighted in frivolous jokes when composing fu and eulogies.” Mei Gao himself laments that he is merely regarded as a jester, while Dongfang Shuo—to whom Ban Gu had likened Mei—reportedly indulged in bizarre and occasionally brutal jokes. Such descriptions provide the necessary balance to Ban Gu’s assertion in the preface to the “Fu on the Two Capitals” that the fu was the genre of high officials and dignitaries at the imperial court. There is no indication that any fu writer of the Western Han gained official recognition as a political advisor by virtue of his literary abilities. Moreover, in no case do we see a fu author advancing to

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66 Declercq, Writing Against the State, is the definitive study of this early tradition, which after the Jin seems to have died out.

67 Hanshu 51.2366. Elsewhere (Hanshu 6Aa.2775), Ban Gu again mentions that the emperor treated Mei Gao and Dongfang Shuo as mere jesters.

68 Hanshu 51.2367.

69 For his perhaps most famous joke, see Hanshu 65.2843: Dongfang first announced to the dwarfs at court that because they were of no use, the emperor had decided to have them executed. When the unsuspecting emperor saw the dwarfs in desperate fear and finally realized the prank, Dongfang responded that the dwarfs, while only a third of his own size, were given the same amount of grain and salary like himself—the dwarfs will eat themselves to death, and I will starve to death!” The emperor laughed loudly and promoted him.

70 The verdict on Mei Gao and Dongfang Shuo as being mere jesters is repeated by Liu Xie; see Zhan Ying, Wenxin jiuweng zhicheng 15.51.

71 See Wan Guangzhai 萬光治, Han fu tonglu 漢賦通論 (Chengdu: Basha shushe, 1989), pp. 126-34.
the earlier *fu*. It ignores, consciously or not, the fundamental differences in literary aesthetics and ideology that occurred over the course of a full century, separating mid- from late Western Han times.

**THE PERFORMATIVE AESTHETICS OF RHETORIC, PLEASURE, AND MORAL GUIDANCE**

Apart from the Yang Xiong/Liu Xin/Ban Gu line of thought, the received sources provide us with preciously little information on the Western Han *fu*. There is no question that there was a large body of literary works that at least by late Western Han times, when Liu Xiang compiled the first version of the imperial catalogue, was referred to as *fu*. The great diversity of the works we have, or have heard about, gives us a first idea of the richness of poetic composition during the Western Han, calling the narrow focus on political criticism and eulogy into question. Some small additional information comes from the final part of the *fu* listings in the “Yiwen zhi.” Here, in a section of 233 anonymous works—probably all of them lost—called “miscellaneous *fu*” (*zi fu* 杂赋), the standard information that includes merely the author’s name and the number of his pieces is replaced by the mention of one or more topics and the number of related pieces:

(a) “*Fu* on [dialogues between] Guests and Hosts” (*ka zhu* 客主赋), eighteen pieces;
(b) “Miscellaneous *fu* on excursions and eulogizing virtue” (*za xingshu ji songde fu* 随行出及颂德赋), twenty-four pieces;
(c) “Miscellaneous *fu* on the barbarians of the four directions and on warfare” (*za xiyi ji bing fu* 雜四夷及兵賦), twenty pieces;
(d) “Miscellaneous *fu* on the loyal and worthy failing in their aims” (*za zhongsian shi ji* 雑中賢失意賦), twelve pieces;79

79 Some titles preserved in later—and somewhat dubiously—sources like the Six Dynasties *Xijing zaji* 西京雜記 or the Song dynasty anthology *Guan jue* 古文結 have been tentatively related to these “Yiwen zhi” categories; see Gu Shi 顧實, *Hanshu “Yiwen zhi” jiangpu* 漢書藝文志詁譜 (Shanghai: Shanghai guji, 1987), pp. 81-83. In a study of a number of *fu* included in the *Xijing zaji*, Knechtges shows that they cannot be regarded as Western Han pieces but must come from later periods; see Knechtges, “The *Fu* in the *Xijing zaji*,” *Xin Ya xiasu jikan* 新亞學術集刊 13 (1994): 433-52.

This brief list, comprising almost a quarter of all *fu* listed in the "Yiwen zhi," displays the breadth of literary composition in Western Han times. Moreover, its broad variety corresponds well to the names and fragments of other Western Han *fu* preserved in a number of later works.\(^{62}\) The most comprehensive account of the Han *fu* provides the texts, fragments, or names of 294 pieces ascribed to 83 authors.\(^{83}\) About 100 of these *fu* have been transmitted in complete or near-complete form; not all of them are considered authentic.\(^{84}\) Prior to the works attributed to Liu Xiang (fragments of three pieces and the names of six others) and Yang Xiong, 40 titles ascribed to 17 authors are known, covering such subjects as trees, birds, insects, other animals, screens, musical instruments, and ale, in addition to the well-known canon mostly transmitted in Shi ji, Hanshu, and Wenxuan. It would be premature to speculate from mere titles and fragments about the nature and purpose of such compositions; practically any topic could be used for entertainment as well as an illustration of moral principles—or, in Yang Xiong's view, as indirect admonition. However, judging from transmitted compositions and even mere titles, the different kinds of Western Han *fu*, regardless of their possibly serious moral and political purposes, were probably all inspired by the quest for linguistic artistry, the sensual delight of poetic expression, and the performative nature of verbal recitation (*fu*).

When trying to envision the aesthetics of the Western Han *fu* as performance texts—"to recite without singing is called *fu*"—we are disadvantaged. Not only do we see but a fragment of the actual literary production of the time; frustrating our efforts even more profoundly, the original context of *fu* presentation at the imperial court is irrevocably lost, leaving us as silent readers of mute texts—instead of as a perceptive audience of eloquent verbal artistry.\(^{85}\) By contrast, in Yang Xiong's interpretation of Sima Xiangru's "*Fu on
the great man,” the text eclipses the moral purpose, leaving the emperor blissfully elated where he should have felt sincerely admonished. In full accordance with Yang Xiong’s view on the problematical nature of the *fu*, this account seems to assert that Emperor Wu was so overwhelmed by sheer aesthetic force that he entirely missed the actual message.

Obviously, Yang Xiong’s late Western Han didacticism is not an isolated phenomenon. It belongs to the same classicist culture that elevated the moral and political Mao 毛 exegesis of the Odes to imperial recognition under Emperor Ping 平 (r. 1 B.C.—A.D. 6) and provided the basis for Wang Yi’s corresponding interpretation of the *Chu ci* anthology. With a strictly didactic approach emerging to both the *Odes* and the *Chu ci*—an approach that mainly through Zheng Xuan’s *Mao Shi zhuang yuan* 毛詩傳譯 gained orthodoxy by late Eastern Han times—the integration of the *fu* into the same set of moral and political paradigms was only logical, sealing the entire early poetic tradition. In later periods, this line of interpreting poetic texts has always been labelled “Confucian” and related to the “victory of Confucianism” in Western Han times. Yet apart from the facts that recent scholarship has increasingly questioned the reality of any such “victory,” and that the very terms “Confucianism” and “Confucian” are anachronistic and misleading labels to describe early imperial culture, Yang Xiong’s critique of the *fu* is more than just another instance of some dry “Han Confucian” didacticism. It recognizes, first of all, the notion of beauty and the aesthetic pleasure derived from elaborate verbal compositions. For Yang Xiong, the pleasure is there, and it is the problem.


In a short but highly original article, Shimizu Shigeru 清水茂 has suggested that there were indeed theatrical *fu* performances at the Han imperial court; see his “Cifu yu xiju” 戲劇與戲劇, in Zhou Xunchu et al., *Cifu wenxue lunji*, pp. 95–96.

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WESTERN HAN AESTHETICS AND FU

In Western Han times, this pleasure probably rested as much in the text itself as in its recitation, that is, poetic performance. The emphasis on presentation and reception, surfacing in the phrase “to recite without singing is called *fu*,” defines the very core of what in Western Han times was understood as *fu*: a certain poetic form, yet also a particular art of textual performance. Obviously, there are common formal elements identifiable in the representative pieces especially of the grand epic *fu* from Sima Xiangru to Yang Xiong to Ban Gu and others. But these elements do not necessarily stand for an abstract and normative concept of poetic genre—such a concept may not have been fully developed even by late Western Han times. Instead, they represent a set of literary conventions derived from the aesthetics of a performative, reception-oriented rhetoric that can be ultimately traced back to the religious spells and political persuasions of pre-imperial times. As such, the epic *fu* is defined by a dialogical setting (following a brief prose introduction) that mimetically reproduces an actual debate; the irregular alternation of rhymed and unrhymed passages that maintains a lively and varied rhythm of speech; the overall length of a single piece as well as exhaustive catalogues of plants, animals, trees, minerals and so on that exhaust both the topic and its audience; and an abundance of rare words, hyperbolic descriptions, and rhyme changes as well as alliterative, rhyming, and reduplicative binomes.

These structural characteristics contribute primarily to the aural effect of the composition, constituting a tangible texture of sensual splendor. As noted by Arthur Waley with respect to Sima Xiangru’s compositions, “such a glittering torrent of words has never since poured from the pen of any writer in the world. Beside him Euphues seems timid and Apuleius cold. He sports with language as dolphin sports with the sea.” Yet Waley goes further, asserting that the *fu*
complaints of neglected scholars, imperial panegyric, and entertainment. Mei Gao, the son of the “Qi fa” author Mei Sheng and according to our accounts the most prolific of all authors at Emperor Wu’s court, certainly was not a magician, nor were Dongfang Shuo, Sima Xiangru, or Wang Bao, to name just a few of the major Western Han literary figures whose texts we still have. But all of them were men remarkably capable of crafting and manipulating the language of their time, confident and self-conscious in their poetic rhetoric.

For Western Han times, the transformation of what originally may have begun as religious word magic into representations of such magic and oratory can be observed in the very structures of the literary pieces at hand. Sima Xiangru’s “Tianzi youli fu” is developed from a dialogue between “Sir Vacuous,” “Master Improbable,” and “Lord No-such,” purposefully exhibiting the staged nature of their discussion. Similarly, Mei Sheng’s “Qi fa,” structured as a dialogue between a prince from the old state of Chu and a “guest” (ke 客) from Wu 蘇, begins with a lengthy exchange about the prince’s mental and physical disorder caused by overindulgence in luxury and pleasure. The initial dialogue ends with the guest’s proposal that the illness cannot be cured by medical practice but can only be “persuaded away” (shui qu 游去) with “essential words and marvelous doctrines” (yao yan miaodao 言言妙道). As the prince agrees, the guest presents his “seven stimuli” or “arousals” (fa 發): the first five, devoted to the worldly pleasures of princely life, give lavish accounts of a music performance, a banquet, a chariot race, a scenic excursion, and a hunt. Their grand epideictic style ascends to its aesthetic peak in the sixth stimulus, a dazzling description of a tidal bore. Here, in a most extravagant display of verbal expression, the guest’s speech culminates in nothing less than the performative verbalization of the magnificent spectacle of the bore. For some eighty lines, most of them tetrasyllabic, the text races along in a furious cascade of descriptive hendiadys and turbulent sound, bursting with rhyming, alliterative, and reduplicative binomes, as in the following passage:

Revolving and rushing, a glistening halo, front and rear conjoined and connected.
Lofty and lofty, lifted and lifted, 
roiling and roaring, raging and raging, 
pressing and pressing, climbing and climbing, 
a layered fortress of multiplied strength, 
doubled and diverse like the lines of troops. 
Rumbling and roaring, booming and crashing, 
pushing and turning, surging and rolling— 
truly, it cannot be withstood!93

純煥浩瀚，前後騐騐。順順印印，摿摿繃繃，莘莘將將。壁壘重堅，
音聲似軍行，甸阬匈硦，軋舖浦舖，原不可當。

While in the description of the tidal bore, the verbal virtuosity of 
the various "stimuli" (fa 發) reaches it climax, it still fails to raise 
the prince from his sickbed. Only the final and briefest of the seven 
stimuli miraculously revitalizes the patient. Here, the breathless and 
swirling phrases abruptly end in what seems like a complete stand-
still: gone are the binomes, the tetrametric rhythm, the Hendiadys, 
indeed the entire descriptive mode, replaced by a measured and 
sober proposal:

The guest said, "Now I shall present to your Excellency the masters of methods 
and arts, possessed of talent and sagacity, thinkers like Zhuang Zhou, Wei Mou, 
Yang Zhu, Mo Di, Bian Juan, and Zhan He. Let us have them discourse on the 
essential and the sublime of all under heaven, giving order to the right and the false. 
With Confucius and Laozi surveying what is presented, and with Mencius 
holding the bamboo tally and counting, not one of ten thousand cases will go amiss. 
These indeed are the important words and marvelous doctrines of all under heaven. 
I wonder whether your Excellency might like to hear them?" Thereupon, the prince 
leaned upon his table, rose, and said, "My mind has become clear as if I had 
already completely heard the words of the sages and disputers." Profusely, his 
perspiration issued forth, and all of a sudden, his illness was gone.94

Quite likely, Mei Sheng may have been aware of the use of words 
for healing purposes, but his "Qi fa" does not constitute such use 
of language. It mimetically, yet by its literary setting also tran-
sparently, represents word magic in the form of a literary artifact. This

94 *Liu chen zhu Wenxuan* 34.17a-b.
For a better understanding of the Western Han *fu*, the complex issue of early Chinese rhetoric must be explored more deeply. Since the time of Warring States' "wandering persuaders" (*youshi* 游士, *youshui* 游說士, *youtan zhi shi* 游談之士, etc.), a tangible sensuality and enchanting beauty of the verbal pattern had always been a forceful element of rhetoric, which was therefore often viewed as deceptive and regarded with disdain. The *Lunyu* passages (15/11; 17/18) where Confucius equates the dangers arising from glib rhetoricians with those resulting from the notorious "melodies of Zheng" (*Zheng sheng* 鄭聲) illustrate the point. Here, in opposition to the solemn "old music" (*yu yue* 古樂), the "melodies from Zheng" (like elsewhere their quasi-synonyms of "melodies from Zheng and Wei" [*Zheng Wei zhi sheng* 鄭衛之聲], "new melodies" [*xinsheng* 新聲], "licentious melodies" [*yinsheng* 淫聲], or "melodies from a perishing state" [*wan guo zhi sheng* 亡國之聲]) are noted for their intricate and stimulating melodic patterns that stir up excessive behavior among those who listen, and thus lead to social chaos. As exemplified in the *Lunyu*, the early Chinese tradition was deeply suspicious of rhetoric. Embellished and persuasive speech was seen as a powerful tool in the manipulation of rulers and thus as largely responsible for the political chaos of Warring States times. Han texts emphatically juxtapose the "cleverly crafted" (*qiao mo* 巧) with the "trustworthy" (*xin* 信); moreover, they identify in particular the southern rhetorical tradition of Chu, to which the Han *fu* is intimately related, as an exemplary case. All such discussions, beginning with the *Lunyu*, fully recognize, if only implicitly, what makes exciting music, mixed colors like purple (*Lunyu* 17/18), and verbal artistry so compelling and dangerous: their superior ability to provide aesthetic pleasure and arouse strong emotion as well as their potential to distract and manipulate. The art of speech—and, by extension, of literary composition—was, at best, morally indifferent or ambiguous; according to Yang Xiong, even when assumedly used for a good cause, it could easily fail by eclipsing its own message.

The conflation of rhetoric and poetry, in the Chinese tradition exemplified in the *Han fu*, is given in the early Western poetic tradition, where "persuasiveness involved reasoning, giving pleasure, and—most important—inducing emotional responses." Horace's last line from the *Ars poética* (The art of poetry) that "poets aim either to benefit, or to amuse, or to utter words at once both pleasing and helpful to life," reminds us of what is missing in Yang Xiong's discussion of the *fu*: while insisting on "benefiting," Yang has little to say about "pleasing." Indeed, the strong reaction against both persuasive rhetoric and vivacious music seems to deny the very notion of rich aesthetic display and the pleasures it provides. Yet nothing testifies better to the pervasive enjoyment of such pleasures than the classicist reaction against it. The rejection of rhetoric is brilliantly expressed in the *Zhanguo ce* (Intrigues of the Warring States) itself, the greatest repertoire of early manipulative speech, compiled in late Western Han times by Liu Xiang. Here, in an almost certainly fictitious account, the famous persuader Su Qin tries to move King Hui 善 of Qin (r. 337–311 B.C.) to take military action against the anti-Qin alliance. Toward this end, he traces the decay of political power to a lack of military prowess and to the emergence of excessive rhetoric. To

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99 As Knechtges and Swanson, "Seven Stimuli for the Prince: The Chi-Fu of Mei Chi'eng," pp. 103, have noted, Waley "is really confusing rhetoric and magic."


101 See, e.g., Shi jì 129.3268, *Han shu* 28B.1668. Yet also note the final paragraph: 81 of the *Laozi* 老子 with its well-known dictum "trustworthy words are not beautiful, beautiful words are not trustworthy" (*xin yan bu mei*, *mei yan bu xin* 信言不美, 美言不信).
make this point, the master rhetorician Su Qin, in a marvelous self-referential turn, pulls out all the stops to overwhelm the king with the full force of oratory, delivering a rushing, hendiadys-laden tri- and tetrasyllabic harangue with rhyme changes after every couplet:

As soon as rules and statutes were complete, the people mostly assumed crafty manners. When writings and documents became dense and murky, the common people lived in hardship. Those above and below resented each other, the folk had nothing to be at ease. The more shining the words and brilliant the reasoning, the more weapons and shields arose. Despite eloquent words and sumptuous adornment battles and attacks did not cease. Profusely they recited refined phrases, yet all under heaven remained in disorder. Tongues withered, ears became deaf, yet one did not see achievement or merit.

Today, the succeeding rulers are ignorant about the supreme way. They all are:
muddled in their teachings, chaotic in their rule, confused by words, mystified by speech, deluged by disputation, drowned by phrases.\textsuperscript{105}

Such display of verbal embellishment does not use language to convey a propositional message; it rather eclipses the message by presenting itself as a verbal artifact, a tangible reality of its own that becomes part of the actual world rather than being a mere description of that world. Su Qin’s language creates and becomes the very reality it purports to describe. To briefly return to the issue of magic and incantation discussed above, such self-referential and reality-generating use of language is typical of the performative speech employed in early Chinese ritual culture, ranging from Shang and Zhou oracle bone and bronze inscriptions to the Odes, and from Warring States strategists’ religious spells and incantations to imperial stele inscriptions and sacrificial hymns.\textsuperscript{106} However, it is at the same time also typical of poetic language, which only partly overlaps with that of religious expression. The principles of performative and self-referential speech transcend any singular purpose or context. From Warring States times onwards, at the latest, the perhaps originally religious significance of such speech continued to exist parallel to, and separate from, its other functions—political persuasion, aesthetic pleasure, moral illustration. Sharing certain qualities of performative speech, expressions of the religious and the moral as well as the entertaining and the political are all related, but the difference between a genuine incantation and its literary representation (as in “Qi fa”) or between an actual debate and its transformation into a textual performance (as in “Da ke nan”) is one that separates the immediacy of political and religious action from self-conscious aesthetic creation. The literary performance is still a performance, yet in terms of linguistic pragmatics, it operates on a fundamentally different level. It is only by the shift toward representation that the theory and the practice of literature begin, that aesthetic form is pursued as an end in itself, and that poetic ambiguity is no longer avoided but constructed.

\textbf{Rhetoric and Moralism}

The greatest difficulty in evaluating the \textit{fu} ever since Yang Xiong has been its perceived conflicting messages, and hence moral

\textsuperscript{105} Zhi Zugeng 謝柱耿, \textit{Zhangwe\u00e1o jie\u00e1hu\u00e1k\u00e1n 靭國策集注考} (Nanjing: Jiangsu guji, 1985), pp. 118–19; see also Knoechteler, “Yang Shyong, The Fu, and Han Rhetoric,” pp. 182–84.

ambiguity, expressed within some of its pre-eminent Western Han examples. At the center of the problem lies a particular rhetorical structure shared by Mei Sheng’s “Qi fa” and Sima Xiangru’s “Tianzi youlie fu”: first, the expository conversation at the outset of the composition leads into a mimetic and performative representation of delight. Here, the spectacle described becomes transposed into the spectacle of verbal virtuosity, that is, of description itself—the self-representation of an artistic language that both describes and creates aesthetic pleasure, doubling the sensual, tangible wonders of the world on the linguistic level. This section, the core and by far largest part of the composition, then abruptly breaks off and is followed by a turn toward moralism, expressed in a vision of chosen simplicity. In order to fully comprehend the fu, we need to understand the nature of this transition: the shift from the mimetic representation of spectacle and pleasure to the moral reflection upon, and ultimately leading away from, this spectacle and pleasure. As shown above for the “Qi fa,” the text in its final section leaves behind both its powerful description of pleasure and the sensualistic language in which this pleasure is recreated as a purely aesthetic one. In the “Tianzi youlie fu,” the hunting emperor, after completing a carnage of truly cosmic dimensions, indulges in the delights of music (including the notorious “melodies from Zheng and Wei”) and is consumed by the pleasures of erotic desire, roused by female dancers of almost transcendent beauty—only to suddenly fall into reflection:

Thereupon, in the midst of drinking and the rapture of music, the Son of Heaven becomes dazed and contemplative, as if having lost something. He says, “Alas! This is too extravagant! I spend my leisure time with [the sensual pleasures of] watching and listening, waste the days with nothing to do! In accordance with [the cosmic cycles of] the Way of Heaven, I slaughter and slay, and from time to time take rest and repose at the present place. I am afraid that later generations become dissolute and dissipated; if they proceed on this path, they will not turn back. This is not how to create a beginning and hand down a tradition to continuing successors.”


108 Watson, Early Chinese Literature (New York: Columbia University Press, 1962), p. 268. The introduction to the “Tianzi youlie fu” notes that in its final paragraph, the piece “returns to the depiction of] modesty and frugality as a means of admonition”; and perhaps—but not necessarily—on an ironical note, the text continues by saying that “the Son of Heaven was greatly delighted” about Sima’s presentation; see Shi ji 117.3002, Han shu 57A.2539.

109 Hanshu p. 978.3575. The word lianshi (reader) is probably of some significance here. The normal Qin and Western Han meaning of the (to survey, usually from some—in the literal as well as in the metaphorical sense of the word—elevated position. As such, it appears, for example, several times in the Qin imperial stele inscriptions (Shi ji 6.243, 250, 261). It also is often paired with guan (to look at, to observe). Sima Qian does not
I do not believe either piece can be successfully—that is, consistently—analyzed without taking the overwhelming element of self-referential verbal artistry into account, and with it the effects of entertainment and pleasure. If our sources do not mislead us, these effects are what much of the Western Han fu was all about, and expertise in literary performance was valued enough to become explicitly recognized at the imperial court. According to the Han Shu, Emperor Xuan 宣 (r. 74–49 B.C.) felt compelled to defend the verbal presentations (ci fu 詞賦) of his day, insisting that they shared the meaning of the ancient Odes, that they included elements of virtue and moral suasion, and that, finally, they were far better than board games and the performances of the jesters. The points of reference are clear: here the ancient Odes, there the contemporaneous ways of entertainment.

But entertainment is not "mere entertainment." The step from religious incantation and political persuasion to the literary representation of these performances is short. Western Han poetic rhetoric, by means of its dialogical settings, explicitly acknowledges a heritage of powerful speech that puts both gods and rulers under its spell. At the same time, through its self-conscious attention to aesthetic patterning, this delightful rhetoric also assumes a celebrative and eulogizing mode. While Sima Xiangru’s rich creations differ recognizably from the ancient Odes, the self-referential principle of displaying their own aesthetic art and artificiality as an accomplishment per se is prefigured in Zhou notions of textual composition. A good example is the Liji 禮記 account on the inscription of tripods, where the inscription is characterized as reflecting both the feats of the ancestors eulogized and the ability of the inscription donor who appropriately displays his virtue by praising his forebears. Without doubt, the "Tianzi youlie fu" is largely a piece of political panegyric, eulogizing the emperor and his hunting park,

use lan in the sense of "to read" that only in later times becomes the dominant meaning of the term. By contrast, already Chu Shaonun, in his additions to the Shiji, occasionally uses lan as "to read" (Shiji 60.2114–15, 126.3203), and we can assume that this usage was known to Yang Xiong. Thus, Yang's use of lan in his very important work may well reflect his understanding of the fu as a genre of texts to be read—for example, by the emperor—instead of of to be listened to in the performative setting of an oral recitation. Such a view would tallly exactly with Yang’s new understanding of Dongfang Shuo’s “Da ke nan.”

13 Note that before arriving at this judgment, Yang Xiong had modelled his own "Yulie fu" 楊麗賦 (Fu on the plum hunts) on the "Tianzi youlie fu," inscribing his purpose of indirect adoration right into the preatory section.

14 Gong Kechang, Shades on the Han Fu, p. 142. To some extent, this reading is prefigured in the remarks that follow the "Tianzi youlie fu" in Shiji 117.3043, and Han Shu 57A.2579.

15 A similar, albeit later case may be made for the last of Sima Xiangru’s compositions, his essay on the he feng 封 and shan 搖 sacrifices, which prefigured the reform of the imperial state sacrifices beginning in 114 B.C.; for the essay and its account, see Shiji 117.3063–72. During the initial years of his reign, the youthful Emperor Wu was probably restrained by his grandfather, Empress Dowager Dou 穀 (d. 135 B.C.), from pursuing his own political priorities.


17 See Liji 周記 正義 (Shihua jing zhu fu fajian ji ed.) 49.379b–379a; on self-reference, see also above.

18 In the Han Shu (64A.2791, 64B.2821), this is noted for "literary presentations from Chu" (Chu ci 趙辭 趙詩), a term not to be confused with the title of Wang Yi’s later anthology. Ci is here probably used synonymously with fu, denoting not merely words or phrases but also their performative nature.

19 Han Shu 64B.2829.
which is a representation of the cosmos. Yet through its sheer endless catalogues and overwhelming sound patterns, the rhetorical grammar of the 庶 produces not so much a specific propositional meaning but a dazzling array of sensual impressions. The fundamental principle of the “Tianzi youlie 庶” is mimetic, recreating the triumph and beauty of imperial culture on a linguistic level. Much like the earlier ritual hymns and inscriptions of Zhou China, it constitutes, performs, and represents the very cultural splendor it is meant to celebrate. Sima Xiangru’s sumptuous descriptions of imperial splendor are lavish aesthetic structures in their own right and as such an integral part of the cultural glory they extol. The conflation of the terms 庶 and 哀 (eulogy) in Western Han times confirms this point: to say that Sima Xiangru’s 庶 are eulogies borders on tautology.

Han authors are aware of this rhetorical principle. When Ban Gu describes the Han capitals Chang’an 长安 and Luoyang 洛阳, contrasting the excessive luxury of the former with the restrained order of the latter, he shifts his literary style from the ornate and hyperbolic (for Chang’an) to the classical and simple (for Luoyang). I suggest the same for the final parts of Mei Sheng’s “Qi fa 庶” and Sima Xiangru’s “Tianzi youlie 庶” as their preceding descriptions mimetically represent the cultural splendor of the court—principally in Mei Sheng’s case, imperial in Sima Xianru’s—so do the closing parts of both pieces, in a dramatic aesthetic shift, not merely express but perform the ideals of reason and restraint. Indeed, the same pattern can already be observed in the “Da zao, a piece where religious expression is married to the aesthetics of persuasion, and that is probably directly ancestral to the Western Han 庶. In all three pieces, the rare words and euphonic binomes end; having exhausted the spectacles of the world together with the linguistic means of their description, Mei Sheng, Sima Xianru, and the unknown author of the “Da zao, in a final chord of solemnity and sovereignty, turn their rulers and themselves into model classicists. In each case,

For the four traditionally known Han interpretations of “Guan ju, see Wang Xinqian 王先谦, Shi jian jia yi jie 十一家義集疏 (Beijing: Zhonghua, 1987) I:4-16; Riegel, “Eros, Jonversion, and the Beginnings of Shijing Commentary,” pp. 155-59.


The title “Kongzi shilun, given by the modern Chinese editors, is problematic as the identification of the word “Kongzi (Confucius) in the manuscript remains dubious.

See Ma Chengyuan 馬承源, Shanghai beiquan cong Zhang Jues Chu zhu shu, vol. 1, pp. 139-44. “Guan ju” is discussed on slips 11, 12, and 14 of the manuscript.
judgments of the guofeng in general can be found in both Xunzi125 and Liu An’s “Li sao zhuàn,”126 which all can be traced back to Lunyu: 3/20: “Guan ju [expresses] pleasure but does not lead to licentiousness, [expresses] sorrow but does not harm” (Guan ju le er bu yin, ai er bu shang 關雎樂而不淫, 哀而不傷). According to the Lu Shi 魯詩 reading, which was adopted by Sima Qian,127 the song is about erotic desire as something that “cuts into one’s nature and shortens one’s years” (hao se fa xing duan nian 好色伐性短年).128 These references to the guofeng (and “Guan ju” as their prime example) suggest an early hermeneutic approach to poetry that over the course of the Han dynasty, and especially with the canonization of the Mao Shi, was completely eclipsed and all but excised from the early textual tradition. The silk manuscripts from Mawangdui and the bamboo slips obtained by the Shanghai Museum finally prove that this interpretation was well-established and widespread, and that it can be documented for at least the second centuries, that is, from the late fourth to the late second century B.C.129 This is the period during which the poetic presentations that we have come to refer to as fu developed to full maturity. Accordingly, the hermeneutics of “Guan ju” during this period help us not only to question Yang Xiong’s position on the fu but indeed to revisit the genesis and early development of the genre itself. What does “using sex to illustrate ritual” mean? I suggest that with this question, we are finally getting to the heart of Western Han aesthetics that seemed so problematic to Yang Xiong.

The early “Guan ju” and guofeng interpretations show an intricate hermeneutical approach far more interesting than the narrow polit-

126 Shiji 84.2482. Liu An’s text is also quoted—and identified—in Ban Gu’s “Li sao zu” 立騈序, which is preserved in Wang Yi’s commentary to the “Li sao”; see Hong Xingua, Chu ci zuhua 1.49.

ical and historicizing exegesis that by late Western Han times began to replace it and that also became central to Yang Xiong. Xunzi, Liu An, and the manuscript authors are united in an interpretation that comprises two steps: first, they acknowledge the sentiments of pleasure and desire in “Guan ju” and other guofeng songs. Second, they claim that while the songs express and provide delight, they ultimately guide their audience toward ritual propriety, that is, the mastery and control of these sentiments. In other words, this interpretation separates the texts’ literal meaning from their perlocutionary effects on their audience. At stake is not the intrinsic meaning of a guofeng song but the effects the song generates in those who take pleasure in it. Thus, “Guan ju” may express urgent desire, but it does not provoke licentiousness.122 What counts is not what the text says, but how an intelligent and perceptive listener is influenced by its performance.

There is another reason to consider the guofeng more for the feelings they induce in their audience than for the meaning of their textual surface. While the early singers and reciters of the Odes were certainly not ignorant of the words they uttered, they did not limit their attention just to these. On the contrary, the early accounts inform us repeatedly about the importance of the Odes as musical performances, and nothing suggests that the above-quoted “Guan ju” judgment in the Lunyu should refer just to the lyrics. Steven Van Zoeren is probably right in stating that this passage is indeed more
focused on “Guan ju” as a musical performance. The appearance of the “Kongzi shilun,” which is deeply concerned with the performative aspects of the Odes, has provided us with another important piece of evidence. Even for the mid-first century B.C., we learn that some of Wang Bao’s compositions were ordered to be “practiced and sung according to the melody of ‘Lu ming’” (a Lu ming zhi sheng xi er ge zhi 使鹿鳴之聲習而歌之), the well-known piece from the Odes. Likewise, the way how the “Great preface” to the Odes is developed out of the earlier discourse on music still reflects the centrality of performance in the ancient Chinese aesthetic discourse. When Yang Xiong rejects the fu as excessively embellished, he is reacting against a language that was originally composed for its performative force but that for Yang, who undoubtedly sees himself more as a reader of, rather than listener to, such texts, now stands in the way of the moral message. To his mind, the idea that the experience of aesthetic pleasure ultimately guides toward a behavior of ritual propriety, is no longer acceptable.

I suggest that the notion of “using sex to illustrate ritual,” obviously a widely known stock formula in the third and second centuries B.C., should be extended to the fu, especially as the word se 色 (“sex”) possesses a much broader semantic range, encompassing sensual attraction, desire, and pleasure in general, including what was perceived as legitimate and appropriate pleasure. In this less specific sense, “Da zhaor,” “Qi fa,” and “Tianzi youlie fu,” with their sudden final shifts from lavish sensuality to restraints and morality, are the very embodiment and self-referential performance of “using sex to illustrate ritual.” On the intrinsic, literary level of the text, the ruler, after having been exposed to the most extravagant pleasures—and only then!—turns around and emerges, in a complete transformation, as the sage king of ritual propriety and kindness. Here, the true sense of the fu rests in its performative nature: after the presentation has eulogized and fully exhausted the cultural splendor of the realm, and has staged this very splendor by its own verbal virtuosity, it not merely describes but performs and constitutes the transformation of its audience, the ruler. Thus, the final passage of the “Tianzi youlie fu” is not admonition or indirect criticism in any simple, straightforward sense. As the emperor within the text of the fu is transformed into a sage, so is the very same emperor to whom this text is presented and who is confronted with his poetic double. The rhetoric of performance embraces the imperial presence in ideal, and entirely panegyrical, terms.

As Bi Wanchen 余łem has argued, the six highly sensualistic “stimuli” or “arousals” in the “Qi fa” that describe marvelous pleasures are not suggesting further indulgence in the prince’s indecorous excesses but, on the contrary, offer an exhaustive account of pleasures that are indeed befitting a ruler as long as he is able to enjoy them within the limits of self-restraint. The same point can be made for the enticements described in “Da zhaor” and “Zhao hun.” In this argument for appropriate and morally sanctioned pleasure, the opposition between eulogy and admonition is largely neutralized. Mei Sheng and Sima Xiangru still instruct their rulers in the way of morality, but their indirect admonition is couched in panegyric terms. The aesthetic pleasures of their compositions, just as the guifeng according to their characterization in Xunzi, “satisfy the desires but do not transgress the correct stopping point” (ying qi ju er bu qian qi zhi 盈其欲而不違其止). Xunzi is also in more general terms the pre-eminent philosophical text to propose a balanced interaction between the fulfillment of desire and the observance of ritual propriety. Its three chapters on ritual (“Lilun” 禮論), music (“Yuelun” 樂論), and “Human nature is bad” (“Xing e” 性惡)

134 For the full discussion, see Van Zoeren, Poetry and Personality, pp. 28-51. In relation to Odes quotations in early manuscripts, the topic is further discussed in Kern, “Early Chinese Poetics in the Light of Recently Excavated Manuscripts.”

135 Mao 161. See Hanhu 64B.2821.

together expound the most consistent philosophical theory of human nature, ritual propriety, and aesthetic display in early China. According to this theory, the undeniable human desire for pleasure needs to, and can, be controlled and moderated through the nourishment and transformative force of ritual propriety. Even more, because the desire for pleasure—a fundamental and undeniable aspect of human existence—brings with it the danger of moral and social dissolution, it also generates the quest for good order, which is then implemented through rules of propriety, that is, "ritual." And finally, aesthetic display, in particular the elaborate display appropriate for the ruler, where the enjoyment of pleasure is fully embedded in ritual practice, is the means to nourish (yang) and cultivate the senses of sight and sound, taste and smell. In this context, the performance of a literary text—be it "Guan ju," "Da zhao," a Han fu, or indeed the entire repertoire of the Odes—is guided by ritual norms and thus offers both delight and instruction. Thus, while the ya (especially daya 大雅) and the song (詩) of the Odes embody and display the ritual order already attained, the guofeng, and foremost among them "Guan ju," possess the transformative force to guide their audience toward this order. According to the Mawangdui "Wu xing" manuscript, "Guan ju" illustrates that even at the time of most urgent sexual desire, one would not wish to overstep the boundaries of ritual propriety.

CONCLUSION

Toward the end of the Western Han, Yang Xiong and Liu Xin no longer uphold the faith that third and second century B.C. texts reveal about the fusion of pleasure and morality. Instead, they regard the fu as doomed to fail in its intention and therefore morally ambiguous. The difference in argument signals a broad and profound shift in the aesthetics and cultural ideology of early China. The late Western Han rejection of the fu becomes comprehensible in the context of an emerging classicism that extends across the entire culture of imperial display, from court-sponsored literature to the grand sacrifices of the state. This classicism is forged explicitly against the generous splendor of the Emperor Wu reign, the remnants of which were still surrounding Yang Xiong and his own sovereignty. The portrayal of Emperor Wu as a ruler indulging in frivolous ritual and blinded by literary ornament is by no means unique to the discussion of Sima Xiangru's compositions; it is part and parcel of the criticism of the whole imperial ritual system, its lavish expenses, dazzling display, exciting music, and a set of hymnic compositions that in contents and diction are very close to the "Nine Songs" on the one hand, and to Sima Xiangru's fu on the other. In this overall context, Yang Xiong ranks among the most prominent advocates for restraint and modesty in matters of ritual performance, and for an overall orientation toward the classical culture of pre-imperial times against which the Emperor Wu period is portrayed as an era of moral and cultural degeneration. In short, the practice and criticism of the fu from Sima Xiangru to Yang Xiong texts, and that bias should be read parallel to gai in the "Kongzi shihun" manuscript. However, more evidence will be needed in order to come to any conclusion on this point.

144 Yang Xiong expresses his desire for imperial modesty and restraint in the preface to his "Yu lu fu"; see Hanyu 87A.3334–35, and Liu chun zhu Wen xuan 8.20a–22a, translated in Knechges, Wen xuan, vol. 2, pp. 115–17.
WESTERN HAN AESTHETICS AND FU

Embraced by a propitious night, angelica and thoroughwort send off their fragrance. Insouciant, lissome and carefree—we offer auspicious cups.  

姫婢奉，緯奇麗，服如芝，兆遷藤。被華文，坐霞穠，曳阿錦，佩珠玉。俠夜，華蘭芳。諳容 tái，獻雲腸。

Lines like these, dramatic and intense, pervade the state sacrificial music of Emperor Wu that retrospectively, some time between ca. 32 and 7 B.C., became disparaged as “melodies of Zheng.” Its descriptive passages, for example, of female attraction, are indistinguishable from their counterparts in Sima Xiangru’s works and allowed both Yang Xiong and Ban Gu to explicitly relate the ju to the purportedly licentious melodies of Emperor Wu’s court. From the short passage just quoted, no less than three descriptive bonomes—wuju 舞驄 (“misty gauze”), exi 何錦 (“satin and batiste”), and rongyu 容與 (“lissome and carefree”—also appear in Sima Xiangru’s “Tianzi youlie fu.” Kuang Heng 聯衡 (chancellor 35–30 B.C.), perhaps the most influential classicist of the time, in 32 B.C. proposed abolishing the elaborate altars at which the “Jiaosi ge” were performed and also submitted corrections to two of their texts. Such initiatives grant us authentic insights into the ideological agenda and intellectual atmosphere of late Western Han classicism. At the same time, they inform us that Emperor Wu’s legacy of ritual and literature was still present and alive in Yang Xiong’s time—Yang’s criticism of the earlier ju was not a distance and

Developed closely along the lines of Western Han cultural history in general. How neatly the various issues of ritual and literature were interrelated in the minds of late Western/early Eastern Han thinkers becomes clear by an interesting historiographic detail: in the Hanshu, Sima Xiangru—who had died in 117 B.C.—is noted twice among the authors of Emperor Wu’s state sacrificial hymns, the “Songs for the suburban sacrifices” (“Jiaosi ge” 佳節歌) that according to all evidence were composed only from 113 B.C. onwards. Specifically, the text in the Hanshu “Monograph on Ritual and Music” (Li yue zhi 樂志) mentions these ritual pieces composed by “Sima Xiangru and some dozen others” (Sima Xiangru 敬叔稚馬相等數十人) as “poems and fu” (shīfu 詩賦) that were then set to music. While their attribution to Sima Xiangru is most likely a mistake, it is not a completely unreasonably one. In many of their passages, the “Jiaosi ge” closely resemble the style of Sima Xiangru’s fu. The following are the final stanzas from the very first of the twenty sacrificial hymns; reminiscent especially of the extravagant descriptions in “Da zhao,” they delight both spirits and humans with a vivacious display of sensual pleasure:

Flocks of beauties form their lines, relaxing in rare and voluptuous patterns; with faces resembling rush blossoms—uncounted are those sought-after grace.

Dressed in resplendent patterns, entwined in misty gauze, drawing satin and batiste, dangling pearls and nephrite.

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153 *Hanshu* 22.1035; see Kern, *Die Hymnen der chinesischen Staatsopfer*, pp. 187–98. The twenty “Jiaosi ge” of Emperor Wu’s reign include a whole string of such celebrative and cheerful pieces; see songs 7, 8, 11, 12, 15, 16, and 19 (*Hanshu* 22.1057–58, 1061–63, 1066–67, 1069–70; Kern, *Die Hymnen der chinesischen Staatsopfer*, pp. 210–23, 241–58, 263–71, 280–94). *Hanshu* 22.1071. The passage reflects the late Western Han classicism but must date before 7 B.C., as it mentions the “Office of Music” (yuju 楚樂府) that was abolished in that year.


155 For Kuang Heng’s memorial on abolishing especially the Taiyi 太—altar at the sacrificial center of Gonghuang 甘露, see *Hanshu* 25B.1256; an annotated translation and brief analysis is given in Kern, “Ritual, Text, and the Formation of the Canon,” pp. 53–66. For Kuang’s suggestions of textual changes for the “Jiaosi ge,” see *Hanshu* 22.1057–58; Kern, ibid., pp. 71–72. A useful account of Kuang Heng’s ritual reforms is included in Michael Loewe, *Crisis and Conflict in Han China*, 104 B.C. to A.D. 9, pp. 154–92.
uninterested act but an emphatic contribution to the political debates of the day. The target was, with the *fu* as well as with the imperial ritual system, the entire display and performance culture of the Western Han that had been designed during the reign of Emperor Wu. Where the authors of the “Jiaosi ge,” in a bold self-assertive gesture, had identified their compositions as “these new tones” (*ci xin yin* 警新音), a late Western Han classicist like Kuang Heng would note that the multiple ornamental details of Emperor Wu’s altar to the cosmic deity Taiyi 太一 “cannot find their models in antiquity” (*bu neng de qi xiang yu gu* 不能得其所於古). In the same vein, Yang Xiong distinguished the venerable *fu* of the ancient *Odes* authors from those of Emperor Wu’s epideictic poets—only to conclude that the latter produced but petty displays of literary embroidery.

By conclusion, Yang Xiong’s criticism of the *fu* was closely related to the institutionalized classification of texts in the imperial catalogue; conceptualized and compiled by Liu Xiang and Liu Xin. Earlier, *fu* could refer to the full range of poetic compositions that were presented as court performances. Yang Xiong’s emphasis on genre identity points to a literary culture that has reached a certain degree of maturity in institutional and aesthetic terms: the notion of genre is based on the distinction between different genres and their genuine forms and functions. At the same time, this gradually emerging idea of literary genres is related to an increasing emphasis on the written (versus the performed and memorized) word, a significant proliferation, collection, collation, and institutionalized classification of written texts, the production of the imperial library catalogue, the fixation of the traditional canon and its exegetical traditions, the development of the imperial bureaucracy, and the formation of a new and relatively coherent class of learned scholars who had come to see themselves as literary authors. Prior to these developments, Western Han poetic aesthetics comprise the central elements of pre-imperial political rhetoric and religious incantation,

transferring both into literary representations. These representations are decidedly self-referential in nature as they draw attention not merely to their topics but also to their own poetic virtuosity; as such, they actually perform and constitute what they describe. This performance is court-based and centered on the ruler: before Emperor Wu’s reign at some princely courts, after 141 B.C. primarily at the imperial court of Chang’an. While authors and performers of the *fu* are recognized for their art, this art itself does not gain them official status beyond the ranks of court entertainers.

In Western Han times, the grand epideictic *fu* is primarily celebrative and eulogistic, with its strong elements of entertainment also in the service of moral illustration. It is not, however, an expression of political criticism and admonition in the narrow sense that Yang Xiong and later writers—including the author(s) of Sima Xiangru’s *Shiji* biography—assign to it, based on their own literary practice. In its epideictic splendor, the grand *fu* represents the powerful and self-assertive aesthetics of ritual and literary culture during the Emperor Wu era. This culture of performance, display, and pleasure is based on the aesthetics of rhetoric as both embellishment and persuasive force. It operates on the assumption that the description, performance, evocation, and enjoyment of pleasure ultimately leads to moral insight and transformation. This aesthetic principle governs the epideictic *fu* as well as the contemporaneous interpretations of the *Odes*.

As a performance genre, the Western Han *fu* was not meant to be read but to be listened to. A host of passages in both *Shiji* and *Hanshu* mention the recitation of all kinds of texts, including the works of the traditional canon. Throughout Western Han times, the culture of oral recitation defined the presentation and reception of texts. Especially for poetic texts, but not restricted to them, excavated as well as transmitted texts from late Warring States and Western Han times offer abundant evidence for the low degree of modern 

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156 In the eighth hymn of the “Jiaosi ge”: see *Hanshu* 22.1057-59; Kern, *Die Hymnen der chinesischen Staatsgötter*, pp. 215-25.


158 For these points, see Kern, “Ritual, Text, and The Formation of the Canon,” and Kern, “Early Chinese Poetics in the Light of Recently Excavated Manuscripts.”

159 The historical change from Sima Xiangru to Yang Xiong is also apparent from the fact that none of Sima’s compositions was imperially commissioned, while all of Yang’s indeed were. This testifies to the increasing institutionalization of the genre, and it is further caution us to anachronistically conflate the nature and function of the two authors’ works.

160 Even Yang Xiong’s inscriptions were recited to Emperor Cheng; see Qian Yi 錢儀, *Fangyan jianshu 方言攬疏* (Shanghai: Shanghai guji, 1984) 13.53a.
orthographic standardization during these periods. We know, for example, that the versions we have of Sima Xiangru’s fu have come down to us in a highly normalized graphic appearance that clearly postdates, perhaps by centuries, even Eastern Han times. Any argument on a particular character—as opposed to a word—in these pieces, or on the overall appearance of the fu as written text during the reign of Emperor Wu, is fundamentally flawed and irrelevant. We do not fully understand the role of writing in the early development of the fu; it may have been largely restricted to the functions of archival preservation and perhaps of mnemonic device to the reciters. Therefore, while it is clear that by the time the imperial library catalogue was compiled, a great number of fu compositions were available in written form and as such categorized and entered into the bibliographic record, it is probably only toward the very end of the Western Han—for example, with Yang Xiong—that the act of reading a fu began to become a regular way of its reception. In Yang’s own time, the organization of the imperial library and the compilation of its catalogue must have strongly contributed to this new trend. Indeed, the imperial desire for textual order was less a matter of descriptive stock-taking than of imposing a prescriptive system of organization onto a vast and extremely varied array of textual material.

In sum, the fu was both less and more than what its traditional accounts from late Western Han times onward suggest: it was not a defined genre, it was not an important vehicle of direct political intervention, and its authors were not regarded as influential political advisors. At the same time, it was the most pervasive literary phenomenon of Western Han court culture, appearing in numerous different forms and fusing entertainment, panegyrics, and admonition. As the evidence from recently excavated manuscripts now shows us, its aesthetics developed not in isolation but within an existing hermeneutical discourse. Thus, as early interpretations of the Odes, which had remained unavailable for more than two millennia, now help us to better understand the principles of literary
discourse.

161 I have dealt with this issue on several occasions; see Kern, “Early Chinese Poetics in the Light of Recently Excavated Manuscripts”; “The Odes in Excavated Manuscripts,” in Text and Rituai in Early China, ed. Martin Kern, forthcoming; and “The ‘Biography of Sima Xiangru’ and the Question of the Fu in Sima Qian’s Shiji.”