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Early Chinese literature, beginnings through Western Han

MARTIN KERN

I. The Chinese language and writing system

The earliest evidence for the Chinese language, and for the Chinese script as its writing system, is found in oracle bone and bronze inscriptions from the site of the Late Shang (ca 1250–ca 1046 BC) royal capital near modern Anyang, located in the northernmost part of modern Henan Province. From there to the present day, a continuous line of development can be drawn for both language and script that has served the expression of Chinese literature over the last three millennia. The Chinese script is one of only a handful of instances in human history where writing was invented independently, and it is the only originally invented writing system still in use today. Over time, it was adopted to write not just Chinese but also other East and Southeast Asian languages such as Korean, Japanese, and Vietnamese, thereby extending the reach of the Chinese literary tradition significantly beyond the boundaries of its spoken language.

The Late Shang oracle inscriptions (*jiaguwen*) scratched into bovine shoulder bones and turtle plastrons were records of communications with the royal ancestral spirits. Since their initial discovery in 1899, more than 150,000 fragments of such inscriptions have been found. They range in length from just a few to several dozen characters and preserve accounts of royal divinations on a wide range of topics – the well-being of the king, military success, the timeliness of sacrifices, the weather, and so on – that affected both the person of the ruler and the prosperity of his state. Incised into the very material used for divination, these inscriptions recorded the king's successful communication with his ancestors and were hence of both religious and political significance. The second group of Late Shang texts, far smaller in number, were inscriptions cast into elaborate bronze vessels (most prominently food and wine containers) that were used in ancestral sacrifices. The Shang had produced ritual bronzes since at least the fifteenth century BC, but

inscriptions appeared only around 1250 BC. In their vast majority, these earliest bronze inscriptions (*jinwen*) contained only one to five characters to denote the donor and the sacrificial purpose of the bronze vessel. However, both bone and bronze inscriptions from the late second millennium BC show the Chinese writing system as sophisticated and well developed, indicating that its origin and development might reach further back in time. Moreover, the inscriptions, while not created for mere archival purposes or the recording of history, seem based on writings that were first composed on perishable materials like wood and bamboo. Nothing suggests that writing at the Shang capital was limited to oracle records and bronze inscriptions; instead, all other writing on less durable surfaces has simply disappeared.

What is not an accident of preservation, though, is the fact that the early Chinese limited the use of their most precious and prestigious materials to those writings that had the closest connection to their religious practices of divination and the ancestral cult. The same observation still holds for the Western Zhou (ca 1046–771 BC). While oracle bone inscriptions soon disappeared under the new dynasty, the production of bronze ritual artifacts, both inscribed and uninscribed, proliferated enormously; bronze vessels, bells, ritual weapons, and so on must have numbered in the tens, if not hundreds, of thousands. Moreover, Western Zhou bronze texts on occasion extended to hundreds of characters and became more regular in both their visual appearance and the use of rhyme, meter, and onomatopoeia. At the same time, these aesthetic devices also appeared in the earliest transmitted writings of Chinese literature: the core layers – most likely dating from the ninth and eighth centuries BC – of the *Classic of Documents* (*Shangshu* or *Shujing*), the *Classic of Poetry* (*Shijing*), and the *Classic of Changes* (*Yijing*). Unlike the inscriptions, these texts are preserved in the standardized orthography in which all received writings from the early period have come to us.

The initial move to standardize the forms of Chinese characters dates from the Qin (221–207 BC) dynasty and was part of the overall administrative standardization enacted by the newly founded imperial rule. During the four centuries of the subsequent Western (202 BC–AD 9) and Eastern (AD 25–220) Han dynasties, including Wang Mang's brief Xin dynasty (r. 9–23) in the middle, the texts of antiquity were transcribed into the then standard script. This script was further refined over the course of the Six Dynasties (220–589). In the course of this development, the number of characters proliferated greatly by the systematic application of semantic classifiers – graphic elements to indicate different categories of meaning – to graphically distinguish homophonous but semantically different words, finally matching the sound, meaning, and

written form of a word with far greater precision than before. The crowning achievement of these scholarly efforts was the character dictionary *Cut Rhymes* (*Qieyun*), arranged by tone and rhyme, that Lu Fayan (fl. 581–601) and his collaborators completed in 601.

Today, the Chinese script – not counting the simplified forms created in the People’s Republic of China – encompasses perhaps 80,000 characters, with the actual number contingent on how variant writings are counted. By comparison, Shang oracle bone inscriptions include fewer than five thousand different characters; the Thirteen Classics (*shisan jing*) of the Confucian canon, containing diachronic textual layers from the Western Zhou through the Han dynasties, total 6,544 different characters; *Cang Jie*, a dictionary attributed to the Qin chancellor Li Si (d. 208 BC) and further elaborated upon by Yang Xiong (53 BC–AD 18), included 5,340 characters; and Xu Shen’s (ca 55–ca 149) *Explanation of Simple Graphs and Analysis of Composite Characters* (*Shuowen jiezi*) was originally composed of 9,353 different characters and in addition included 1,163 variant forms (the received version of the dictionary includes 10,700 characters). These numbers illustrate the gradual development of the writing system. A first peak, reflecting Eastern Han scholastic attempts to create a standardized inventory of writing and, hence, normative readings of the Classics, emerged with the *Shuowen jiezi* around AD 120; yet it was the later differentiation of characters through the systematic addition of semantic classifiers that multiplied the repertoire of the written language.

A certain number of Chinese characters show obvious pictographic origins. This fact has given rise to the misperception that Chinese characters in general are pictographs (images of things) or ideographs (images of ideas). They are, instead, logographs, writing the words of the Chinese language. As such, they primarily represent not ideas but sounds and hence function by and large like the letters and graphs of other writing systems, if considerably more cumbersome. Yet Chinese characters also possess specific features that have influenced the development of Chinese writing, literature, and even culture in general. Because the characters represent syllables, and because the vast majority of early Chinese words were monosyllabic, individual characters wrote individual words in classical literature. At the same time, the syllables of any Chinese dialect number merely in the hundreds; even while further differentiated by different tones, this tightly limited repertoire of sound resulted in very large numbers of homophonous words. Prior to the large-scale post-Han differentiation and standardization of writing, the pervasive homophony of words combined with a limited

repertoire of characters led to the promiscuous use of “loan characters” (*jiajiezi*); that is, characters being “borrowed” to write a whole range of homophonous words. This widespread phonetic use of the writing system infused a considerable potential of ambiguity into all but the most pedestrian administrative pieces of writing and shows that writing – especially the writing of the texts of high antiquity – functioned properly only within a framework of interpretation, commentary, transcription, and personal instruction. All received Chinese texts from classical antiquity have reached us through the filter of these hermeneutic practices that continuously served textual continuity. At least through the late Six Dynasties, the writing system was not able to arrest the textual tradition; in order to continue, the tradition – and with it the writing system – had to evolve dynamically.

A second characteristic of Chinese characters, very much matching the isolating nature of the Chinese language, is their immutable form. Without profuse use of grammatical particles (*xuci*, also known as “function words”) – something normally avoided in classical literary writing – the written language was both extremely economical and seriously underdetermined in terms of tense, number, gender, and syntactical relations. Moreover, the proliferation of dialects over the vast geographic expanse of the realm of spoken Chinese, and diachronic changes within these dialects, are rendered moot and invisible by the stability of the characters. Yet, perhaps even more importantly, the stability of the characters has created an illusion of linguistic and cultural stability that generated a formidable reality in its own right: a continuous literary tradition of three millennia where any newly written text could be enriched by expressions from various earlier written texts without necessarily giving the appearance of stylistic antiquarianism or phonetic incompatibility. Since pre-imperial times, this phenomenon has led to the perpetuation of a literary koine that, while changing incrementally over time, was firmly guarded in its fundamental identity and continuity as it encompassed an ever-expanding universe of texts.

The third feature of Chinese characters that has contributed to the power and coherence of the written tradition is their use to write foreign words that were either phonetically transcribed or genuinely translated into Chinese. During the Six Dynasties, when Buddhism made its powerful entry into Chinese civilization, thousands of new terms and names found their way into the Chinese language. Written with existing Chinese characters that at the same time maintained their conventional use to write indigenous Chinese words, the foreign additions to the Chinese dictionary were easily naturalized and became part of the Chinese intellectual and literary tradition.

Finally, the basic monosyllabic structure of most Chinese words, cast into individual and immutable characters, provided the rhythms for both poetry and prose. Classical Chinese seems to fall naturally into simple rhythms of beats that are also words: the xx | xx structure of the *Classic of Poetry*, the xx | xxx meter of the classical poem in the five-syllable line, the alternating sequences of four and six characters in parallel prose, the four-syllable-line structure of proverbs and slogans, and other metric forms give the classical language a profoundly rhythmical appearance. The resulting regularity of poetic meter lends itself most naturally to the aesthetics of end-rhyme and parallelism, two defining formal features of Chinese literature that can be traced throughout the tradition.

These characteristics of the classical written language contributed forcefully to a tradition of Chinese literature that by now has continued well into its fourth millennium. Part of the attraction and cultural force of the writing system was based in its early mythology, which described the system of Chinese characters as not artificially devised but found in nature, imagining writing as an element of cosmic order. In the absence of a creator god, the order of writing was seen as emerging from the natural world and revealed to the sages of high antiquity. Xu Shen's postface to his *Shuowen jiezi* provides the mature statement of this mythology of writing, and indeed of civilization as a whole:

When in the time of antiquity Bao Xi [Fu Xi] ruled the world as king, he looked up and perceived the images in the skies, looked down and perceived the model order on the earth. He observed how the patterns of the birds and beasts were adapted to the earth. Nearby he took [his insights] from himself; further away he took them from the things of the world. Thereupon he first created the eight trigrams of the *Classic of Changes* in order to transmit the models and images . . . When Cang Jie, the scribe of the Yellow Emperor, saw the claw and hoof traces of birds and beasts, he recognized that these could be distinguished in their forms and differentiated from one another. [Thus] he first created incised writing . . . When Cang Jie first created writing, he probably made images of forms according to their categories; thus, [his simple characters] are called "patterns" [*wen*]. Later, these were increased in number through the mutual combination of elements of mimetic form and sound; [these complex characters] were called "graphs" [*zi*].

Here, the invention of the Chinese script is both a civilizational feat of the ancient sages and an act of "finding" writing in nature, tracing the origins of writing to both history and the natural cosmos and envisioning the script as a

representation of order that encompasses and comprehends both. This view of the origin of the Chinese script became enormously influential over the following centuries, extending into the cosmologies of literature, calligraphy, and painting. The idea that literature was an order of nature remained at the core of literary theory as expressed in Lu Ji's (261–303) "Poetic Exposition on Literature" (*Wen fu*), in Liu Xie's (ca 467–ca 522) *The Literary Mind and the Carving of the Dragon* (*Wenxin diaolong*), and even in Tang and Song ideas about "ancient-style literature" (*guwen*).

Xu Shen's account is rooted not only in ancient mythology, but also in one of the philosophical core texts of early China, the "Appended Phrases" (*Xici*, or *Xici zhuan*). This text, also known as the "Great Tradition" (*Dazhuan*) and likely dating from the third century BC, is a cosmological treatise that became appended to the *Classic of Changes* as one of the so-called "ten wings" (*shiyi*) of philosophical elaboration that by Han times were attributed to Confucius (551–479 BC?). Yet in the "Appended Phrases," writing—in its initial stages of "knotted cords" (*jiesheng*) and "scratched notations" (*shuqi*)—appears merely as one of many civilizational achievements, including agriculture, traffic, commerce, and so on; it is not yet connected to the culture heroes of high antiquity, nor is it related to the cosmological eight trigrams. This difference between the earlier and the later accounts points to the development of a textual culture during the early centuries of the Chinese empire when writing and literature became gradually established as the supreme expression of culture. The early Chinese term for writing-as-culture is *wen*, which originally denotes any kind of natural or human "pattern." Before the empire, the term was not restricted to "writing" but used broadly for "cultural accomplishment," especially in ritual demeanor and performance, including the "patterns" of music and material ornament. It was only in late Western Han times, around the middle of the first century BC, that *wen* began to denote primarily "writing." This shift was more than a change in meaning of a single word: it signaled an overall move of the cultural core from ritual to textual expression. It generated a cultural history of the written text together with the institutions to sustain it—first and foremost the imperial bureaucracy and its civil examination system—that remained intact and in place throughout the rise and fall of succeeding imperial dynasties. In this continuity, the written tradition constituted its own sovereign realm, parallel and always superior to the reality of imperial rule, and explicitly imbued with the capacity not only to express human emotion and thought, but to reflect the nature and condition of social and cosmological order. Yet despite the powerful interpretation that the later tradition has exerted over its origins, it is imperative not to project this later understanding

of *wen* into the twelve centuries of Chinese writing before the late Western Han cultural shift.

II. Inscriptions on oracle bones and bronze artifacts

Shang dynasty oracle records are brief, seemingly bureaucratic documents of religious practice that lack any literary aesthetics. Following an act of royal divination during which the bone or plastron cracked under the local application of intense heat, an inscription was added right next to the crack – the pattern of which presumably represented the response from the ancestral spirits – to record the original divination charge in an alternating pair (“It may rain / It may not rain”) as well the diviner or king’s prediction according to the cracks. On occasion, a verification of the royal prediction was added at a later point. In addition, the inscriptions routinely provide the notation of the date of the divination as well as the name of the diviner. Especially during the early reign of King Wu Ding (r. ca 1200–1181 BC), oracle questions covered the entire range of royal activities (sacrificial rituals, military expeditions, agriculture, meteorology, astrology, natural calamities, hunting) along with matters concerning the personal well-being of the king (toothaches, dreams, illnesses, births). After King Wu Ding, however, divinations became not only far more numerous but also increasingly limited to matters of the royal ancestral sacrifices, suggesting that divination became a more formalized routine. The oracle questions of Anyang did not allow the unexpected: phrased in formulaic yes/no alternatives and thus strictly limiting the range of possible answers, they expressed the confidence of the living in a predictable world where the spirits were not considered capricious – or, perhaps, the desire to impose limits on spirits the King and his diviners did consider capricious.

While the Late Shang kings placed great emphasis on the continuity with their venerated ancestors to whom they also sacrificed, it is less clear why they produced so many oracle records. These records were sometimes carved weeks after the divination; moreover, there is a considerable number of used but uninscribed bones and plastrons. It is unlikely that the inscriptions were meant as historical records. Their dating system of the sixty-day cycle gave neither a year notation nor the name of the king; the unwieldy shape of bones and plastrons, especially in light of their sheer numbers, made them cumbersome to stack and keep track of. Moreover, some very large characters were apparently meant for display while others were not only incised but also filled with red color. The yes/no alternatives were written in beautiful symmetry, and in a number of cases, the same inscriptions were repeated over

a series of bones or plastrons. None of these efforts added informational value to an archival use. Thus the records' main purpose may have been to show the king in his prerogative to communicate with the Shang royal ancestors and to secure their blessings. The aesthetic features of the inscriptions, their semantic ossification over time (which evidently did not render them less valuable), their confidence in a universe that could be divined and explained, and the way in which they frequently show the king as religious agent ("The king, testing the charge, said: . . .") all contributed to the ritual and political representation of the Shang kings. In this the oracle records are related to the only other group of texts extant from high antiquity in durable material, the Shang and Western Zhou inscriptions on bronze paraphernalia used in the ancestral sacrifices. These texts belonged to the same political and religious contexts as the oracle inscriptions, and both bodies of early writing must therefore be considered in light of one another.

While ritual bronze vessels pre-date the period of the divination records by more than two centuries, the casting of inscribed objects arose only around the time of the oracle inscriptions. It then developed rapidly under the Zhou dynasty, who had overthrown the Shang in roughly 1046 BC and maintained the royal capital in the Wei river valley of modern Shaanxi Province until driven eastward by non-Zhou invaders in 771 BC. It is this period of nearly three centuries – retrospectively called the Western Zhou – and especially its early reigns, that to later historical imagination became the golden age of political order and civilization, providing the cultural framework and moral orientation for the subsequent literature of Eastern Zhou (771–256 BC) and early imperial times. While the Western Zhou rulers soon abandoned the bone and plastron oracles of the Shang for new forms of divination, they developed the art of bronze casting to a level of technological and aesthetic sophistication unseen in any other early civilization. They did so on a very large scale, producing thousands, perhaps tens of thousands of bronze objects that show a dazzling array of forms and designs. These precious objects belonged entirely to the royal and aristocratic elite, who used them primarily in ancestral sacrifices and further at secular occasions such as banquets. The earliest Zhou bronzes seem eccentric and inferior compared to the Late Shang artifacts, but gradually the Western Zhou developed its own formal language for what were the most precious artifacts of the time. The casting of ritual bronzes was not entirely limited to the royal court, but it appears that throughout Western Zhou times it mostly remained to some extent under court authority, as did the inscriptions. Bronzes from the early part of the dynasty have been discovered in tombs spread along a northern Chinese corridor that extends from the Wei

river area eastward along the Yellow river. Yet after the mid-tenth century BC, bronzes were largely concentrated in the Wei river core region of the Western Zhou, where they have been found both in tombs and, tightly and carefully packed, in storage pits. These pits from the latter half of the Western Zhou, when the dynasty began its political and military decline, were apparently dug to hide the bronzes from invaders until their owners could retrieve them at a later, more secure time. This time never came after the Western Zhou was displaced eastward to the area of modern Luoyang in 771 BC.

The bronze inscriptions before the mid-Western Zhou reign of King Mu (r. 956–918 BC) are rather irregular in their visual layout. In their vast majority, they contain only single characters or brief phrases of five characters or fewer, simply naming the donor of the bronze artifact, yet a small number of individual vessels could enter into long accounts. The most extensive inscription known so far, that of the famous Mao Gong tripod, contains 498 characters and surpasses even the longest hymns from the *Classic of Poetry*. With very few exceptions, all vessel inscriptions were cast on the inside of either the vessel, its lid, or both, while the outside was aesthetically defined through the vessel shape and often elaborate ornament that included rich geometrical designs as well as abstract yet imposing representations of animal shapes and monstrous faces (*taotie*). Most of the early vessels were of limited size – rarely surpassing fifty centimeters in diameter – that revealed their delicate features only upon close and careful inspection. During the ancestral sacrifices, their inscriptions were covered with the offerings and could not be read (except, perhaps, by the descending spirits invited to partake of the food and wine). The viewing public of these artifacts was firmly circumscribed, comprising only the lineage members and their guests in the sacrifices and banquets, or in the case of the royal house including high-ranking officials as well as diplomats from subordinate or neighboring polities. The lineage members would have been able to associate the individual bronzes, which were kept for generations, with specific ancestors. While inscribed vessels were particularly prized, numerous bronzes were cast without inscriptions. However, due to the sheer demand of economic, technological, cultural, and social resources that were on display in such an exquisitely crafted artifact, even uninscribed vessels were still fully capable of signifying the donor's merits and recognition. For these merits, recognized by the royal court and recorded on bamboo, the casting and possession of a bronze vessel was granted.

Over the course of the Western Zhou, the average bronze inscription grew in length to comprise several dozens of characters. Not by accident, most

of the longest and historically informative inscriptions date from the mid-tenth century BC onward, a period of profound social, political, and ritual reforms. These inscriptions show a number of new developments following King Zhao's (r. 977/975–957 BC) disastrous military campaign southward, which resulted in complete defeat and the death of the king. During the following reign of King Mu, power was no longer as concentrated in the royal family as it had been before; instead, large numbers of official appointments were given to members of an institutional elite not related by blood. Meanwhile, the eastern part of the Zhou realm appears to have slipped from royal control, as the archaeological record shows inscribed vessels from the mid- and late Western Zhou period being largely limited to the Wei river capital region. In this time of crisis, administrative reforms led to a more complex bureaucracy and inspired more elaborate forms of court ritual, most prominent among them the ceremony of royal appointment. The larger size and bolder ornament of the vessels suggests that rituals were now conducted in front of larger, less intimate audiences. Vessels were now produced in much greater numbers and appeared increasingly in sets that reflect the sumptuary rules of social hierarchy. Unified in both material design and linguistic expression, they testify not only to new forms of mass production but also to the increased degree of sociopolitical institutionalization and control that the royal court exerted over its shrinking sphere of influence. This is further expressed through the proliferation of official titles and the detailed accounts of bureaucratic and ritual procedure in the inscriptions from this period.

The appointment inscriptions provide a standardized account of a court procedure that was as ceremonial as it was bureaucratic. In a solemn ritual, the king (or sometimes a high-level aristocrat) issued a charge (*ming*) to the appointee and bestowed (*ci*) on him the lavish insignia and paraphernalia appropriate to his status and task. The charge, written on a bundle of bamboo slips, was first read out loud and then handed over to the appointee. After the ceremony, it served as the basis for the bronze inscription to be cast in the appointee's name. Within the appointee's ancestral sacrifices, the inscribed words were then perhaps transformed back into speech and integrated with the presentations of food and wine, dance, music, and song.

These longer inscriptions are composed according to a fixed tripartite structure. The first part, usually the most extensive, provides the record of speeches from the appointment ceremony. In its fullest form, this record first details the appointee's self-presentation of his ancestors' and his own merits, followed by the royal response of approval and charge of appointment. These

statements are sometimes introduced by the formulae “I, X, said” and/or “the king approvingly said” – on occasion abbreviated to the simple verb “said,” with the subject eliminated – that reflect the oral performance of the appointment ceremony. More often, however, only one of the two highly ritualized speeches is cast in the vessel, with the other one being only implied. While the appointee’s speech is more individualized in its account of past merits, the royal speech is almost entirely codified according to a standard format.

In the second and much shorter part of the inscription, the donor dedicates his vessel (“I have made this precious . . .”), identifying the artifact and sometimes also the specific ancestors to whom he will sacrifice with it. This self-referential part marks the making and sacrificial use of the inscribed artifact as an act of virtue and defines the donor’s place vis-à-vis his illustrious forebears. While the record of the appointment ceremony presents the donor’s past achievements as the prerequisite for the casting of the vessel, the statement of dedication, moving from past to present, focuses on the casting and use of the artifact itself. Finally, the third part consists of a formulaic and often rhymed prayer through which the donor asks his ancestors for their future blessings as the response to his sacrifices.

In their announcements of merit, Western Zhou bronze inscriptions of a certain size concern a range of topics, including records of royal appointments, land contracts and other legal agreements, marriages, diplomatic visits, military achievements, and others. Yet while such details are prized by modern scholars for their historical information, they were also the easiest to dispose of: the vast majority of inscriptions are shorter and tend to comprise merely the dedication and prayer. Further condensed, an inscription contained only the dedication identifying the donor through the formulaic “I, X, have made this vessel” or, in the extreme case, simply giving his name. While these inscriptions – not to mention the thousands of un-inscribed artifacts – evidently defy any purpose of recording historical detail, they still point to their donor’s accomplishments, without which no right to cast such a vessel would have been granted.

The rigorous ritual regime that governed the appointment inscriptions can be gathered from five late Western Zhou inscriptions that provide a fairly comprehensive picture of the ceremony. These inscriptions date from around 825 to 785 BC and recognize different individuals in different positions, but they are largely reproduced verbatim down to the list of awarded insignia. The Feng tripod inscription (809 BC) of ninety-seven characters reads as follows:

{Part 1} It was the nineteenth year, the fourth month, after the full moon, the day *xinmao*. The king was in the Zhao [Temple] of the Kang Palace. He arrived at the Great Chamber and assumed his position. Assisted to his right by Intendant Xun, [I,] Feng entered the gate. [I] assumed [my] position in the center of the court, facing north [toward the king]. Scribe Liu presented the king with the written order. The king called out to the Scribe of the Interior, X, to announce the written bestowal to [me,] Feng: “[I bestow on you] a black jacket with embroidered hem, red kneepads, a scarlet demi-circlet, a chime pennant, and a bridle with bit and cheek pieces; use [these] to perform your service!” [I] bowed with my head touching the ground. {Part 2} “[May I, Feng,] dare in response to extol the Son of Heaven’s greatly illustrious and abundant blessings and on account of this make for my August Deceased Father, the Elder Zheng(?), and his wife Zheng [this] precious tripod!” {Part 3} “May [I enjoy] extended longevity for ten thousand years! May sons of sons, grandsons of grandsons, forever treasure [this tripod]!”

The uniformity of such inscriptions points to the ritual institutions of the Zhou royal court of King Xuan (827–782 BC), to the existence of a royal archive that maintained the continuous identity of royal announcements over decades, and to the legal stature of the document. Just at the time when the appointment ceremony became a major part of Western Zhou administration and ritual, inscriptions on legal contracts also appeared in larger numbers, typically listing the names and titles of the officials who served as witnesses at the time of the legal agreement. Similarly, the appointment inscriptions included the names and titles of the officials who recited the charge and hence were witnesses to the appointee’s claim to his inscribed vessel. As a result, each inscription became part of a larger ritual continuum that was further expressed through the formulaic standardization of the shape and ornamentation of bronze vessels. This overarching stability in both language and bronze design suggests that by the second half of the tenth century, the casting of bronze inscriptions, especially those recording royal appointments, was largely under centralized control. By contrast, even when some of the highest officials such as the “scribes” (*shi*) noted above commissioned vessels on their own authority, they were comparatively crude in their bronze work and sometimes semiliterate in their writing.

Western Zhou bronze inscriptions are in many respects the fountainhead of Chinese literature. Their texts emerged from meticulously scripted court rituals and were presented in the religious context of elaborate sacrifices to the ancestors, fusing political legitimacy and religious communication into a single form of expression. Their underlying set of religious beliefs was oriented toward the humans of previous generations whose spirits were considered

still present and powerful. Cast into precious and durable artifacts of display, bronze inscriptions were more than just silent writings: their gradually emerging aesthetics of rhyme, meter, onomatopoeia, and other euphonic elements indicate that they were meant to be recited and heard.

As such, bronze inscriptions were both more and less than historical records. Their formulaic rhetoric left little room for historical detail but idealized the past in a standardized idiom. This linguistic structure embodied the ideology of the ancestral sacrifice itself, namely the continuity with the models of the past; furthermore, they recorded not what had happened but what was to be remembered. Thus, while dozens of Western Zhou bronze inscriptions offer accounts of war, none records a defeat; even King Zhao's disastrous campaign is retold as having successfully "tamed" the southern regions. Yet, at the same time, bronze inscriptions were also much more than the archival records that presumably contained a fuller (and more accurate?) version of the past: their mode of commemoration produced the moral and political paradigms of history and identity; their poetic idiom spoke at once to the spirits of the dead and the community of the living; their repetition in sets of bronze vessels marked the status of the donor entitled to these sets; their aesthetic form, shimmering from the depths of the most exquisite of artifacts, showed them as insignia of great attainment; and the very fact of their existence displayed writing itself as a conspicuous expression of religious and political power.

The mid- and late Western Zhou elite were aware of these qualities of inscribed artifacts. Moreover, in offering an increasingly elaborate account of court ritual and royal administration, the bronze texts came to exhibit the self-consciousness of a hereditary class of "scribes" or "makers of records" (*zuoc*) as the highest-ranking officials at court. No inscription portrays them involved in the actual process of writing; instead, they oversaw the production of writing and performed its ritual presentation. Their most famous exemplar is Scribe Qiang, who around 900 BC, or perhaps one generation later, had a simple yet elegant bronze water basin of 47.3 centimeters in diameter inscribed. When excavated from a pit near Zhuangbai (Fufeng, Shaanxi) in December 1975, it was accompanied by 102 other bronze vessels – seventy-three of them bearing inscriptions – that mostly came from four generations of his family of royal secretaries. Its 16.2-centimeter-high exterior base and wall bear a bird ornament in the flat, continuous ribbons familiar from other bronze vessels of the middle Western Zhou period. The inscription is cast on the vessel's otherwise unadorned interior.

In it – likely as a statement of merit – Scribe Qiang presented himself as a member of the Western Zhou court, boasting a distinguished ancestral line

of royal secretaries. A master of the dynasty's political and cultural memory, he traced and praised the genealogy of the Western Zhou kings and then paired them in no less eulogistic fashion with the line of his ancestors who had, one after the other, served the succeeding Zhou rulers. This text is the most powerful self-representation of an early Chinese functionary of writing known so far, testifying to the mature ritual institutions of the Western Zhou court as well as to the donor's self-awareness as the heir to a lineage of royal secretaries. The 276 characters (including nine ligatures) are cast into two beautifully symmetric columns of nine vertical lines each. Each line comprises fifteen characters evenly spaced apart; only in the final line, the carver of the mold accommodated twenty characters. This slight mark of imperfection illustrates two conflicting goals: first, it suggests a preexisting text that could not be shortened by even a mere five characters. Second, while the carver could have begun another vertical line, he chose, or was instructed, not to do so – clearly to preserve the balance of columns. Striking a remarkable compromise, he respected both the integrity of the text and the symmetry of its display. Compared to most other vessel types that in their appearance are defined by shape and ornament while more or less hiding their inscriptions on the inside, the open surface of the water basin was ideal for displaying two columns of elegant characters, promoting, above anything else, an image of calligraphic beauty and order that eloquently bespeaks the awareness of the visual power of Chinese writing even in this very early period. Scribe Qiang's water basin inscription was meant to be seen.

In the first column, Scribe Qiang eulogizes the lineage and achievements of the Zhou royal house, presumably concluding with his own ruler. In the second half, starting almost precisely at the column break, he lists and praises his own ancestors and their accomplishments, finally ending with his own person. The symmetrical order of the text is further enhanced by its literary aesthetics of mostly four-syllable-line verse and the regular use of end rhyme; in their coherence, both features are unusual for their time. Most remarkably, Scribe Qiang applied rhyme and meter to the two long genealogies but not to the final prayer section, reversing the usual aesthetic choice of most other inscriptions. He thus granted the weight of aesthetic emphasis not to the prayer but to the narrative that defined both himself and his ancestors in their intimate relation to the Zhou kings.

In its synthesis of visual appearance, literary aesthetics, and narrative structure, Scribe Qiang's inscription is the epitome of order and regularity. It represents the ideal political order of the Zhou royal lineage, the ideal order of the Qiang family line, and, finally, the ideal order of the written artifact. The

combination of Zhou dynastic memory, perfected literary form, and superb visual display reveals an extreme degree of authorial self-consciousness; likewise, the scribe's vocabulary significantly exceeds the repertoire of other inscriptions. While this inscription has no match in the archaeological record of its period, it shows the possibilities of writing in the royal institutions of political and religious ritual around 900 BC. The only comparable example so far, this one coming from the early eighth century BC, is found in the Qiu pan-water basin, excavated in 2003 together with twenty-six other inscribed vessels from a pit in Yangjiacun (Meixian, Shaanxi). Here again, in a text of 372 characters that includes a royal appointment charge, the genealogy of Zhou kings is provided in the service of the praise of one's ancestors, who are eulogized for having served the individual kings. The royal genealogies presented in these inscriptions prove the continuity of political memory preserved in the archival records that could be selectively applied to the vessel inscriptions. With the latter, any specific instance of memory could be extended to whole series of bronze paraphernalia or divided and distributed over a series of artifacts, especially, though not exclusively, in bell inscriptions. At the same time, the literary aesthetics of a text – rhyme, meter, onomatopoeia, and so on – depended on oral recitation to come to life in the multimedia performance of the ancestral sacrifice.

Following the fall of the Western Zhou in 771 BC and the eastward relocation of their capital to the area around modern Luoyang (Henan), the royal prerogative to commission inscribed bronze vessels was increasingly assumed by the lords of the states of the Spring and Autumn Period (771–481 BC). The decline of royal authority and rapid disintegration of the Zhou realm into numerous polities, culminating in the centuries of warfare during the Warring States Period (476–221 BC), is directly reflected in the rhetoric of the inscriptions. Bronze donors no longer referred to the Son of Heaven as the sole origin of power but instead – as on a set of bells cast by the lord of Qin around 700 BC – usurped the royal claim of responding directly to Heaven and being in charge of the realm. While the individual states developed distinct regional styles in their bronze décor, the language of their inscriptions remained the Western Zhou ritual idiom which, as a result, became increasingly ossified and atavistic. The linguistic differences across far-flung regions and several centuries were silenced in the stereotyped diction of the inscriptions. The number of long inscriptions presenting the donor's accomplishments to his ancestors declined in favor of shorter, preconceived formulae that spoke more to the living than to the spirits. More extensive texts such as the inscriptions cast by King Cuo of Zhongshan (r. 323–313 BC) expressed a claim for secular

political authority largely divorced from the earlier forms of religious communication. Not accidentally, King Cuo's long texts extolling the feats of their donor in beautiful gold-inlaid calligraphy appeared on the outside of the vessels, signifying a new mode of representation for an audience comprising, first and foremost, members of the political community.

Especially from the mid-tenth century BC onward, the bronze inscriptions of Western and Eastern Zhou times – texts unmarred by later editing – are closely related to the early hymns and royal speeches preserved in the received *Classic of Poetry* and the *Classic of Documents*. They were used in the same ceremonial contexts, are written in the same idiom of archaic ritual language, display the same (and over time shifting) concerns with religious communication and political authority, and are primary expressions of an early Chinese cultural memory and identity that was to be secured through elaborately orchestrated ritual performance. While the great historical narratives of the *Poetry* and the *Documents* are not replicated in the inscriptions, they share with the latter the formal and functional paradigms of early literary expression. Like the material of bronze, the poetic speech of these received texts was both exquisite and durable, expressing what must not be forgotten and providing the format in which memory, distilled from history, could be secured. The physical site common to both the inscriptions and the earliest layers of the transmitted Classics was the ancestral temple – an arena for ritual performance and itself the spatial embodiment of memory and identity.

Linguistic evidence, including reference to official titles, ideological concepts, ritual procedures, and administrative structures, suggests that the bulk of the early layers of the *Poetry* and the *Documents* comes from this time of political reorganization and ritual reform. These classical texts, valorized as the hallmark of Zhou civilization, apparently emerged when the Zhou began to experience themselves in a time of crisis and loss, forever separated from their glorious early days. To the late Western Zhou, these days were now to be remembered as irretrievably past. Thus the memory of the dynastic founders, kings Wen and Wu, celebrated in the *Poetry* and the *Documents*, is very rarely invoked in early Western Zhou inscriptions but becomes decidedly more emphatic in late ones; likewise, the expression “Son of Heaven” (*tianzi*) as the designation of the king becomes common only during the middle of the Western Zhou and truly prominent only toward its end. The “Mandate of Heaven” (*tianming*), in traditional historiography a centerpiece of early Western Zhou rule and rhetoric and found in a number of early *Poetry* hymns and *Documents* royal speeches, is all but invisible in Western Zhou inscriptions. Considering this evidence, it appears that the speeches and

hymns traditionally associated with the early reigns of the Western Zhou were, in fact, already expressions of remembrance of a golden age lost. Like the bronze inscriptions, the hymns and speeches are devoted not to history but to memory. Late Western Zhou bronzes are not interested in recent events or rulers but in the idealized moment of Zhou origin, as are the hymns and speeches.

III. The *Classic of Poetry*

Chinese poetry emerged from the ancestral sacrifices and political rituals of the Western Zhou, where it was produced by court officials. In its early stage, this poetry is best understood formally as a mode of intensified, rhythmic speech or song that included the use of end rhyme, meter, and onomatopoeic expressions that often took the form of rhyming, alliterative, and reduplicative binomes – two-character compounds that were usually euphonic in nature. In somewhat irregular fashion, these elements appear already in the earliest Western Zhou bronze inscriptions. Following the mid-Western Zhou, and especially over the course of the Eastern Zhou period, their systematic use in inscriptions increased steadily, though never reaching the level of pervasive coherence exhibited in the received version of the *Classic of Poetry*. One should not, however, apply the most rigid formal definition to Western Zhou poetry, especially as our current version of the *Classic of Poetry* is the product of later editing and systematization. A somewhat looser understanding of poetry as intensified, rhythmic speech, directed at both the spirits and the political elite, also allows us to better appreciate the continuity of such speech across the different “genres” of ritual hymns, bronze inscriptions, and the royal pronouncements of the *Classic of Documents*. These expressions form the backbone of early historical consciousness, mythological remembrance, and political representation.

In addition to the *Documents* and the *Poetry*, the third transmitted text probably dating from late Western Zhou times is the *Classic of Changes*, originally a divination manual that over the course of Warring States and early imperial times was transformed into a cosmological text complete with a series of philosophical commentaries known as the “ten wings.” Since Han times, when the core text became attributed to the duke of Zhou (r. 1042–1036 BC) and its commentaries to Confucius, the *Changes* was considered the most fundamental of the Five Classics (*wu jing*), generating an enormous amount of speculative philosophical scholarship that culminated in the Song dynasty “Learning of the Way” (*daoxue*, often translated as “neo-Confucianism”). Modern scholarship

has identified poetic passages and nature imagery in the earliest layers of the *Changes* that seem parallel to those of the *Poetry* and reflect another use of archaic song. The “line statements” (*yaoci*) to the six lines of each of the sixty-four hexagrams show a preference for the four-syllable-line meter and an irregular use of end rhyme. While the traditional reception of the *Changes* has not paid much attention to this aesthetic dimension of the textual core, it has been rediscovered in recent efforts to understand the *Changes* as a work of religious practice. At a minimum the poetic form of the original divination manual testifies to the overall coherence of intensified speech across the range of Western Zhou religious expression; to speak in poetry was to speak with truth and authority.

The same applies to the declamations in rhythmic speech that are attributed to the early Zhou kings and preserved in the *Documents* – majestic harangues that in part have been interpreted as dramatic libretti and stage directions for the steps of ritual dances. Yet the most comprehensive and lasting representation of archaic Chinese poetry is the corpus preserved in the *Poetry*, an anthology of songs that encompasses the voices of rulers as well as those of the common people, verses of mythological remembrance and celebration, as well as lyrics of love and hope, solitude and despair. It is this all-embracing view of human existence, expressed in the solemn and straightforward diction of pre-classical Chinese, that has established the *Poetry* as the foundational text of Chinese literature. This is not to say that its songs should be subsumed under the category of the “lyrical” as opposed to dramatic and epic forms of expression. While the individual text of ancient Chinese literature is incomparably shorter than, say, those of the Greek epics or plays, the *Poetry* contains magnificent examples of polyvocal performance texts alongside extensive narratives that over the course of a series of short poems establish, albeit in compressed form, the foundational story of Zhou civilization.

The received *Poetry* contains 305 songs that are traditionally dated, if without specific evidence, to between 1000 and 600 BC. None of the songs is attributed to a particular author, although four of its ritual hymns contain self-referential statements that seem reminiscent of a bronze vessel donor’s statement of dedication, as in the example of “Lofty the Southern Mountain” (Jienanshan, *Mao* 191): “Jiafu has made this recitation / in order to lay bare the king’s disorder. / Use it to change your heart / in order to nourish the ten thousand states.”

A few ritual hymns show tenuous links to texts in the *Documents*, while other songs seem to reflect on historical events from Eastern Zhou times; yet in no case can authorship be established. Moreover, the attempts of

Han and later scholars to assign individual songs, or groups of songs, to specific historical circumstances are retrospective assertions of dubious origin. The same uncertainty applies to many of the received interpretations of the ancient verses, as has become clear from recently excavated Warring States and early Han manuscripts, which for now provide the earliest discussions of the songs – and differ decidedly from all received readings. For more than two millennia, the *Poetry* has remained hermeneutically inexhaustible, continuously transcending the historicity of all its interpretations.

While several pre-imperial texts – including the *Analects* (*Lunyu*) and the recently excavated manuscript “Confucius’ Discussion of the *Poetry*” (Kongzi shilun) of ca 300 BC – show Confucius involved with the anthology, it was Sima Qian (ca 145–ca 86 BC) in his *Records of the Historian* (*Shiji*) who first attributed the compilation to him, noting that Confucius had chosen the “three hundred” songs from an existing corpus of three thousand. This statement may primarily reflect an early imperial tendency to relate all of the Five Classics in one way or another to Confucius, by then the model sage and primary classicist who was believed to have opened the connection to the civilization of the early Zhou through his writing, editing, and interpretation of the Classics. The *Analects*, a compilation of short sayings and dialogues believed to come from subsequent generations of disciples, cites “the master” as having characterized the *Poetry* on various occasions. With the ancient songs, “one can inspire, observe, unite, and express resentment” as well as learn “in great numbers the names of fish, birds, beasts, plants, and trees” (*Analects* 17/9); those who fail to study them “have nothing to express themselves with” (16/13) and are like a man who “stands with his face straight to the wall” (17/10); moreover, the goal was not mere memorization but the ability to properly apply the songs in social intercourse (13/5). Early criticisms, as in *Master Mo* (*Mozi*), subsequently ridiculed the classicists (*ru*, a term that only in specific contexts denotes the followers of Confucius) for being consumed with singing, dancing, and putting to music the “three hundred songs” (*Mozi* Chapter 48). The two sides confirm what is apparent from both the received tradition and an increasing number of newly excavated manuscripts on wood, bamboo, and silk: the *Poetry* was by far the most prominent and most quoted text in Warring States and early Han times. It was not merely a particular text used by the classicist tradition; it was the text around which this tradition arranged itself.

The received anthology is divided into four sections, comprising 160 “Airs of the States” (*guofeng*), seventy-four “Minor Court Hymns” (*xiaoya*), thirty-one “Major Court Hymns” (*daya*), and forty (mostly sacrificial) “Eulogies” (*song*), an early division that is now confirmed by excavated manuscripts. In the

received text, the “Airs of the States” are further divided into fifteen sections named after a range of Eastern Zhou geographical regions and states. These extend roughly along the course of the Yellow River from modern Shandong in the east to modern Shaanxi – the Western Zhou capital area – in the west, associating the ancient songs with the northern heartland of Western and early Eastern Zhou China, and hence also with the language of the bronze inscriptions. Whereas the four-syllable meter was fully developed by the time of the Scribe Qiang inscription but rarely applied consistently in inscriptions, it is observed in roughly 95 percent of all lines in the received *Poetry*. Quotations in Warring States and early Han manuscripts show a slightly more varied meter – suggesting later standardization and/or the existence of early parallel versions – but by and large attest to the regularity of form by the fourth century BC. The dominant four-syllable meter, with a slight caesura between the second and the third characters, most likely emerged with the earliest layers of the anthology, the ancestral and banquet hymns performed to the slow and heavy rhythms of bells, drums, and chime stones.

In terms of content, a line can be drawn between the “Airs of the States” and the hymns and eulogies. The latter comprise mostly sacrificial eulogies, extensive court panegyrics, and the great dynastic hymns recalling the foundation and rise of the Zhou. The former, by contrast, are mostly shorter lyrics composed in simple formulaic language that frequently seem to assume the voice of the common folk: songs of love, courtship, and longing; of soldiers on campaign and hardworking farmers; of political satire and bitter protest. While Warring States and early imperial texts frequently invoked the “Major” and to some lesser extent also the “Minor Court Hymns” and “Eulogies,” the later (post-Han) tradition clearly favored the “Airs of the States” for the presumed authenticity of their personal and political sentiments.

In recent years, fragments from the *Poetry* have appeared in six excavated manuscripts: the “Confucius’ Discussion of the *Poetry*” from ca 300 BC, a fragmentary manuscript of slightly more than a thousand characters on twenty-nine partially broken bamboo slips that, written in the calligraphy of the southern state of Chu and probably looted from a tomb in modern Hubei, was acquired in Hong Kong by the Shanghai Museum; two versions of the “Black Robes” (Ziyi) text – one from Guodian (Jingmen, Hubei; ca 300 BC), the other again in the Shanghai Museum – that the tradition has preserved in the Han dynasty compilation *Records of Ritual* (*Liji*); the “Five Forms of Conduct” (Wuxing) from Guodian, with another version, now including an elaborating commentary, from Mawangdui tomb no. 3 near Changsha (Hunan; tomb

closed 168 BC); and a fragmentary version of the anthology, containing sixty-five songs known from the “Airs of the States” and four from the “Minor Court Hymns,” that was found in Shuanggudui (Fuyang, Anhui; tomb closed 165 BC). These manuscripts on silk (Mawangdui) and bamboo (all others) have confirmed the received text of the *Poetry* in two ways: with a single exception, all quoted poems can be found in the extant anthology, and the individual characters, while written with numerous graphic variants, represent the sounds, and hence likely the words, of the text as we know it. By 300 BC at the latest, a canonical anthology similar to the present one was already in place, if still far from the later standardization in orthography and interpretation.

The received version of the anthology is known as the *Mao Tradition of the Poetry* (*Mao shi zhuan*) and attributed to the otherwise obscure scholar Mao Heng of the third to second century BC. In Han times, it was known as one of four hermeneutic traditions of the *Poetry* and was patronized by Liu De, Prince Xian of Hejian (r. 155–129 BC), the older brother of Emperor Wu (r. 141–87 BC) and a man famously fond of ancient writings. The other three traditions – the *Lu Poetry* (*Lu shi*), *Qi Poetry* (*Qi shi*), and *Poetry of [Mr.] Han [Ying]* (*Han shi*) – had been endowed with chairs at the Imperial Academy under Emperor Wu, while the *Mao Tradition* received this status only under Emperor Ping (r. 1 BC–AD 6). Over the course of the Eastern Han, however, the *Mao Tradition* began to eclipse the other “three lineages” (*sanjia*) partly as the result of a debate that favored versions of the Classics in “ancient script” (*guwen*) over those in “modern script” (*jinwen*) – versions first written down or transcribed in Han times. While in fact none of the four traditions was written in “ancient” (pre-Qin) script, advocates of the *Mao Tradition* argued that its text had descended from the first generation of Confucius’ disciples and was therefore of supreme authenticity and authority. Strong support for the *Mao Poetry* came from the *guwen* partisan Xu Shen, who in his *Shuowen* dictionary quoted the *Poetry* overwhelmingly from the Mao version. In the next step, Zheng Xuan (127–200), the greatest and most influential Eastern Han commentator on the Five Classics, complemented the *Mao Tradition* with his own interpretation. The resulting *Commentary to the Mao Tradition of the Poetry* (*Mao shi zhuan jian*) became the base text for the *Poetry* in the imperially commissioned *Correct Meaning of the Five Classics* (*Wujing zhengyi*) of AD 642; in 653 it was made the authorized commentary, confirming the *Mao Tradition* as the imperial version of the *Poetry*.

In Zheng Xuan’s own time, the *Mao Tradition* was still secondary to the *Lu Poetry*, the exegetical tradition founded by Shen Pei. Shen was the student of a student of the late Warring States thinker Xun Kuang (or Xun Qing,

ca 335–238 BC), the principal author of the late third-century BC *ru* (classicist) text *Xunzi*, and became appointed as imperial “erudite” (*boshi*) for the *Poetry* under Emperor Wen (r. 180–157 BC). The influence of the Lu exegesis can be traced across a range of Western Han sources and as late as AD 175 was chosen for the inscriptions of the Five Classics on stone stelae erected outside the Imperial Academy. The catalogue of the Western Han imperial library, compiled after 26 BC and preserved in abbreviated form in the “Monograph on Arts and Writings” (*Yiwen zhi*) of Ban Gu’s (32–92) *History of the Han* (*Han shu*), lists fourteen works from all four Han traditions; yet according to the catalogue in the *History of the Sui* (*Sui shu*; completed AD 657), the Qi and Lu traditions had died out during the third and fourth centuries and even the only work still known from *Mr. Han’s Poetry* – *Mr. Han’s Exoteric Tradition of the Poetry* (*Hanshi waizhuan*), a text later reconstituted – was no longer being taught. Meanwhile, subcommentaries to the *Mao Tradition* had greatly proliferated.

These developments, spanning the third through the seventh centuries, postdate the original compilation of the *Poetry* by at least five hundred years and have erased most traces of early poetic hermeneutics. No independent evidence supports the claims for the early authenticity and hence superiority of the *Mao Tradition* – claims deeply tied to the Eastern Han quest for cultural tradition and political legitimacy. According to Han political discourse, the *Poetry*, together with the other Classics, fell victim to the large-scale book proscription that the chancellor Li Si engineered under the Qin First Emperor (Qin Shihuang, r. as emperor 221–207 BC). Yet because the *Poetry*, unlike some other (and most later) texts, was preserved also in oral memory, it could be reconstituted under the Han dynasty. The Han account of the “burning of the books” is dubious, however, and may primarily reflect the ideological needs of both the Han court classicists and the ruling house; traces of official patronage of the *Poetry* are abundantly present in early imperial sources such as the Qin First Emperor’s stele inscriptions and early Han state ritual hymns (see below). Furthermore, the manuscript fragments from both before and after the Qin show the same type and degree of textual variation.

The received sequence of the four sections of the *Poetry* runs opposite to their presumed chronological appearance, with the “Eulogies” and “Major Court Hymns” considered the earliest parts of the collection. The “Eulogies” consist of thirty-one “Eulogies of Zhou” (Zhou song), four “Eulogies of Lu” (Lu song), and five “Eulogies of Shang” (Shang song). Of these, the “Eulogies of Zhou,” with their lack of stanza divisions, relatively irregular meter, near absence of rhyme, and general lack of aesthetic polish, appear as the most

archaic group of songs and are widely believed to reflect the original language of early through mid-Western Zhou times. These mostly very short pieces – twenty of them comprising fewer than fifty characters – are sacrificial hymns addressed to the early ancestors of the Western Zhou royal house, ending with Kings Cheng (r. 1042/35–1006 BC) and Kang (r. 1005/3–978 BC). (By contrast, the “Eulogies of Lu” and “Eulogies of Shang” are much later pieces that in length and elaborate poetic form concur largely with the “Major Court Hymns.”) The first “Eulogy of Zhou” in the received anthology, “Clear Temple” (Qing miao; *Mao* 266), is the song with which the Duke of Zhou purportedly sacrificed to King Wen (r. 1099/56–1050 BC), father of the dynastic founder King Wu (r. 1049/45–1043 BC). Since Eastern Zhou times, this text has been celebrated as the model of a sacrificial hymn:

Ah! Solemn is the clear temple,
 reverent and concordant the illustrious assistants.
 Dignified, dignified are the many officers,
 holding fast to the virtue of King Wen.
 Responding in praise to the one in Heaven,
 they hurry swiftly within the temple.
 Greatly illustrious, greatly honored,
 may [King Wen] never be weary of [us] men.

Six other “Eulogies of Zhou” (*Mao* 271, 285, 293, 294, 295, 296), all of them similarly brief, have been reconstructed as a continuous narrative that was enacted in dance, mimetically representing the conquest of the Shang by King Wu. All the “Eulogies of Zhou” are difficult to date, although their pronounced commemorative gesture may place them at a greater distance to the early kings than is traditionally recognized. Notably, several hymns refer to Kings Wen and Wu – twice even to King Wen’s “statutes” or “models” (*dian*) – and some also refer to the “Mandate of Heaven” and to the king as the “Son of Heaven.” In bronze inscriptions, these concepts become prominent only in the latter half of the Western Zhou.

Whatever their specific date, the Zhou temple hymns were part of a repertoire of music and dance, with their words self-referentially describing the sacrifices at which they were performed. Extolling the sacrificial service as an act of filial piety, they praised the ancestors and prayed for their blessings in response. This self-referential gesture, common to both hymns and bronze inscriptions, was at the core of a ritual system founded on the principle of reciprocity between the dead and the living. By describing the very ritual in which they were performed, some of the longer – and most likely later – sacrificial hymns celebrated the spirits as much as the act of celebration itself, creating

a verbal display of ritual and social order. Furthermore, the seventy-two lines of the great sacrificial hymn “Thorny Caltrop” (Chuci, *Mao* 209), organized in six stanzas of equal length, follow the steps of the sacrifice by describing the ritual participants in their different roles and marking their separate speeches through rhyme change and other formal devices. The result was the polyvocal script for a ritual drama to be performed in the ancestral temple. As such, the text both accompanied the sacrifice and perpetuated it in hymnic speech. It was a text for both the present and the future, beginning with the invocation of memory by a religious specialist: “Thorny, thorny is the caltrop, / so we remove its prickles. / Since times of old, how is it done? / We plant the panicked millet, the glutinous millet: / . . .” Then, after describing in detail the complete success of the sacrificial action and the proper behavior of all its actors, the hymn addressed both the living and their future descendants with the prayer ubiquitous in Zhou bronze inscriptions: “Sons of sons, grandsons of grandsons, / never fail to continue these [rites]!”

This hymn from the “Minor Court Hymns” is a far more consciously constructed account of the ancestral sacrifice, compared to the archaic “Eulogies of Zhou.” In its systematic retelling and extreme linguistic regularity (likely a feature of Eastern Zhou composition and editing), it did not describe any particular performance but the blueprint and essence of all such performances; it embodied the performances of the past as long as the hymn was sung in the commemorative rituals of subsequent generations. As such hymns were thought to have emerged directly from the archaic sacrifices, they came to stand for the ritual order of old itself. According to the late fourth-century BC *Mencius* (*Mengzi*), “When the traces of the [ancient] kings were extinguished, the Poetry vanished.”

Even more than the sacrificial “Eulogies,” the “Major Court Hymns” served as the primary texts of early Chinese religious and cultural memory. They are marked by extensive length (in a number of pieces several hundred characters), a striking regularity in ceremonial diction, and a grand vision of the foundation of the Zhou and its way of rulership. From the perspective of the “small prefaces” (*xiaoxu*) that accompany each song in the *Mao Tradition*, the “Major Court Hymns” proceed largely chronologically, beginning with a series of hymns in praise of Kings Wen and Wu and ending with two songs that criticize King You (r. 781–771 BC) under whom the Western Zhou finally collapsed. Judging from their contents, the “Major Court Hymns” appear to include pieces for both sacrificial rites and court banquets as well as songs clearly related to the appointment ceremony, especially “The Jiang and the Han” (Jiang Han, *Mao* 262). Within this poetic history of the Western Zhou,

a group of five texts (*Mao* 236, 237, 241, 245, 250) have been identified as the master narrative of the life of King Wen; in addition, the first of the “Major Court Hymns” titled “King Wen” (Wen wang; *Mao* 235) and another one titled “King Wen Has Fame” (Wen wang you sheng, *Mao* 244) are entirely devoted to his praise. King Wen is further mentioned in two more hymns (*Mao* 240, 255, the latter being the king’s harangue directed toward the last Shang king, a text reminiscent of the *Documents* speeches). The “Mandate of Heaven” is mentioned, in one form or another, in no fewer than five of the hymns of praise (*Mao* 235, 236, 241, 249, 255). Considering the formal coherence and sustained narrative of commemoration together with their emphasis on King Wen and the “Mandate of Heaven,” and comparing these aesthetic and ideological features to Western Zhou bronze inscriptions, a late Western Zhou date, at the earliest, seems most plausible.

As a repertoire of mythical commemoration and an inventory of ritual expression, the “Major Court Hymns” compare to the great epics of early Greece even without matching them in scope. Their greatest difference from the latter might be overall absence of glorification of battle; unlike the Homeric epics, the Chinese hymns minimize the account of martial detail. Instead, like the royal speeches enshrined in the *Documents*, the court hymns emphasize the moral “mandate” as the source of Zhou civilization and superiority that was represented in the appropriate ritual demeanor of the king and his appearance of “majestic terror” (*weiyi*). Accordingly, the foundational myth of the Zhou origin is one not of warfare but of the invention of agriculture, related in the great hymn “She Bore the Folk” (Sheng min) that tells the story of Lord Millet (Hou Ji). With him, history begins: his miraculous birth, his survival as an infant among wild animals, his invention of agriculture and the planting of millet, his sacrifices to the spirits. Like “Thorny Caltrop,” the hymn finally leads to the present, recalling Lord Millet’s sacrifices as the blueprint for those now given to him:

Truly – our sacrifices, what are they like?
 Some hull (the grain), some scoop it;
 Some sift it, some tread it.
 Washing it, we hear it swish, swish;
 Distilling it, we see it steam, steam.
 Now we consult, now we consider;
 We take southernwood to sacrifice the fat,
 We take a ram to flay it.
 Now we roast, now we broil;
 To rouse up the following year.

We load the wooden vessels,
The wooden vessels, the earthen vessels.
As the fragrance begins to rise,
The god on high is calmed and delighted.
How good the fragrance is indeed!
Lord Millet founded the sacrifice,
Lucky, without fault or offense,
It has reached the present day.

In the historical and philosophical writings of Warring States and early imperial China, the “Major Court Hymns” – hermeneutically unproblematic and unambiguous in their moral intent – were the primary texts invoked to “prove” an argument with the authority of antiquity. Quotations from the hymns served to condense a historical situation or discursive point into a single expression that would sum up, and define, the issue at hand. While quotations from the *Poetry* appear across a wide range of texts, they were used with particular intensity by that diverse group of thinkers who referred to themselves as classicists, *ru*, and were engaged with a defined body of textual learning. The “Six Virtues” (Liude) manuscript from Guodian shows that by 300 BC at the latest, the core of this set of learning had coalesced as the “Six Arts” (*liuyi*); in Han times, these were narrowed into the Five Classics: the *Poetry*, *Documents*, *Changes*, *Spring and Autumn Annals*, and *Rites*, no longer including the “art” and textual body of “Music.” In Warring States times, a basic text (*jing*) existed for each of these, giving rise to a growing body of further elaborations both oral and written; yet likely because of their formal coherence, their direct historical relation to high antiquity, their eminent usability for citation, and their poetic diction that invited easy memorization and oral transmission, no text was more prominent than the songs from the *Poetry*. Thus the *Zuo Tradition* (*Zuo zhuan*) and the *Discourses of the States* (*Guoyu*), the two largest historical narratives of the fourth century BC, show songs from all sections of the anthology being recited at interstate diplomatic meetings, indicating a universal circulation uninhibited by cultural differences across the Eastern Zhou states. The mutual understanding of speakers of different dialects in the medium of the *Poetry* suggests that the songs were performed in a literary koine that transcended any local idiom. This elite koine was likely the “elegant classical speech” (*yayan*) that Confucius is said to have used for the *Poetry*, the *Documents*, and matters of ritual (*Analects* 7/18). To speak in this idiom was to perform the memory of classical culture – a memory “transmitted, not created” (*Analects* 7/1).

Quoting and reciting the *Poetry* was primarily a matter of oral practice. Regardless of the writings recently excavated from a small number of elite tombs, the manuscript culture of Warring States China must have been of limited depth and breadth. The available stationery was either too bulky (wood and bamboo) or too expensive (silk) for the extensive copying of texts and their circulation over vast distances. References to writing and reading, as well as to the economic, material, or educational conditions of textual production and circulation, are extremely scarce in the early literature, which instead consistently depicts learning in personal master–disciple settings (likely supported by writing as aide-mémoire and educational practice). While local writing of technical, administrative, legal, economic, military, and other matters existed in the different regions of the Warring States, the extensive circulation of the Classics probably did not depend on writing. No pre-imperial source speaks of the circulation of the Classics as writings, or of the profound difficulties involved in transcribing them among distinctly different calligraphic and orthographic regional traditions. Not one of the numerous invocations of the *Poetry* in the *Zuo Tradition* and the *Discourses of the States* mentions the use of a written text; invariably, they show the ability of memorization and free recitation – in the literary koine mentioned above – as the hallmark of education.

In Warring States times, no particular written version of the *Poetry* (or the *Documents*) was considered primary or authoritative. Only the institutionalization of official learning (*guanxue*) at the Qin and Han imperial courts led to written versions of the Classics taught at court, especially at the Imperial Academy founded in 124 BC, and called for textual stabilization and standardization. Yet excavated manuscripts even from Western Han times still display the characteristics of classical texts primarily memorized and only on occasion written down locally. The more than 1,400 characters of *Poetry* fragments in manuscripts from the late fourth through the mid-second centuries BC show a ratio of textual variants consistently in the range of 30 to 40 percent of all characters. This ratio does not include different conventions in writing the same character, and it easily doubles once one removes the most common and simple characters from the equation. Yet these variants are overwhelmingly merely graphic, showing a text unstable in orthography but stable in sound. While the calligraphy of the early manuscripts was bound to regional conventions and scribal idiosyncracies, the text that was written, and that could be sounded out, transcended such differences. Meanwhile, the sheer amount of graphic variation combined with the archaic poetic idiom of the

Poetry would have made private reading impossible. To identify and understand the text, one would have had to already know it. The manuscripts thus support the scenario of direct, primarily oral, teacher–disciple transmission that is described in traditional sources and over time gave rise to a variety of hermeneutic approaches and teaching lineages.

IV. The “Airs” and the early hermeneutic traditions

Chinese poetic hermeneutics, and literary thought in general, likely emerged from the use of poetry in specific historical situations such as illustrated in the *Zuo Tradition* and the *Discourses of the States*. In these contexts of educated diplomacy, quotations from the *Poetry* were invoked to encode meaning in polite speech of shared cultural experience. While the “Major Court Hymns” and “Eulogies,” and to a lesser extent also the “Minor Court Hymns,” offered relatively unproblematic narratives of morality and virtuous rulership, the hermeneutical challenge arose with lines from the “Airs of the States.” These songs, often deceptively simple and formulaic, allowed for a wide range of applications according to specific circumstances. A song, stanza, or couplet from the “Airs” could not be reduced to a presumed single original meaning of its words; it came to mean different things on different occasions. In fact, authorship and original composition were not at stake; the only two of the 160 “Airs” that refer to their own composition do so anonymously: “It is because of his narrow heart, / that I have made this satire” (“Dolichos Shoes” (Ge ju), *Mao* 107); “The man is not good, / so I sing to accuse him” (“The Gate to the Tomb” (Mu men), *Mao* 141).

In the widespread use of the *Poetry* in the *Zuo Tradition* and the *Discourses of the States*, single stanzas were presented to make a point; none of the transmitted “Airs” or “Court Hymns” is ever cited in full, and only one – very short – of the “Eulogies.” While this practice was later criticized as “breaking a stanza off [from its context] to generate meaning” (*duanzhang quyi*), it made sense to an audience that did not presume any such fixed or original context but accepted the “Airs” as a repertoire of texts freely available for sophisticated, indirect communication. In this hermeneutic approach, it was the situational presentation and reception that endowed the “Airs” with ever-renewed meaning and significance. Furthermore, in occasional ensemble performances of the songs, their meaning rested not in the words alone but also in their musical presentation. In *Analects* 9/15, Confucius says that he had rectified the ritual music so that the “Court Hymns” and “Eulogies” were all arranged in their proper order; elsewhere (8/15), he notes how the coda of

“Fishhawks” (Guanju, *Mao* 1) “fills the ear.” According to the *Zuo Tradition*, Ji Zha, a prince from the southeastern (allegedly semi-barbarian) state of Wu, in 544 BC visited the northeastern state of Lu, the home state of Confucius where the old rituals of Zhou were still maintained. When the prince was treated to a musical performance of the entire *Poetry*, he perspicaciously commented on the condition of the individual states as their music was presented to him. Here, the performance of the songs, both textual and musical, was the visible and audible emblem of good order – or its opposite.

It is not always clear what a particular song conveyed in a specific situation, as in the case of “Zhongzi, Please!” (Qiang Zhongzi, *Mao* 76), which in the *Zuo Tradition* (Duke Xiang, 26th year (547 BC)) is recited in order to achieve the release of the marquis of Wei from imprisonment in Qin:

Zhongzi, please!
Do not leap into our hamlet,
do not break the willow trees we have planted.
How would I dare to care for them,
yet I am fearful of my father and mother.
Zhongzi is truly to be loved,
yet the words of father and mother
are also truly to be feared.

Zhongzi, please!
Do not leap across our wall,
do not break the mulberry trees we have planted.
How would I dare to care for them,
yet I am fearful of my older brothers.
Zhongzi is truly to be loved,
yet the words of my older brothers
are also truly to be feared.

Zhongzi, please!
Do not leap into our garden,
do not break the sandalwood trees we have planted.
How would I dare to care for them,
yet I am fearful of the many words by the people.
Zhongzi is truly to be loved,
yet the many words by the people
are also truly to be feared.

Nothing in this song relates to an imprisoned ruler, nor did subsequent readers dwell on this interpretation. Instead, the *Mao Tradition* took the song into a new direction by connecting it to another, unrelated anecdote from the *Zuo Tradition*. In this historical application, the song criticized a ruler of the

state of Zheng who in 722 BC failed to avert disaster by allowing his younger brother to usurp ever greater power until he finally could be subdued only by military force. This reading, too, cannot be substantiated from the lyrics proper and, beginning in Song times, has been rejected by later commentators. Zheng Qiao (1104–1162) understood the song as “the words of a licentious eloper” that had nothing to do with the historical story advanced by the *Mao Tradition*. Zheng’s interpretation was accepted by Zhu Xi (1130–1200) in his *Collected Traditions of the Poetry* (*Shi jizhuan*) that after the Mao and Zheng Xuan exegesis became the single most influential commentary on the anthology. Modern readers, disposed toward taking the “Airs” as originally folk songs, have understood “Zhongzi, Please!” as the words of a young woman who fears that her lover’s impetuosity will compromise her social reputation.

The case is typical of how the *Mao Tradition* interpreted the “Airs” as composed in response to specific circumstances and hence – once these circumstances could be identified – as historical documents. More than any other early interpretation, the *Mao Tradition* was focused not on the application or reception of the “Airs” but on their purported specific moment and historical significance of textual composition. In this, it appropriated a formula that appears in several early texts, most succinctly in the third- or second-century BC “Canon of Yao” (Yaodian) of the *Documents*: “poetry expresses intent” (*shi yan zhi*). In the “Canon of Yao,” this was followed directly by the phrase “song makes words last long” (*ge yong yan*), emphasizing performance and its mnemonic force to give poetry its duration. By contrast, the “Great Preface” (Daxu), presumably composed by Wei Hong in the first century AD and included with the *Mao Tradition* some time before Zheng Xuan, dropped the second half of the statement to focus entirely on the act of original composition. The seminal statement on the nature and purpose of both the *Classic of Poetry* and Chinese poetry in general, the “Great Preface” reflected a strong notion of authorship indicative of early imperial thought. In some of its most important parts, this statement was developed out of contemporaneous ideas about music that are preserved in the “Records of Music” (Yueji). Combining Warring States and Qin–Han material, this chapter from the *Records of Ritual* elaborates on ideas from earlier texts such as *Xunzi* and some of the Guodian manuscripts that discuss music as an expression and instrument of cosmic and social order. With only the slightest modifications in language – mainly replacing the terms “tones” and “music” with “words” and “poetry” – the “Great Preface” restates the central passage from the “Records of Ritual” on the nature of composition:

The poem is where the intention goes. In the heart it is intention; sent forth in speech, it is the poem. The affections are moved within and take on form in speech. When speaking them is insufficient, one sighs them. When sighing them is insufficient, one draws them out by singing. When drawing them out by singing is not sufficient, unconsciously the hands dance them, and the feet tap them. The tones of a well-governed era are at ease and lead to joy; its rulership is harmonious. The tones of an era in turmoil are bitter and lead to anger; its rulership is perverse. The tones of a perishing state are lamenting and lead to longing; its people are in difficulty.

In this vision, music and poetry sprang involuntarily from the perceptive human mind after it was affected by an external impulse. The resulting artifact was an immediate individual response to a specific historical experience that was generated by the fundamental participation of the human mind in the workings of the cosmos. The human author was not a creator in the Aristotelian sense but produced an expression that was at once specific and universal. It served as a concomitant, immediate response to historical circumstances and could thus be interpreted as authentic judgment. In the *Zuo Tradition* and *Discourses of the States*, this judgmental function was assigned to the recitation of existing anonymous poems; in the “Great Preface” as well as in the individual “small prefaces” to individual songs, it was transposed to the moment of original poetic composition. The *Mao Tradition* thus epitomized the reading of the *Poetry* as historical documents, constituting the historical interpretation of individual songs such as “Zhongzi, Please!” as well as the overall arrangement of the “Airs” in groups of poems under the names of different states. Thus the apparently geographic division of the “Airs” according to regions is in truth a moral one. In the Mao arrangement and interpretation, the first two sections – the eleven “South of Zhou” (Zhou nan) and fourteen “South of Shao” (Shao nan) songs – collectively represent the moral virtue of the early Zhou royal house, with the “South of Zhou” poems specifically focused on the royal wives. By contrast, entire sections like the ten “Airs of Chen” and all but the first of the twenty-one “Airs of Zheng” purportedly criticized the lack of morality in the leaders of these states. Zheng Xuan, in his preface to the *Mao Tradition*, further systematized this approach by grouping both the “Court Hymns” and the “Airs” into those of “moral orthodoxy” (*zheng*) and others of “deviation” (*bian*), where the “orthodox” poems are panegyrics and the “deviant” ones songs of political satire and admonition. With the emphasis on poetry as a direct reflection of its time, the panegyrics (most of the “Eulogies” and “Major Court Hymns”) were believed to come from the glorious days of the early Western Zhou, while

the political satires (most of the “Minor Court Hymns” and, with the exception of the two opening sections, the “Airs”) were located in later times of disorder.

The framework of historical interpretation had far-reaching consequences for the use of literature for the entire Chinese tradition. It established the songs of the *Poetry* as an account of political and cultural rise and decline and its presumed anonymous authors and reciters as moral judges of their own ages. Already in the *Zuo Tradition* and the *Discourses of the States*, poetry recitation is frequently portrayed as a means by which ministers and advisers admonished their rulers. The *Mencius*, next to the *Analects* the most influential early philosophical work of the *ru* tradition, quotes a (lost) “Great Oath” (Taishi) chapter from the *Documents* as saying that Heaven judges the king through the eyes and ears of the common people. To the *Mao Tradition*, this is the origin of poetry: voices from among the common folk or morally upright ministers who speak truth to power. Not a few of the “Airs” and “Minor Court Hymns” indeed complain about acts of injustice such as the hardships of soldiers on campaign or the injustice done to peasants on their fields. Thus “Big Rat” (Shi shu, *Mao* 113) in three formulaic stanzas of minimal variation gives voice to the farmers who toil in vain:

Big rat, big rat,
Do not eat our millet.
Three years we have served you,
Yet you have not been willing to care.
At last we are going to leave you
And move to that happy land.
Happy land, happy land,
Where we shall find our place. (Stanza I)

Similarly, “Minister of War” (Qi fu, *Mao* 185), also in three brief and repetitious stanzas, complains about the misery of the troops:

Minister of war!
We are the king’s claws and teeth.
Why have you rolled us into misery,
With no place to settle or rest?

Minister of war!
We are the king’s claws and teeth.
Why have you rolled us into misery,
With no place to arrive and rest? (Stanzas I, II)

In the three stanzas of “Northern Gate” (Bei men, *Mao* 40), a man resents the duties imposed by his government and at the same time accuses Heaven of showing no mercy:

I go out the northern gate,
My worried heart distressed, distressed.
Destitute indeed and poor,
With no one knowing my hardship.
It is over now, alas!
Heaven, truly, has done it –
Alas, what can it be called?

The king’s affairs come to me,
The government’s affairs are ever heavier on me.
When I come in from the outside,
The folk in the house all take turns to scold me.
Heaven, truly, has done it –
Alas, what can it be called! (Stanzas I, II)

Similarly, Heaven is held responsible in the three stanzas of “Yellow Birds” (Huang niao, *Mao* 131), which describes three different men, each one close to death:

Jiao-jiao cry the yellow birds
Settling on the jujube tree.
Who followed Lord Mu?
Ziju Yanxi!
Truly, this Yanxi,
Of a hundred men the finest!
He draws close to the pit,
Trembling, trembling in terror.
Heaven, the azure one,
Slays our good man!
If one could ransom him, ah –
A hundred men for this life! (Stanza I)

In Han times, this song was related to an event of 621 BC, narrated in the *Zuo Tradition*, when three brothers and 174 others were sacrificed to follow Lord Mu of Qin into the grave; accordingly, the song was attributed to “the people of Qin” (Zheng Xuan) who deplored the fate of their “three good men.” While such songs are easy to appreciate in their outspoken satirical message, many others are not nearly as straightforward and have been subjected to elaborate decoding. A specific feature of many “Airs” is

an opening nature image followed by a juxtaposed human situation. Here, nature imagery serves as an implicit analogy to human affairs, a rhetorical technique identified as “evocation” or “stimulus” (*xing*) in the poetic tradition. Due to its indirect nature, “evocation” has proven a rather difficult concept to define, but according to the Mao reading, it governs a song like “The Peach Tree Lush” (Tao yao, *Mao* 6):

The peach tree lush, lush,
Blazing, blazing its flowers.
This girl goes out to marry,
Suiting well her [new] house and family. (Stanza I)

The following two stanzas are close repetitions of the first but develop the “blazing flowers” first into “ripening fruits” and then into “luxurious leaves.” In the Mao interpretation, these images evoke the vitality of youth together with the appropriate timeliness of growth and development: as the fruits ripen to their fullness, so does the girl reach the proper time of marriage. This analogy is then further developed into a praise of morality and social order, as it radiates from the royal court downward to the common folk: in the ideal world of the early Zhou, the young women will not miss the right time of marriage.

While the specific historical interpretations of the *Mao Tradition* were often doubted by later readers, the “Airs” themselves – songs of love and courtship, pleasure and joy, frustration and anguish – have survived over two millennia of imperial and modern China. Their simple and often charming diction has conveyed a sense of dignity and sincerity, endowing the poetic voice with a superior capacity for truth, immediacy, and compassion that has inspired the Chinese literary tradition to the present day. Yet the reception of the *Poetry* had no room for aesthetic concerns; not one of the early commentators appreciated them as examples of beautiful or well-crafted language. The task of the Mao interpretation was to create, or to reconstruct from sources no longer known, a historical context for each of the “Airs,” and it did so through two separate but complementary forms. The first of these are the “Minor Prefaces” attached to each of the 305 songs that consist of a succinct, usually single-phrase, statement and a longer elaboration of it, as in the case of “Yellow Birds”:

“Yellow Birds” laments the three good men. The people of the state, in criticizing Lord Mu for having people follow him into death, made this poem.

The distinction between the two parts of the preface might suggest that the initial statement preceded its subsequent elaboration chronologically and

may have been attached to the song quite early, even in pre-imperial times. By contrast, the historically explicit second part of the preface seems to reflect the particular reception of the “Airs” within the overall institutionalization of textual learning at the late Western Han imperial court. It was at this time when a distinctly historical perspective on the Five Classics became preeminent and was taught to thousands of students at the Imperial Academy. Such teaching further required the fixation of a standardized, unambiguous text that no longer depended on individual instruction in a personal teacher–disciple setting. In addition to the historicization provided by the prefaces, it was again only the *Mao Tradition* that furnished such a standard text by adding numerous glosses of individual words (*xungu*). No such glossing is known from the pre-imperial period, and no text was in greater need of it than the archaic verse of the *Poetry* that especially in many of the “Airs” offered neither a sustained narrative nor a specific argument, but instead relied on principles such as “evocation” to create meaning out of highly underdetermined poetic expression. The most dramatic illustration of what the *Mao Tradition* accomplished, and how it differed from earlier readings of the “Airs,” are the three stanzas of “Fishhawks,” the first song in the received anthology:

Guan-guan cry the fishhawks
On the islands in the river.
Pure and fair, the virtuous lady,
A good companion to the prince.

Long and short grows the watercress,
Left and right one plucks it.
Pure and fair, the virtuous lady,
Waking and asleep he seeks her.
Seeking her, he does not get her,
Waking and asleep he thinks of her.
Longing, oh, and longing,
He tosses and turns from side to side.

Long and short grows the watercress,
Left and right one pulls it.
Pure and fair, the virtuous lady,
With zithers small and large one befriends her.
Long and short grows the watercress,
Left and right one picks it.
Pure and fair, the virtuous lady,
With bells and drums one delights her.

In this song in four-syllable lines, the Mao commentary glosses the first word, a reduplicative binome, as “harmonious sound,” and the second word, an assonant binome, as a kind of bird that lives in separation. This nature image, filling the entire first line, is then interpreted as evocative of the virtue of the queen (by the later tradition identified as the wife of the Zhou founder, King Wen): she is in harmonious company with her lord but keeps the appropriate distance in order not to debauch him. With line three, this reading is further solidified in the description of the lady. The first word, the near-rhyming binome *yaotiao*, is glossed as “secluded and noble,” while the epithet for the lady is read as “good.” Together, these word glosses generate the meaning that the “Minor Preface” then elaborates upon, establishing a specific hermeneutic procedure in which evocative nature images are decoded as illustrations of human relations and behavior.

The interpretation of “Fishhawks” also sets the tone for the first section of the anthology, the eleven “South of Zhou” poems that have been hailed as the paradigm of the “orthodox airs” since Zheng Xuan. Furthermore, the *Mao Tradition*, transmitted through Zheng Xuan’s commentary, came to serve as a model of reading not only for the ancient songs but also for poetry in general, including new compositions from late Eastern Han times onward. Yet up to then, the Mao reading had been the exception, not the rule. The Lu tradition – the dominant reading of the “Airs” in Han times – took the song as specific criticism of King Kang’s sexual indulgence and neglect of duties; similarly, the Qi and Han interpretations read the song as a satire on excessive behavior. Some Eastern Han and later texts such as Zhang Chao’s (fl. ca 190) “*Fu* Ridiculing ‘*Fu* on a Maidservant” (Qiao qingyi fu) maintained that “Fishhawks” functioned as a satire because it confronted King Kang with an illustration of true virtue – a reading that could thus accommodate Mao glosses such as “goodness,” “harmonious separation,” or “secluded and pure.” It is dubious, however, that this interpretation represented the original Lu (or Qi or Han) tradition of the *Poetry*. Other early texts like the *Xunzi*, Liu An’s (175–122 BC) “Tradition of ‘Encountering Sorrow” (Lisao zhuan), or Sima Qian’s *Records of the Historian* seem to have understood “Fishhawks” and the “Airs” in general as expressions of sexual desire. Such a reading cannot accept the specific Mao glosses for “Fishhawks,” which suggests that the four Western Han hermeneutic traditions differed not merely in their graphical choices but also in their understanding of the words represented by these graphs. Meanwhile, those who took the “Airs” as expressions of desire did not consider them immoral; they “satisfy the desires but do not lead to transgressing of the right stopping point” (*Xunzi*), they “express a

fondness or sexual allure but do not lead into licentiousness” (Liu An), and their expression of “erotic desire does not surpass appropriate demeanor” (Qi reading). In this interpretation, the “Airs” and “Fishhawks” are not political satires of a specific historical background and purpose but general vehicles of moral edification, dovetailing with Confucius’ statement (*Analects* 3/20) that “‘Fishhawks’ expresses pleasure but does not lead into licentiousness, expresses sorrow but does not cause harm.” The same interpretation has now been found in two early manuscripts: both the “Five Forms of Conduct” from Mawangdui and “Confucius’ Discussion of the *Poetry*” in the Shanghai Museum collection state that “‘Fishhawks’ uses the expression of sexual allure to illustrate the case for ritual propriety.” In other words, the expression of sexual desire was not considered problematic but a strategic form of guidance, beyond such desire, to proper social conduct. From at least the late fourth century BC onward, this seems to have been the standard interpretation of “Fishhawks” and the “Airs” – and in the Shanghai Museum manuscript it is explicitly associated with Confucius, the purported compiler of the *Poetry*.

Compared to these readings as well as to the satirical interpretation, the *Mao Tradition* introduced a decidedly new understanding of the “Airs” in general and “Fishhawks” in particular. Moreover, through its prescriptive word glosses, the *Mao Tradition* effectively created a new text that was phonologically consistent with the long-established *Poetry* anthology but established a new interpretation and definition of its words. Fixed in both orthography and meaning, it served the needs of early imperial “official learning” (*guanxue*). Methodologically, the Mao reading reversed the earlier practice of flexibly applying the hermeneutically underdetermined songs to historical situations; now, a definite historical context was established to determine their purported single original purpose and meaning. Through its glosses and “Minor Prefaces,” the *Mao Tradition* prepared the ground for the argument of the “Great Preface” that poetry was the response to specific historical circumstances.

The extent of this rewriting of the text of the *Poetry* is apparent from a comparison between “Fishhawks” and several other “Airs.” The key word in the second line of “Fishhawks,” *yaotiao* (Mao: “secluded and noble”), appears in entirely different characters not only in the Mawangdui “Five Forms of Conduct” but also, written with the characters *yaojiao*, in “The Moon Appears” (Yue chu, *Mao* 143) – a song from the “Airs of Chen” that according to its *Mao* preface “criticizes fondness of sexual allure” and those in office who “are not fond of virtue but delighted in glorifying sexual allure.” Here, *yaojiao* is understood as the sensual attraction of a young woman, that is, in precisely the sense the satirical reading of “Fishhawks” seems to understand *yaotiao*

there. Furthermore, the Mawangdui “Five Forms of Conduct” manuscript elaborates on “Fishhawks” as follows:

If [the man’s desire] is as deep as this, would he copulate next to his father and mother? Even if threatened with death, he would not do it. Would he copulate next to his older and younger brothers? He would not do it either. Would he copulate next to the countrymen? He would not do it either. [Being fearful] of father and older brother, and only then being fearful of others, is ritual propriety. Using the expression of sexual allure/desire as an analogy to ritual propriety is to advance [moral conduct].

This discussion of parents, brothers, and countrymen does not directly bear on the text of “Fishhawks” but is parallel to the concerns about sexual desire raised in “Zhongzi, Please!” It was thus only in the *Mao Tradition* that “Fishhawks” was placed in a paradigmatic opposition to both “The Moon Appears” and “Zhongzi, Please!” – in earlier readings, these texts were discussed from the common perspective of sexual temptation and its resolution in moral propriety.

The later tradition reacted in mixed ways to the *Mao Tradition*, which had become orthodox by Tang times. Song dynasty scholars such as Ouyang Xiu (1007–1072), Su Zhe (1039–1112), Zheng Qiao, Lü Zuqian (1137–1181), and Zhu Xi were critical of many of the *Mao* historical readings of the “Airs” (though, curiously, not in the case of “Fishhawks”). They proposed to free the *Poetry* from the *Mao* readings that they judged as obscuring straightforward expressions of folk sentiment. In the minds of these scholars, the meaning of the “Airs” was still open to direct access. In this spirit, Zhu Xi’s *Collected Traditions of the Poetry* – the version of the anthology that ruled supreme in the imperial examinations from 1315 through 1905 – consisted of the merely necessary word glosses and some succinct evaluations of meaning. Yet even while arguing new readings of the songs, it still could not escape the power of the *Mao* glosses. In particular, Zhu Xi and other Song readers struggled to explain why the anthology included texts such as “Zhongzi, Please!” when Confucius had famously stated that the *Poetry* could be “covered in one phrase: no wayward thoughts!” (*Analects* 2/2). On this dilemma, only the newly excavated manuscripts – texts long eliminated from the received tradition and not available to Song or later imperial readers – offer a fundamentally new perspective. These manuscripts not only question the validity of the *Mao Tradition* but also vigorously refute the later – especially modern – reading of the “Airs” as original folk songs that express their meaning on the plain surface of their words. Both the Mawangdui “Five Forms of Conduct” and the

Shanghai Museum “Confucius’ Discussion of the *Poetry*” lay out a hermeneutic process that takes the textual surface of the text as an analogy or “illustration” (*yu*) for moral edification. While these sources do not reach back to the original composition of the songs, and perhaps not even to the initial compilation of the anthology, they document an early mode of reception popular among the Warring States classicists who claimed Confucius as their intellectual ancestor. Whether or not Confucius was indeed the compiler of the *Poetry*, the hermeneutic approach attributed to him in the Shanghai Museum manuscript of ca 300 BC was the dominant one that carried the anthology into the early empire. Without it, the “three hundred songs” might have disappeared just like almost all other poetry from pre-imperial times. While texts like the *Zuo Tradition* show traces of songs outside the received anthology, sometimes including brief quotations, not a single complete stanza comparable to those from the “Airs” has survived. Only once has a body of texts been retrieved that, in its theme of a hunting excursion, its tetrasyllabic form, and its poetic imagery, shows similarity to the “Court Hymns”: a cycle of verse engraved into a Warring States set of ten round stone blocks – so-called stone drums – that were first mentioned in literary sources of the seventh century AD. They include more than 460 still legible characters and are kept in the Beijing Palace Museum. Their existence shows both the original production of poetry outside the received anthology and its later near-complete disappearance. The songs of the *Poetry* became canonical through their early appropriation by the *ru* classicist intellectual lineage, and they have survived ever since because of their continuously evolving hermeneutic possibilities.

V. The royal speeches in the *Classic of Documents*

The only other text of the Five Classics that in Warring States and early imperial times was frequently mentioned alongside the *Poetry* is the *Classic of Documents*, an anthology of speeches, historical narratives, and cosmological treatises. Its core – hailed as the fountainhead of both political philosophy and historical writing – comprises a series of royal speeches some of which may date from the late Western Zhou. Composed in a formulaic, rhythmic, and partly rhymed diction, these ceremonial speeches are attributed to rulers from high antiquity to the Xia, Shang, and Zhou dynasties. They are centrally concerned with political legitimacy obtained through the “Mandate of Heaven” (*tianming*) – a concept, however, that bronze inscriptions mention with some frequency only from late Western Zhou times onward.

References to specific *Documents* chapters can be found across Warring States texts, including newly excavated manuscripts. By the late fourth century BC, and possibly much earlier, a certain body of texts was gaining canonical stature that at least partially corresponds to our received version of the text. However, while more than 90 percent of all early *Poetry* quotations have counterparts in the transmitted anthology, only about a third of *Documents*-style quotations are found in the received classic. Excavated manuscripts further show that compared to the *Poetry*, the wording of *Documents*-style texts was far more unstable, perhaps because their diction was not as strictly guarded by rhyme and meter as the ancient songs. Furthermore, the *Documents* are virtually never quoted as “documents” (*shu*) in the way the *Poetry* is routinely cited as “poetry” (*shi*). Instead, they are mentioned by titles that may or may not concur with the chapter titles of the received text.

Of all Warring States texts, only the third-century BC *Xunzi*, edited at the late Western Han imperial court, concurs in all its *Documents* quotations with the received text. In Warring States and even Western Han times, an evidently much larger body of *Documents*-style texts – or separate compilations of such texts – circulated in the political discourses of different intellectual lineages. As a result, the textual history of the received anthology is exceedingly complex.

First, the text contains various layers whose composition seems to reach from late Western Zhou to Qin and Western Han times. Second, the history of the text during Qin and Han times remains unclear. Third, the received version of the text in the *Correct Meaning of the Five Classics* is attributed to the *Documents* expert and descendant of Confucius Kong Anguo (d. ca 100 BC). According to an account that includes various embellishments and contradictions, Kong’s version of the text had been retrieved from the walls of Confucius’ former residence where it had survived the Qin book burning until it was finally discovered some time between 154 and 128 BC. This version in pre-Qin “ancient script” (*guwen*) purportedly correspond to twenty-nine known chapters in the Western Han “modern script” plus material of sixteen additional ones. The text was lost with the fall of the Western Jin dynasty and the destruction of the palace library in 311. The canonical version included in the *Correct Meaning of the Five Classics*, the ancient-script *Hallowed Documents* (*Shangshu*), is based on a *Hallowed Documents of Kong Anguo* (*Kong Anguo Shangshu*) presented by a certain Mei Ze in 317 after the constitution of the Eastern Jin. It now included fifty-eight chapters, of which thirty-four, according to their titles, corresponded to the twenty-nine chapters of the Western Han text. The authenticity of the remaining chapters was doubted already in Song times, but only Yan Ruoqu (1636–1704) proved them to be forgeries, containing both newly fabricated

texts and fragments from other early sources. Hui Dong (1697–1758) and others further corroborated Yan’s work, effectively dividing the received text into two halves: the forged ancient-script chapters on the one hand, and the twenty-nine Western Han modern-script chapters on the other.

This, however, still does not clarify the provenance of the Western Han *Documents*. Han and later sources report that the Qin official erudite (*boshi*) Fu Sheng (b. 260 BC) had hidden his copy in a wall to save it from the Qin proscription of 213 BC, yet the wall fell victim to the turmoil of the Qin–Han transition. Emperor Wen (r. 180–157 BC) then ordered the court official Chao Cuo (d. 154 BC) to visit Fu Sheng and orally retrieve his “explanation” (*shuo*) of the text. Wei Hong (mid-first century AD), in a lost preface to (Kong Anguo’s?) ancient-script *Documents*, noted that the old and frail Fu Sheng “could not speak properly.” His unintelligible utterances were translated by his daughter, yet Chao Cuo understood her dialect only in parts. While much of this saga is dubious – for example, as a Qin court erudite, Fu Sheng was exempted from the proscription and did not have to hide his *Documents* copy – consistent emphasis is placed on the disrupted and imperfect oral transmission of Fu Sheng’s text as opposed to Kong Anguo’s ancient-script version found in the wall of Confucius’ own house. This theme resonates with Eastern Han ancient-script ideology. As with the *Poetry*, nothing suggests that the *Documents* were lost under the Qin; more likely, the text existed in different versions, oral and written, that followed different lines of transmission.

Whatever its early history, the *Documents* anthology is highly eclectic and reflects not just a single intellectual source or lineage. Its chapters range from eighty-six to 1285 characters in length and are organized into the “Documents of the Yu and Xia Dynasties” (Yu Xia shu), “Documents of the Shang Dynasty” (Shang shu), and “Documents of the Zhou Dynasty” (Zhou shu). Among the twenty-nine Western Han chapters, four “Documents of the Yu and Xia” concern the mythological heroes Yao, Shun, Gao Yao, and Yu, or claim to be their direct speeches. Five “Documents of the Shang Dynasty” chapters chronicle the rise and fall of the Shang. The following nineteen chapters of the “Documents of the Zhou Dynasty” begin with the “Oath at Mu” (Mu shi), in which King Wu addresses his troops before his decisive attack on the Shang, and ends with the “Oath of Qin” (Qin shi), a speech set in 632 BC that culminates in the assertion that the well-being of the state was based in the person of an autocratic ruler. Many of these speeches are titled either “oath” (*shi*) or “announcement” (*gao*) and combine elements of proclamation, admonition, and terrifying threats. The dating of all of these texts is uncertain. Linguistic evidence suggests that especially the purportedly earliest speeches,

those attributed to the rulers of the Shang and earlier, are in fact Warring States or Qin–Han fabrications. By contrast, the earliest parts of the *Documents* are a group of twelve speeches attributed to the early Western Zhou rulers, most notably the five long “announcements” traditionally believed to have been made by the Duke of Zhou, acting as regent for King Cheng (r. 1042/35–1006 BC): the “Great Announcement” (Da gao), “Announcement to Kang” (Kang gao), “Announcement on Alcohol” (Jiu gao), “Announcement to Shao” (Shao gao), and “Announcement at Luo” (Luo gao). In each of these, the Duke of Zhou – traditionally also credited with the composition of the *Classic of Changes* and the first of the “Eulogies of Zhou” – presents in a highly ceremonial idiom the principles of rulership and ritual order, grounding the claim for political legitimacy in religious practice: the texts refer to the ancestors, the order of sacrifice, the consultation of oracles, cosmic portents, and the Mandate of Heaven that the Zhou kings are anxious to maintain.

The overall diction of the early speeches is one of ceremonial gravity and solemnity. It is intensified through rhythmic phrasing (often falling into a four-syllable meter), repetitions of various kinds, frequent exclamations like “Alas!” at the beginning of a paragraph, catalogues (as in the lists of dignitaries and functionaries), and the regular use of fixed formulae like “I, the small child” (*yu xiao zi*) that are also familiar from bronze inscriptions. A passage from the “Many Officers” (Duo shi) speech may illustrate this style; here, the Duke of Zhou addresses the officers remaining from the overthrown Yin (Shang) dynasty:

It was in the third month when the Duke of Zhou commenced [his government] in the new city of Luo. He made an announcement to the officers of the [former] Shang king: “The king speaks to this effect: ‘You, remaining officers of Yin! Merciless and severe Heaven has sent down great disaster on Yin. We, the Zhou, assisted in its Mandate, and with Heaven’s bright majestic terror we executed the royal punishment, rectified the Mandate to Yin and made it end according to God. . . [The last Shang king] was greatly licentious in his dissolution; he neglected the brightness of Heaven and the respect due to the folk. It is because of this that God on High did not protect him and sent down disaster as great as this. . . Ah! I declare to you, the many officers: I, only because of this, have transferred and settled you in the west; it is not because I, the One Man, take it as my virtue to disturb your calm. This is indeed the Mandate from Heaven – do not go against it! I do not dare to be dilatory – do not resent me! . . .’ The king says: ‘I declare to you, the many officers of Yin: Today, since indeed I have not killed you, it is that I give you this order again: Today, I have made a great city here in this place of Luo. I, indeed, in the four quarters have none whom I reject. Moreover, you, the many officers:

with zeal and fervor, hasten to be our subjects! Be much obedient! . . . If you are greatly reverential, Heaven itself will favor and pity you. If you are not greatly reverential, you not only will not have your land, I will also apply the punishments of Heaven on your persons. Today, yours it is to dwell in your city and perpetuate your residence . . . ’

No specific evidence suggests that the speeches like “Many Officers” were given by their purported speakers. Their linguistic features, repeated claims for the Mandate of Heaven, and references to specific administrative procedures and functionaries show clear parallels to mid- and late Western Zhou bronze inscriptions and seem to mark them as products of retrospective imagination, composed not by founding heroes but by their later descendants, who commemorated and celebrated the feats of their forebears. As such, the speeches contained the memory of the early Western Zhou model rulers as speaking in their own voices. While the tradition is entirely silent on the institutional framework in which the early speeches played their role and were preserved, their ceremonial rhetoric and presumed commemorative nature may plausibly situate them in the ancestral sacrifice and other court rituals that asserted both memory and identity. In this hypothesis, the speeches were part of the multimedia experience of dance, music, and recitation. Their commemorative gesture places them, together with the “Major Court Hymns,” in the later part of the Western Zhou dynasty: a time of crisis that was forever removed from the dynastic founders – and all the more in need of their memory.

VI. Warring States narrative literature and rhetoric

With the single exception of the “Announcement to Kang,” citations of the early *Documents* speeches are exceedingly rare in Warring States texts. This stands in sharp contrast to the presumably youngest chapters of the *Documents* that claim to contain the voices from mythological antiquity but, in fact, present elaborate schemes of cosmological, numerological, and bureaucratic order popular among late Warring States thinkers. Examples of these chapters are the “Great Plan” (Hong fan), the “Merits of Yu” (Yu gong), the “Canon of Yao” (Yao dian), or the “Plans of Gao Yao” (Gao Yao mo). Their ideal images of a cosmo-political order emerged in direct response to the instability of the Warring States period, a time of incessant warfare during which all political thinkers shared the quest for political unity that had no reality beyond the memory of high antiquity. A prominent example of such imagination is the “Canon of Yao,” which shows the mythical ruler Shun on a cosmic

journey through his realm. In a repetitive, monotonous account intimating total order and standardization, the ruler embarks in the middle month of each season toward the cardinal direction correlated to it in “Five Phases” (*wuxing*) cosmology, ascends the primary mountain there, and exerts his sovereignty through a fixed order of ritual activities:

In the second month of the year, [Shun] went east to visit those under his protection and arrived at [Mount] Venerable Dai. He made a burnt offering and in the correct sequence performed “gazing from the distance” sacrifices to the mountains and streams. Then he gave audience to the lords of the east, regulated the [calendar of the] seasons and months, rectified the [designations of the] days, and unified the pitch-pipes and the measures of length, capacity, and weight.

Similarly, the “Merits of Yu” shows Yu as the ordering force in a mechanical and predictable universe: he measures the known realm, regulates its waters, cultivates its mountains, develops its plains, organizes agriculture, divides the world into nine spheres, and distributes both land and surnames. Likewise, “The Great Plan” presents the cosmic ruler in the center of a numerology scheme that encompasses both the natural and the political worlds.

The amalgamation of cosmology and political mythology is a typical phenomenon of late Warring States times, rhetorically anticipating the unification of the Chinese realm. No early Chinese text advocates an alternative to a unified rule; instead, a number of works composed around the Qin unification are joined by their trust in a centralized, well-ordered cosmos and state. Their ideal natural and social universe is open to human comprehension and prediction because its dynamics are not erratic but governed by principles of regularity. This regularity is expressed in numerological systems – most comprehensively in the correlative philosophy of the Five Phases – that were mapped onto time (seasons), space (directions), social structures (administration and so on), and a host of other matters.

Thus the late Warring States(?) *Rituals of Zhou* (*Zhou li*) – first promoted by Liu Xin (d. AD 23) at the end of the Western Han and later one of the Thirteen Classics – arranges the administrative institutions according to the “offices” of Heaven, Earth, and the four seasons. For each office, the exact (if highly schematic) number of bureaucrats at the different ranks is noted, on the whole reproducing the numerological order of the universe as the order of political administration and its ideal textual description. While the *Rituals of Zhou* has been associated with either the Qin imperial court or Wang Mang’s Xin dynasty (AD 9–23) – both regarded as illegitimate by the later tradition –

its scholasticism matches that of other late Warring States and early imperial texts. For example, *Mr. Lü's Spring and Autumn Annals* (*Lüshi chunqiu*), compiled under the patronage of the Qin chancellor Lü Buwei (d. 235 BC), discusses the ideal administrative order in twelve core chapters (completed 239 BC) that are dedicated to the twelve months of the year. Similarly, the “Merits of Yu” and the “Great Plan” impose numerology on geography and thus turn the actual landscape of early China into mythological space. The same is true for two other late Warring States works: the *Tradition of King Mu* (*Mu tianzi zhuan*) and the *Classic of Mountains and Seas* (*Shanhai jing*). The former text was excavated from a tomb in AD 281, with its four core chapters likely dating from the mid-fourth century BC. It recounts in highly formulaic and systematic fashion the Western Zhou king Mu’s legendary celestial journey to the west, culminating in his sojourn with the Queen-Mother of the West (Xiwangmu), who grants him a romantic encounter at Jasper Pool in the Elysium of the Kunlun mountains. Here, King Mu is no longer a mere historical figure; he is a cosmic sovereign who converses with a host of spirits on whom he graciously bestows entire catalogues of splendid gifts.

It is unclear how widely this mythological narrative, built around the trope of the celestial journey, circulated in late Warring States times. It did not, however, enter the tradition of historical narrative. The abundance of anecdotal and fictional elements in works like the *Zuo Tradition* notwithstanding, some lines – however tentative and inconsistent – were drawn between the downright fantastic (and therefore didactically irrelevant) and the historically and morally plausible. This may also explain the isolated position of the *Classic of Mountains and Seas*, an ethno-cosmography of the strange lands and their bizarre inhabitants beyond the Chinese realm. While a text titled *Classic of Mountains and Seas* is first mentioned in the *Records of the Historian*, the received version is a work of many chronological layers; only Chapters 1–5 may reach back into Warring States times. The text abounds with specific geographic detail such as the distances between places, but these are largely schematic and as a whole create more a mandala-like cosmic diagram than any realistic geography. Like the “Heavenly Questions” of the *Verses of Chu* (*Chuci*; see below), the *Classic of Mountains and Seas* was reportedly written to existing illustrations (not to be confused with later illustrated versions of the text). Such a connection to visual representation is quite possible, although the exact relation between text and image remains unclear.

If texts like the *Tradition of King Mu*, the *Classic of Mountains and Seas*, and perhaps many other writings devoted to the strange and the transcendent – the

kinds of things Confucius “did not talk about” (*zi bu yu*; *Analects* 7/21) – were on the margins of the early prose tradition, the mainstream of Warring States narrative was profoundly historical. It developed from the *Spring and Autumn Annals* (*Chunqiu*) that already in the *Mencius* is attributed to Confucius and in Han times became part of the Five Classics. Covering the years from 722 to 481 BC, the *Annals* provides brief annalistic entries from the perspective of twelve generations of rulers from the small northeastern state of Lu, the home state of Confucius. The *Annals* was not the only text of its kind; in Warring States times, the very term “Spring and Autumn” (*chunqiu*; perhaps more correctly “Springs and Autumns”), which refers to the continuous rise and fall of ruling houses, was generally used for annalistic accounts that various Eastern Zhou states kept in their archives. The *Annals* records events about other states of the realm but only in their relation to the state of Lu and from a Lu perspective. Far more inhibiting to the reading of the *Annals*, however, is the extreme brevity of the individual entries, the limitation to a small number of events per year, and the formulaic diction of the text. To function as an archival text that could be consulted about the past, it must have been substantiated by a host of additional records. In its received version, the text is in urgent need of further explanation.

According to the *Mencius* (III.B.9), Confucius had compiled the *Annals* in response to a world in turmoil and decline. From the beginning, the text was understood as moral judgment. According to the *Mencius*, Confucius expected to be both understood and condemned on the basis of the *Annals*; and after he had completed the text, “rebellious subjects and deceitful sons were frightened.” Despite the terse and factual nature of the *Annals*, its author is portrayed as a moral authority. His writing both rectifies the past and offers moral guidance. As with the exegesis of the Five Classics altogether, the interpretation of the *Annals* takes its decisive turn in Western Han times. Like the *Poetry*, the *Annals* was seen as encoded language; in fact, due to its extremely terse and formulaic wording, the text was virtually incomprehensible without further elaboration. The central commentary to the *Annals*, dominant from the early Han through the mid-first century BC, was the *Gongyang Tradition* (*Gongyang zhuan*), which elevated Confucius to the status of a “plain” – that is, uncrowned – “king” (*suwang*). He did not equal an actual ruler but was above all rulers by submitting them to his own moral judgment.

The *Gongyang Tradition* is said to have begun with Confucius’ disciple Zi Xia, from whom it continued orally for some four hundred years to an otherwise unknown erudite, Mr. Gongyang, who during the reign of Emperor Jing (r. 157–141 BC) first wrote the text on bamboo and silk. The account is

impossible to verify, but by the time of Sima Qian, the *Annals* had become the master text of Spring and Autumn history with the *Gongyang Tradition* as its principal exegesis. Its most illustrious proponent was Dong Zhongshu (ca 179–ca 104 BC), who attracted thousands of students, among them Sima Qian. In Western Han times, none of the Five Classics was more directly applied to questions of imperial rule than the *Annals*. In 51 BC, Emperor Xuan (r. 74–49 BC) personally presided over a court debate – led by Xiao Wangzhi (ca 110–47 BC), the Grand Tutor to the heir apparent – on the Five Classics at the Stone Canal Pavilion (*shiqu ge*) within the imperial palace. The meeting of twenty-three court scholars had been triggered by the ascendance of a new *Annals* exegesis, the *Guliang Tradition* (*Guliang zhuan*), as a challenge to the *Gongyang* interpretation. The debate was immensely political and over several months led to written discussions on various topics, many of them related to matters of ritual propriety and social order. On each of the more than thirty questions under debate, the final pronouncement was left to the emperor, who thus assumed his own authority over the Classics. In the end the *Guliang Tradition* was given preference over the *Gongyang* and received its own chair at the Imperial Academy.

The high-profile debate over the *Annals* testifies to their importance at the Western Han court. It implied a series of assumptions on a notoriously underdetermined text, that, in order to mean anything at all, had to be imbued with profound yet hidden authorial intent. Thus, in addition to the *Poetry* and the *Changes*, the *Annals* was the third of the Five Classics that called for complex hermeneutic procedures and generated a large field of learning engaging thousands of scholars. The study of the *Annals* assumed particular urgency because its lessons could be directly applied both to Han rule and to Han historical writing. Thus Confucius, now the preeminent historian of old, became a powerful model for Sima Qian, to whom, in turn, we owe the only substantial biographical account of Confucius. This account created the very model the Han historian then set out to follow.

The Western Han understanding of the *Annals* was rooted in three notions: “praise and blame” (*baobian*), “subtle phrasing” (*weiyán*), and “rectification of names” (*zhengming*). Together, they defined the purpose and supreme stature of the historian: his work served as a tool of historical criticism, as a warning for the present and future, as a standard of language, and, by its nature as a textual artifact, as a retrospective rectification and replacement of history itself. Thus the famous last entry in the *Annals*, dating to the fourteenth year of Duke Ai (481 BC), reads, “The fourteenth year, spring. In the west, hunters caught a unicorn.” The *Gongyang* comments,

The unicorn is a beast of benevolence. It arrives under the rule of a [true] king. Without a [true] king, it does not arrive . . . Confucius said: “How could it come! How could it come!” He grasped his inner sleeve and wiped his face; tears soaked his seams . . . When the hunters caught the unicorn in the west, Confucius said: “My way has ended.”

Gongyang and *Guliang* both subject the *Annals* to a question-and-answer catechism that probes deeply into the text. They operate on the assumption that Confucius had used “subtle phrasing” to encode moral judgment, and that commentary could decode the text back into plain language. To this end, *Gongyang* and *Guliang* explore the meaning of each word in the *Annals* through a tripartite procedure. First, they insist that historical writing is conveyed in strict and precise language. Second, they propose that deviations from that normative phrasing are purposeful and can be identified. Third, these deviations also follow precise rules and, if properly decoded, will demonstrate how a deviation in phrasing reflects the deviation in moral behavior that the historian was trying to expose. In this spirit, each entry in the *Annals* could be decoded as moral judgment and offered examples from the past as lessons for the present. This was particularly true for anomalous natural phenomena of which numerous instances were reported in the *Annals*. These accounts were readily available to scholars like Dong Zhongshu or the *Guliang* expert Liu Xiang (79–8 BC), who used them to explain any irregular cosmic events of their own times, such as eclipses, droughts, floods, unusual atmospheric phenomena, the appearance of strange plants and animals, or aberrant movements of the stars and planets.

While the *Gongyang* and *Guliang* traditions offer paradigms of historical judgment and the encoding of praise and blame, their catechistic format stays close to the *Annals* and is limited to the events reported there. The third “tradition” (*zhuan*) that in Han times became related to the *Annals* was that by a Mr. Zuo, whose *Zuo Tradition* is only loosely connected to the *Annals* but at the same time offers by far the most extensive narrative account of Spring and Autumn history. The *Zuo Tradition* is the most important and most fascinating work of pre-imperial historical writing and in many ways served as both source and model for Sima Qian’s *Records of the Historian*. It is traditionally attributed to Zuo Qiuming, an obscure figure of the fifth century who is briefly hailed for his moral judgment by Confucius in *Analects* 5/25. While the *Zuo Tradition* was one of the central sources for Sima Qian, it was only Liu Xiang’s son Liu Xin who recommended the work for imperial canonization with the argument that its text was in ancient script and thus more trustworthy than the *Gongyang* and *Guliang* traditions that had relied merely on oral transmission. To many

a scholar in late imperial China, Liu Xin was the *bête noire* of the Han: a man who not only had betrayed the Western Han imperial house of Liu (to which he was directly related) by serving the “usurper” Wang Mang, but was also a forger of several classics – especially the *Zuo Tradition* and the *Rituals of Zhou* – in order to provide ideological support for Wang’s “New” (*Xin*) dynasty. This claim by Kang Youwei (1858–1927) and others, that Liu Xin had forged the *Zuo Tradition*, has been discredited; in general, the composition of the work is now dated into the late fourth century. Following the historical framework of the *Annals*, it includes a wealth of documents and speeches woven into the narrative proper. It remains unclear to what extent these are based on authentic, and thus indeed very early, written records. While certain stylistic features seem to distinguish the chronologically earlier narratives from the later ones, numerous instances of proleptic speech – predictions of future events that almost all turn out to be true – indicate a strong retrospective authorial or editorial hand.

Despite these uncertainties, the *Zuo Tradition* is rightfully celebrated as a masterpiece of grand historical narrative. It constitutes the single most important historical narrative from the years 722 to 468 BC; that is, thirteen years beyond the last entry in the *Annals*. The text is replete with narrative detail and dramatic encounters, with a highly complex architecture in which extensive strings of anecdotal narrative develop in parallel, overlapping, and recurrent patterns. It also is hailed for its didactic orientation. Instead of offering authorial judgments or catechistic hermeneutics, the *Zuo Tradition* lets its moral lessons unfold within the narrative itself, teaching at once history and historical judgment. This combination of historical account, narrative aesthetics, and didactic persuasion is fundamentally self-contradictory: both rhetorical brilliance and didactic purpose tend to undermine the modern reader’s trust in the historical account – yet to the literary tradition, it was precisely this powerful combination that has elevated the *Zuo Tradition* to its preeminent stature of a classic in the Confucian canon.

In narrative tension and dramatic episodes, the *Zuo Tradition* leaves little to ask for: battles and fights, royal assassinations and the murder of concubines, courage and cowardice, deception and intrigues, excesses of all colors, oppression and insurgence, appearances of cosmic portents and ghosts. Infused with an emphasis on sincere personal intent and emotion, the narrative offers a panorama of human existence that – not unlike the “Airs of the States” – locates the roots of truth and morality less in the rulers than in their subjects. As a whole, the text continuously illustrates the importance of social order and ritual hierarchy precisely because it recounts so vividly the catastrophic

consequences of their failure. Meanwhile, despite its overarching didacticism, it also leaves moments of ambivalence and moral inconsistency that testify to disparate anecdotal traditions.

The dominant narrative strategy is related to the absence of an authorial voice. Instead, through predictions, flashbacks, and extensive dialogues, the narrative threads, which often span years and decades, are both held together and reflected upon in the thoughts and speeches of the historical protagonists themselves. History appears driven not by the events proper but by the choices and deliberations of its individual agents, who routinely provide the justifications for, and explanations of, their own actions. In this rhetorical framework, the bare outcome of a conflict is far less important than the moral choices it makes explicit. These choices tend to be presented at an early stage of the specific narrative, inviting the reader to predict the result of the conflict together with the historical actors' own predictions. In the *Zuo Tradition*, history becomes a moral and predictable universe of social and ritual order. Violations of this order are recognizable, and their consequences are foreseeable. Success and failure are not a matter of brute force but result from the degree to which the moral order and its externalization in ritual form are observed. Those who violate the rules, who act ruthlessly toward the common folk, or who ignore sagely advice, are doomed. Such judgment unfolds without authorial interference and is often left implicit, yet by entering the *Zuo Tradition* universe, the audience – the Chinese elite versed in the Classics and their moral imperatives – was well prepared to follow its logic.

Individual anecdotes are on occasion also capped by brief moral verdicts attributed either to Confucius or to an anonymous “superior man” (*junzi*). In these remarks, the *Zuo Tradition* becomes related to the ethical and political program of Warring States *ru* classicists. Most likely, these verdicts were attached at the time when the vast array of anecdotal narratives were cast into the grand narrative of the received text; one may speculate that they – much like the prefaces to the songs of the *Poetry* – served the purposes of a particular teaching lineage to distill both historical knowledge and moral teaching into compact formulae. Most importantly, they make the *Zuo Tradition* speak directly to those in power, reminding them of the historical precedents and inevitable consequences of their own actions. As a whole the text thus assumes a single voice that embodies the totality of voices of ministers, advisers, “old men,” and other named or anonymous figures who consistently present their rulers with political advice and remonstrations to remind them of their moral duties and of the predictable regularities of history. These voices, together the voice of the *Zuo Tradition*, speak with elegance and authority; they represent

the historical actors as well as “Confucius” and the “superior man” – yet ultimately they represent the very classicists who compiled the *Zuo Tradition*. Rulers who heed them succeed; those who do not heed them fail. As such the *Zuo Tradition* is not a disinterested account of the past but a text directly tied to the specific political and philosophical persuasions of Warring States classicists. It is, in every sense of the word, their text.

The constructed, patchwork-like nature of the narrative becomes apparent in the many instances of inserted didactic episodes, brief vignettes of exemplary situations that must have existed independent of the context into which they were finally embedded. These brief passages may represent an earlier anecdotal style that is much more prominent in the other great historical narrative dating from the Warring States period, the *Discourses of the States*. Sima Qian attributes this text likewise to Zuo Qiuming, but the *Discourses* follows a different organization and is more philosophical and rhetorical treatise than continuous narrative. A number of parallel passages shared by the *Zuo Tradition* and *Discourses* may reveal a widely available repertoire of traditional knowledge circulating in various written and oral versions. Additional parallels are found between the *Zuo Tradition* and *Master Yan’s Spring and Autumn Annals* (*Yanzi chunqiu*), another collection of anecdotal writing. Containing mainly the remonstrations that Yan Ying (d. 500 BC) purportedly delivered to Lord Jing of Qi (r. 547–489 BC), this text oscillates between history, rhetoric, and didactic purpose. Its 215 episodes, compiled into eight chapters in late Western Han times, likely date from the late Warring States period and display the trope of the morally superior adviser even more pointedly than the *Discourses* and the *Zuo Tradition*.

The twenty-one chapters of the *Discourses* are a rich collection of speeches and dialogues, interspersed with narrative and discursive passages, which are assigned to eight Western and Eastern Zhou states: Zhou, Lu, Qi, Jin, Zheng, Chu, Wu, and Yue. The chapters are named after their states (“Discourses of Zhou,” “Discourses of Lu,” and so forth) and in themselves are chronologically ordered, ranging from the tenth century BC to 453 BC. However, the interest of the *Discourses* in the eight states is decidedly uneven, as the distribution of its 245 episodes reveals: while the mighty Eastern Zhou state of Jin is represented with 127 entries (in the current text arranged in nine chapters), the small state of Lu – Confucius’ home state, where purportedly the Western Zhou ritual traditions were still maintained – receives no fewer than thirty-seven, exceeding both the royal state of Zhou (thirty-three passages) and Lu’s powerful northeastern neighbor Qi (eight). This distribution may be another reflection of *ru* classicism and its preoccupation with Lu – a

state both noble and powerless, exemplifying as a polity what Confucius, the “uncrowned king,” embodied as a person.

Han sources may thus be correct in locating the compilation of the *Discourses* not entirely separately from that of the *Zuo Tradition*; both are devoted to the same moral purpose and historical paradigms under which they organize a wide variety of materials. Both abound in references to recitations of songs from the *Poetry*, performed as elements of diplomatic discourse and political remonstrance. Given these similarities with the *Zuo Tradition*, the Jin dynasty commentator of the *Discourses*, Wei Zhao (d. 273), called the *Discourses* the “exoteric tradition” (*waizhuan*) to the *Annals*. While the text itself shows no such specific relation, the connection of the *Discourses* with the historical and political consciousness of Warring States *ru* classicists, to whom the *Annals* was the primary account of history, is unmistakable.

Altogether, the large corpus of Warring States anecdotal and philosophical writing (on the latter, see below) was framed in historical terms and over time became organized in a series of compilations, many dating from as late as Western Han times. Instead of authors, we must think of compilers, and probably groups of compilers; individual authorship, if existing at all before the third century BC, was an extreme exception. Not only do the texts themselves withhold any information to identify their authors – no excavated manuscript so far contains a reference to its author – but the substantial pieces of traditional lore that appear repeatedly, and then in strikingly different versions, across a range of compilations from the fourth through the first centuries BC, amply testify to the fluidity of such material beyond geographical and political boundaries. Even the – in this context often overstated – divide between the multistate world of the Warring States and the early empire is questionable. We know next to nothing about the specific ways in which this lore developed, was circulated, and became transmitted to the late Western Han court classicists who organized the textual world of early China in the way we know it. An outstanding example of a narrative that found its way into a whole series of texts is the story of Wu Zixu, a refugee from Chu who became a key political adviser and military leader in the southeastern state of Wu. The *Zuo Tradition* gives most of its account on Wu Zixu in eight entries dating from 522 through 484 BC; the *Discourses* concentrates the story into a period of only twenty-two years while dramatically embellishing its details; *Mr. Lü’s Spring and Autumn Annals* provides further, increasingly bizarre additions; and in Chapter 66 of the *Records of the Historian*, the story becomes refocused on Wu Zixu’s moral choices. Finally, two probably Eastern Han anecdote compilations complete the retellings: the *Book on the Incomparability of Yue*

(*Yue jue shu*) and, most extensively, the *Spring and Autumn Annals of Wu and Yue* (*Wu Yue chunqiu*), recounting the struggle between the states of Wu and Yue at the southeastern Chinese periphery. On this increasingly rich basis, later versions continued to elaborate on Wu Zixu (who gradually became the epitome of filial piety), including a “transformation text” (*bianwen*) manuscript found at Dunhuang.

The fantastic proliferation of detail in the Wu Zixu story provides abundant evidence not for specific authors but for the motives, interests, and literary techniques common to them all. The building blocks of early Chinese prose are historical anecdotes focused on exemplary individuals and their thoughts, words, and actions. They are driven not by chronology but by direct speech and dramatic dialogue that reveal the protagonists’ inner worlds. Where the cosmic or ancestral spirits interfere, they do so in predictable responses to human action and intent. The emphasis on speech and dialogue exposes the constructed nature of prose rhetoric: the great speeches of early Chinese narrative, beautifully phrased and yet ever-changing across parallel accounts, are the words of ritual propriety (or failure thereof) as imagined by later generations. They are at once the most fictional and the most powerful elements of historical narrative – true not because they had ever been spoken but as ideal and prototypical speech.

The emphasis on the spoken word in early China – references to the importance of writing are next to absent – extends far beyond history. Speeches and dialogues structure much of philosophical writing (the early layers of the *Analects*, the *Mencius*, but also the core sections of the *Mozi* and the *Zhuangzi*) that, in turn, takes on the framework of the historical anecdote. Yet the primacy of oral persuasion culminates in another body of texts centered on the figure of the “itinerant rhetorician” (*youshui*) or “political strategist” (*zongheng jia*). Their accounts are the pseudohistorical *Intrigues of the Warring States* (*Zhanguo ce*), compiled by Liu Xiang between 26 and 8 BC from at least six different collections of remonstrations (*jian*) and persuasions (*shui*). The *Intrigues* contains 497 entries relating to the seven big domains of Warring States times (Qin, Qi, Chu, Zhao, Wei, Han, and Yan), as well as to the Zhou royal house and the minor states of Song, Wei, and Zhongshan. The origins of the anecdotes are unknown, and the textual history of the *Intrigues* is problematic. The earliest commentary is attributed to Gao You (ca 168–212), but the current text is based on a reconstruction of Liu Xiang’s compilation by Zeng Gong (1019–1083) which gave rise to two editions of different arrangement: while Yao Hong’s (ca 1100–1146) version presumably follows Liu Xiang’s initial order of the text according to states, Bao Biao’s (1106–1149) edition – revised

and annotated by Wu Shidao (1283–1344) – abandons the geographical for a purely chronological sequence of the entries.

A short text of twenty-seven entries that has been found separately among the silk manuscripts from the Western Han Mawangdui tomb no. 3 contains a number of direct parallels to the *Intrigues*. Further parallels appear in the *Records of the Historian* and in the “Forest of Persuasions” (Shui lin) chapters of the *Han Feizi*. Altogether, a large body of rhetorical writings beyond the *Intrigues* must have circulated widely in the early empire. As they appear in several sources, these materials show an early rhetorical tradition – alive for several centuries before reaching Liu Xiang – quite distinct from the moral universe of *ru* classicist learning. Paying no attention to the hallowed *Poetry* and *Documents*, these “persuasions” show expertise in the craft of rhetoric that was forged among strategists who traveled between the various states to offer their political and military advice. While early China did not produce systematic treatises on rhetoric and did not develop anything like the lexicon and the professional and institutionalized training of rhetoric of ancient Greece and Rome, discussions of rhetorical techniques are preserved in sources like the “Smooth Persuasions” (Shun shui) of *Mr. Lü’s Spring and Autumn Annals*, the “Difficulties of Persuasion” (Shui nan) of *Han Feizi*, or the “Arrayed Traditions of Fortune-Tellers” in the *Records of the Historian*. These texts do not discuss specific rhetorical figures but emphasize strategies of persuasion such as the need to explore one’s counterpart’s thoughts or the use of historical analogy and precedent. Yet it is mostly the individual *Intrigues* episode that reveals the basic techniques of early Chinese oratory. A common rhetorical strategy is to explore a situation from two possible outcomes that both lead to the same conclusion, as in the brief anecdote “A Person Who Presented the Drug of Immortality to the King of Jing” (*Intrigues*, Chu, 4):

Someone presented the drug of immortality to the king of Jing. The receptionist ushered him in when an attendant asked: “Can it be consumed?” – “It can.” Thereupon the attendant snatched the drug and consumed it. The king was angry and sent a man to execute him, but the attendant sent someone to persuade the king: “Your subject has asked the receptionist, and the receptionist said it could be consumed; thus, your subject consumed it. In this, your subject is without fault; the fault rests with the receptionist. Moreover, the visitor had presented the medicine as the drug of immortality. If your subject consumed it and were then executed by the king, it would be the drug of mortality. If the king executes your innocent servant, it will be clear to everyone that the king has been deceived.” Thereupon the king did not execute him.

In the vast majority of persuasions, the principal scenario is the same: a strategist speaks to the ruler who follows advice or fails to listen. As such, the *Intrigues* reflect the political circumstances of the Warring States era, when competing states were in constant need of political and military advice. The traditional image of the Warring States themselves is largely shaped by the persuasions that display the cynical pursuit of strategic advantage. What the rulers in the *Intrigues* request, and what the “itinerant persuaders” deliver, is clever advice beyond the moral concerns set forth in the speeches of the *Zuo Tradition* and the *Discourses of the States*. Unlike *ru* classicist discourse, the speeches of the *Intrigues* pull out all the stops of deceit and manipulation, demonstrating not the elegance of virtuous speech but the efficiency of amoral, if not downright immoral, verbal craft. The *Intrigues* thus occupy an ambivalent position where admiration for eloquence and disapproval of the unscrupulous ploy converge. Both Confucius in *Analects* 15/11 and 17/18 and Mencius (V.A.4) denounce crafty speakers who, according to the *Analects*, are able to “overturn family and state.” Yet the most brilliant, if certainly fictional, condemnation of crafty political rhetoric is found in the *Intrigues* itself. This condemnation is attributed to the master rhetorician Su Qin, who tries to move King Hui of Qin to take military action against the anti-Qin alliance of the time. Su Qin traces the decay of political power to a lack of military prowess and to the emergence of excessive rhetoric. To make this point, Su Qin, in a marvelous self-referential turn, overwhelms 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 put them 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.

In this verbal cascade, language is more than the vehicle of meaning; Su Qin creates the very reality he sets out to denounce. In Western Han times this particular use of oral rhetoric became one of the defining features of the dominant court genre of literature, the poetic exposition (*fu*; see below). It carried with it both the splendor and the moral ambiguity of persuasive speech – and for this came to be rejected by the later Confucian tradition.

VII. The question of literacy

While the *Zuo Tradition* and the *Discourses* are genuine Warring States works, the oratory of the *Intrigues* and discussions of rhetoric found in texts from the late third and early second centuries BC are somewhat later constructions of Warring States political discourse. Much of the *Intrigues* is historically unreliable – if perhaps no more so than some aspects of the Wu Zixu legend – but the text reflects genuine practices of diplomacy and debate during the era of political disintegration and interstate conflict from, roughly, 500 through 200 BC. After the foundation of the Qin empire in 221 BC, the new politics of intellectual and material unification and standardization put an end to the “discourses of the hundred lineages” (*baijiayu*) of Warring States times, the classical era of Chinese philosophical debate. The expository prose of the Warring States is written in “classical Chinese,” which – compared to the archaic language of the *Poetry* and the core layers of the *Documents* and *Changes* – is characterized by a lucid and smooth style. As a whole, this body of texts created the intellectual foundations of the Chinese empire. The *ru* classicists in particular composed a new body of expository texts around the *Poetry* and the *Documents* that secured these canonical works as the primary source of cultural authority. This new corpus of philosophical prose established the *ru* scholars as the principal interpreters and guardians of the Classics – men who, like Confucius in *Analects* 7/1, “trustfully delight

in antiquity.” Meanwhile, other intellectual lineages developed their own responses to the changing needs of an increasingly complex society and its diverse fields of traditional and emerging knowledge.

The specific origins of Warring States intellectual discourse are difficult to grasp. Traditional ideas that relate purportedly very early texts to specific authors – like the *Laozi* coming from the sixth century BC – are a Han dynasty phenomenon and fraught with dubious assumptions about the original integrity of individual “books” and the identity of their putative authors and audiences. No archaeological or traditional evidence inspires confidence in high rates of literacy in, say, 500 BC. Pragmatic writing for economic, administrative, legal, military, and other technical purposes had been in existence since Western Zhou and probably even late Shang times, although no wide-ranging evidence such as we find in ancient Mesopotamia or Egypt exists to support more specific conclusions. Some form of schooling, including its economic and cultural resources from buildings to textbooks, must have been available to the aristocratic elite as well as – for functional literacy in daily transactions – to lower strata of administrators, judges, and practitioners of medical and other specialist knowledge. Traditional historiography relates the composition of expository prose to the lowest rank of the hereditary aristocracy, the “servicemen” (*shi*) who lived in the capitals of the various states or moved from state to state. For example, Xun Kuang, the principal author of the *Xunzi*, is said to have traveled from the eastern states all the way to Qin in the west.

It would be adventurous to project the practices of writing known from the late fourth century BC onward, and then especially from the Han imperial state, to earlier centuries, or to relate low-level functional literacy to the composition of philosophical prose. Administrative tasks relied on the technology of writing in ways philosophical discourse did not. Beginning with the late Shang oracle records and extending to the texts of Western Zhou bronze inscriptions, one can identify anonymous specialists in writing at the royal court. The *Rituals of Zhou*, a text that purports to outline the institutions of the Western Zhou but reflects Warring States ideals of political and cosmological order, lists a total number of 366 government offices and mentions acts of reading and writing for 42 of these. However, the vast majority of governmental offices – real or imagined – produced and kept written texts. This fact is reflected in the general “outlines of offices” (*xu guan*) that introduce the six major sections of the *Rituals of Zhou*, as in the outline for the highest office of the state, that of the prime minister (*dazai*) in the Ministry of State (*tianguan*):

Prime minister, one man in the rank of one of the six ministers (*qing*); Vice prime ministers (*xiaozai*), two men in the rank of Ordinary grand master (*zhong dafu*); Assistant ministers of state (*zaifu*), four men in the rank of Junior grand master (*xia dafu*); Senior servicemen (*shangshi*), eight men; Ordinary servicemen (*zhongshi*), sixteen men; Numerous junior servicemen (*lü xiashi*), thirty-six men; Storehouse keepers (*fu*), six men; Scribes (*shi*), twelve men; Aides (*xu*), twelve men; Runners (*tu*), one hundred and twenty men.

The sequence of positions is typical and reflects the ranks of government officials: the three levels of servicemen (*shi*) were still part of the nobility, but the four ranks of storehouse keepers, scribes, aides, and runners were not; their members were recruited from commoners. The storehouse keepers were in charge of storing official documents and contracts; the scribes, usually double the number of storehouse keepers, were their subordinates who created these writings. According to Zheng Xuan's commentary, both groups were appointed not by the ruler but by the respective ministers, which reflects their relatively low status.

Altogether, the *Rituals of Zhou* lists for the regular offices of the central government 442 storehouse keepers and 994 scribes, plus those for administrative units beyond the central government (including 101 scribes). Whatever its factual substance, this account clearly points to large numbers of minor officials charged with the production and storage of documents, and thus to an extensive amount of pragmatic writing. This is consistent with evidence from recently excavated manuscripts. Direct archaeological evidence for the status of government scribes comes from the late third-century BC Qin statutes, written on bamboo, that were excavated in 1975 from Shuihudi (Yunmeng, Hubei) tomb no. 11 (sealed 217 BC). The tomb occupant, a man named Xi who lived from 262 to 217 BC, began his career as a local scribe (*shi*) at the age of eighteen or nineteen (244 BC) and was promoted to the position of a prefectural scribe (*lingshi*) three years later. In that capacity his responsibilities included the investigation of criminal cases; in 235 BC, he was promoted to a higher legal position. This biography suggests that the position of scribe, although hereditary in the state of Qin, was an entry position to be taken at a young age, immediately after being trained in an office that the Qin statutes identify as "study room" (*xueshi*); the main prerequisite was the ability to recite and write a text of a certain length.

The *History of the Han* and the postface of the *Shuowen jiezi* note that a scribe had to master a text of nine thousand characters in length; by contrast, a number of five thousand characters is noted in a recently excavated legal manuscript from Zhangjiashan (Jingzhou, Hubei) tomb no. 247, "Statutes

and Ordinances of the Second Year” (Ernian lüling, probably referring to the year 186 BC), that includes a “Statute on Scribes” (*Shilü*). Both the *Shuowen* and the “Statute” give the students’ age as seventeen *sui* (sixteen years according to Western counting) before they were examined for the position of scribe, which corresponds to the entry-level position mentioned for the Shuihudi tomb occupant. The difference in the number of characters may itself be nothing more than a scribal error based on the similarity of the graphs for “five” and “nine” in Warring States script.

It is difficult to gauge how many different characters a text of five thousand or nine thousand graphs contained, but considering the nature and rank of the scribal position, it was certainly far below what was needed to read the Classics. The Western Han administrative wooden slips from Juyan (Edsengol, Inner Mongolia/Gansu) show evidence that they were written by scribes of only limited education. Depending on the nature of the text an aspiring scribe had to master for low-level administrative tasks, the number of different graphs may have been in the low four digits, if not much fewer. His scribal competence for producing pedestrian documents was fundamentally different from composing expository prose with its frequent references to the archaic classics.

At the same time, the technology of writing was far more instrumental to administrative, economic, and legal procedures than to the philosophical debate. Warring States expository prose is replete with references to the dialogical teacher–disciple relationship and to the primacy of committing knowledge to memory (while remaining virtually silent on acts of writing). If these sources – texts that finally ended up as the edited written artifacts we now have – are at all to be trusted, the technology of choice in philosophical argument, political oratory, and the perpetuation of the canon was memorization, not writing. For Warring States times, it remains to be shown that the ability to write was the hallmark of superior education and self-cultivation, or of the cultural elite in general. It may well have been the domain of menial clerks on the one hand, and of the servicemen (*shi*) on the other. While the former operated on the basic level of functional literacy, the latter – as coming from the lowest rank of the traditional aristocracy – had good reason to master a technology that on occasion supported their primarily oral discourses and may have granted them the attention of the ruling elite and, possibly, a perspective of upward mobility. Be this as it may, none of the early philosophical masters – Confucius, Mencius, Mozi, Zhuangzi, and so on – is said to have been the writer of the entire text later circulated under his name. (The exception is Laozi, who only according to later pious legend wrote his work

of “five thousand characters.”) Texts like the *Analects* or the *Mozi* are about the early masters, not by them. For all works of expository prose prior to the late third century BC (when real authors like Xun Kuang and his student Han Feizi entered the picture), we must assume a mode of gradual composition and compilation along the literacy/orality continuum. The more widespread textual circulation in pre-imperial times is assumed, the larger the space for oral transmission and recomposition becomes – never precluding the writing down of a text on whatever specific occasion. Either way, all received Warring States texts were reshaped through the editorial work by scholars at the Han imperial court.

For two millennia, the perception of Warring States intellectual discourse has been shaped by these scholars and their views of textual composition. While the recent manuscript finds have invited challenges to these views, they do not establish a new vision of early Chinese textuality that could compete in scope and depth with the received accounts produced in Han times. It remains next to impossible to approach the newly excavated texts without constant reference to the overall framework designed by Han thinkers – a framework that not only aligned an existing textual tradition with a grid of powerful categories but, in fact, was responsible for shaping and editing the tradition. We cannot approach Warring States expository prose without considering the nature and scope of Han dynasty editorship and textual classification.

VIII. The Han construction of Warring States textual lineages

Sima Tan (d. ca 110 BC), father of Sima Qian and the first author of the *Records of the Historian*, is credited with the first outline of Warring States thought which he organized in “six intellectual lineages” (*liu jia*): *yinyang* cosmologists, *ru* classicists, Mohists, terminologists (*mingjia*), legalists (*fajia*), and Daoists (*daoja*). Sima Tan did not, however, identify specific texts under these headings. In 26 BC, Emperor Cheng (r. 32 BC–7 BC) ordered Liu Xiang to assemble and collate the writings from across the empire and to compile the imperial library catalogue “Categorized Listings” (*Bielu*). In around 6 BC, Liu’s son Liu Xin shortened the catalogue into the “Seven Summaries” (*Qilüe*), which Ban Gu in the late first century AD then further abbreviated into the “Monograph on Arts and Writings” in his *History of the Han*. The result was a broad survey of the enormous textual heritage that had accumulated by the fall of the Western Han, and it is here where we first see individual works assigned to specific intellectual lineages, reflecting the views of the

Han literary and political elite and giving pride of place to the Classics and the texts of the “hundred lineages.” The vast fields of technical writing such as those on religion or the occult arts, which have become visible from excavated manuscripts, were undoubtedly known but are significantly underrepresented in Ban Gu’s account. Thus the imperial catalogue was not a disinterested collection and description of all available materials, but rather reflects a selective and prescriptive vision of the textual heritage superimposed on a far more eclectic, less neatly divided universe of Warring States writing. Liu Xiang and his collaborators, as well as Liu Xin and Ban Gu, were court classicists to whom the canon of the Five Classics was both the source and the summit of all thinking and writing, as elaborated upon in the *ru* classicist exegetical traditions that had developed around these hallowed works of antiquity. The Five Classics were the “arts” (*yi*) proper, perfected and all-encompassing, to which all other “writings” (*wen*) were both subordinate and oriented.

The “Monograph on Arts and Writings” begins with a brief historical introduction from a late Western/early Eastern Han conception of early Chinese literary culture. According to Ban Gu, the “subtle phrasing” (*weiyán*) and “great principle” (*dà yì*) of antiquity had been lost after Confucius and his immediate disciples, and the resulting uncertainty led to diverse hermeneutical and teaching traditions for each of the Classics. Following the (purported) large-scale destruction of classical learning under the Qin, the old texts had been collected only in fragments at the Han imperial court until Emperor Cheng’s edict of 26 BC.

After this sketch, Ban Gu presents the resulting textual order in six divisions. The first three of these were devoted to the philosophical and literary heritage:

- The texts and hermeneutic traditions of the “six arts” (*liuyi*), including the “art,” or classical learning, of music that by Han times had been lost. In addition to the *Changes*, *Documents*, *Poetry*, *Rites*, *Music*, and *Spring and Autumn Annals*, this supreme category also included the *Analects* and the *Classic of Filial Piety* (*Xiaojing*) – both primers in Han elite education – as well as the glossaries of “elementary learning” (*xiaoxue*) that facilitated the access to the Classics.
- The writings of Warring States and early Han philosophical “masters” (*zhuzi*), arranged under the rubrics of the *ru* classicists, Daoists, *yinyang* cosmologists, legalists, terminologists (or “sophists”), Mohists, strategists (*zonghengjia*), writers of miscellaneous learning (*zajia*), agriculturists (*nong jia*), and folklorists (*xiaoshuojia*).
- Songs and poetic expositions (*shifu*) mostly of Han times.

The following three categories of Ban Gu's catalogue contained a broad range of technical writings:

- military writings (*bingshu*);
- cosmological, calendrical, and prognostic writings (*shushu*);
- pharmaceutical and medical writings (*fāngji*).

Liu Xiang personally collated the texts of the former three divisions and supervised those of the latter three. Working from vastly disparate materials, he and his collaborators had to select, decipher, collate, and arrange their texts; in addition, they transcribed them in current script onto new sets of bamboo slips, producing a new body of standardized texts. For each text Liu submitted to Emperor Cheng the work itself, a table of contents, a description of the various sources, information on the author, details regarding the collation, and a general discussion. All received early writings have come to us through this filter of textual evaluation, ordering, and rewriting. All excavated manuscripts so far available that pre-date Liu Xiang's efforts and have counterparts in the tradition differ in their internal arrangements from the received versions. Where it is possible to judge these differences, the received text seems less compelling than the manuscript version. The example of the "Black Robes" chapter from the *Records of Ritual* is particularly illustrative: while the manuscript versions in the Guodian and Shanghai Museum collections develop a consistent political argument on the ruler–subject relation, the differently arranged paragraphs of the received text appear as a series of individual statements, or clusters of statements, that lack cohesion or logical progression. Where the manuscript versions are tightly structured around a sequence of quotations from the *Poetry* (and, to a much lesser extent, the *Documents*), the same quotations in the received text are partly applied to different paragraphs and structured in a looser and somewhat redundant fashion. As a result, the received texts seem doubly deficient: first, the loss of the coherent political argument shows a deterioration in meaning, with a line of clear reasoning transformed into a series of disjointed statements; second, the loss of the earlier version's tight textual organization points to the erosion of mnemonic structure. In all likelihood the Guodian and Shanghai Museum manuscripts contain a coherent text that lent itself easily to memorization. The *Records of Ritual* version, by contrast, reflects an institutionalized imperial culture of writing and reading where texts were not primarily memorized and internalized but studied and stored on stationery. In the imperial collection of writings, the circulation and preservation of texts and ideas no longer depended on their intrinsic mnemonic structure. Liu Xiang's editorial choices

were meaningful and appropriate to the imperial environment of official learning but not necessarily the best reconstructions of ancient texts that originally functioned in a very different cultural context.

Another striking case is that of the three Guodian manuscripts of ca 300 BC that, taken together, constitute a text containing parts of the received *Laozi* but in a different order of paragraphs. At the same time, the “*Laozi C*” manuscript from Guodian is physically indistinguishable from a previously unknown cosmogony that the modern editors have labeled “Grand Unity Gives Birth to Water” (Taiyi sheng shui) and that may well have been an integral part of the proto-*Laozi* materials. To further complicate the matter, the “Grand Unity” manuscript itself can be divided into two distinct parts, written on two distinct groups of bamboo slips, that may have been separately interspersed with the “*Laozi C*” materials. Altogether, the Guodian manuscripts seem to show an ongoing textual formation of the *Laozi* text in the late fourth century BC (whereas two complete copies of the received text, dating from early Western Han times, have been found at Mawangdui). Even if the Guodian collection were merely an idiosyncratic selection from a larger body of material similar to the received *Laozi*, it would suggest that the text was open to manipulation rather than firmly established.

Yet another example of remarkable textual change can be found with the bamboo text that the Shanghai Museum editors have titled “The Father and Mother of the Folk” (Min zhi fumu), also of around 300 BC. This manuscript text is parallel both to most of the “Discourse on Ritual” (Lun li) chapter in the Han dynasty compilation *Family Sayings of Confucius* (*Kongzi jiaoyu*) and to roughly the first half of the *Records of Ritual* chapter “Confucius Dwells at Leisure” (Kongzi xian ju). Unlike either of these received texts, however, “The Father and Mother of the Folk” sets out with a question regarding a couplet from the *Poetry* hymn “Drawing Water from Afar” (Jiong zhuo, *Mao* 251), posed by Confucius’ disciple Zi Xia: how does a ruler become rightly called “the father and mother of the people?” From here, the tightly structured, partially rhymed text develops, in five steps, Confucius’ discussion of song, ritual, and music. While the text has survived in two separate versions, neither is identical to the manuscript; although the received texts adhere to the basic formal structure, they show different arrangements of the material, together with a host of lexical changes. Furthermore, the manuscript’s emphasis on “Drawing Water from Afar” as the starting point of the entire discussion (to which it then also returns later) has disappeared. Thus either the textual material existed in several parallel versions, with the manuscript and the received texts being just three instances among others, or the received

versions reflect two instances of strong editorship that did not shy away from cannibalizing an earlier text to create something new and quite different in both form and meaning.

Not all excavated manuscripts with received counterparts reveal such dramatic changes, though none of them – especially in the internal arrangement of its sections – fully concurs with its counterpart. The complex history of texts in early China is too poorly understood to determine the actual relations between two or more different versions of a single text. What is clear, however, is the degree to which early imperial scholarship has interfered with the textual heritage far beyond merely exegetical debates. The salaried Western Han court classicists had to create new, normalized texts out of numerous bundles of bamboo slips that more often than not were in considerable disarray or in competing and divergent orthography. Han scholars like Liu Xiang literally wrote their own imperial versions of the earlier texts by making orthographic and lexical choices, but also, even more fundamentally, by deciding which writings were to be included under a specific title – that is, as a “book.” While the learned men of pre-imperial times must have had ways to refer to texts by titles, the vast majority of excavated manuscripts do not show them; only in a few cases were titles written on the back end of a bundle of bamboo slips, visible once the bundle was rolled up. Collections like the *Records of Ritual* were compiled as “books” with “chapters” only in early imperial times. What was eventually to become a “book chapter” was earlier an individual treatise in its own right, which circulated independently from the other “chapters” with which it finally came to be grouped.

This is not to say that pre-Han manuscripts did not display a sense of textual integrity. The tight, rhythmic structure of both the “Black Robes” and the “Father and Mother of the Folk” manuscripts show more, not less, awareness of textual structure than their received counterparts. Furthermore, the Guodian and Shanghai Museum manuscripts use punctuation marks in the form of black dots or hooks to indicate the end of individual sections, and the “Black Robes” text from Guodian has a note “twenty-three” appended to indicate the number of its paragraphs. Together with the punctuation marks at the end of each paragraph, this note confirms a notion of textual order. If the received “Black Robes” chapter of the *Records of Ritual* indeed evolved from something like the manuscript version, a later editor not only changed the order of paragraphs but also expanded the text: the received version of twenty-four paragraphs contains two additional ones while combining two of the manuscript paragraphs into one. As with the “Father and Mother of the

Folk,” the received version, most likely a Han product, has replaced an earlier textual order with a new one.

The Han imperial catalogue, and indeed our entire perspective on the pre-imperial tradition, is thus an intellectual artifact of the early empire. Its view of mutually exclusive Warring States “schools of thought” has overplayed their differences and understated unmistakably common ideas that connect, for example, *ru* classicist ritualism to “legalist” realism (as manifest in the *Xunzi*). Heterogeneous compendia like *Mr. Lü’s Spring and Autumn Annals*, the second-century BC *Huainanzi*, the *Records of Ritual*, or even the *Documents* are not accidents of ideological confusion. As compilations of a variety of earlier texts (*Documents*, *Records of Ritual*) or the product of a larger group of scholars (*Mr. Lü’s Spring and Autumn Annals*, *Huainanzi*) they were more the rule than the exception. No manuscript-yielding tomb from late Warring States or early Han times can be identified with a specific philosophical lineage. The tomb occupants, presumably sponsors (of some social stature) of the writings they were buried with, show widely eclectic interests. In short, the manuscript situation makes us question some of the hard distinctions Liu Xiang and his collaborators produced in response to the challenge to organize an enormous amount of disparate bamboo writing into “books” complete with authors and titles.

Furthermore, only some 10 percent of all excavated manuscripts have counterparts in the received tradition, and only a few others can be related to entries in the “Monograph on Arts and Writings.” Tombs have yielded an impressive amount of technical writing: texts on divination, astrology, calendrical calculations, exorcism, pharmacology, and medical questions stand side by side, and often overlap, with works that detail legal, bureaucratic, and military procedures. Of the 278 titles of technical writing listed in the Han catalogue, two have survived through the later imperial tradition. While the “Monograph on Arts and Writings” was already selective, the later tradition, with its focus on the classics, historical texts, philosophy, and poetry, had even less room for the far more diverse riches of early Chinese textuality. For the history of literature, these newly discovered works are important because they hold the potential to illuminate a host of references (especially in the field of religion) that were self-explanatory to the contemporaneous readers of early and medieval literature but became obscure to later ages.

The manuscript finds also do not support traditional ideas about Warring States and Han intellectual and cultural geography. Contrary to the ideological view of the northeast as the center of the classical tradition and of the south as semi-barbarian, most canonical texts of *ru* classicist learning

excavated so far come from southern tombs. Indeed, all pre-imperial and early imperial manuscript evidence for the *Poetry* comes from the south – the area of the ancient state of Chu – with the tombs of Guodian, Mawangdui, and Shuanggudui also yielding a substantial number of other *ru* classicist texts, as does the Shanghai Museum corpus that is likewise written in Chu script. While the identity of the Guodian tomb occupant remains unknown, the Mawangdui tombs belong to the family of Li Cang (d. 185 BC), who was ennobled as marquis of Dai and appointed chancellor of the principedom of Changsha in the early years of the Han dynasty. The Shuanggudui tomb in Fuyang (Anhui) belongs to Xiahou Zao (d. 164 BC), the marquis of Ruyin, who was, like Li Cang, a high-ranking member of the early Han political and cultural elite.

In the north, only three other excavated sites, all dating to Han times, contain similar writings: tomb no. 40 from Bajiaolang (Dingxian, Hebei Province) with a version of the *Analects*, fragments from the *Xunzi*, and a number of other Han writings on bamboo slips; tomb no. 6 from Mozuizi (Wuwei, Gansu) with parts of several *Ceremonial Ritual (Yili)* chapters on wooden and bamboo slips; and ruins of houses and watchtowers at Lop Nor (Ruoqiang, Xinjiang) with an *Analects* fragment of only ten characters on one wooden slip. Altogether, the geographical distribution of excavated texts of classical *ru* learning may be partly explained as accidents of preservation and excavation. While future excavations may yield new evidence for *ru* writings in northeastern burials, it has at least become clear that classical learning was actively pursued, and perhaps with particular enthusiasm, also in other regions, especially in the south.

IX. The texts of Warring States philosophical and political discourse

While the limited manuscript finds expand and challenge the traditional view of Warring States intellectual discourse, the imperial catalogue remains a powerful guide to the received corpus of early expository prose. Its compilation was not external or posterior to the texts it lists but concomitant with the editorial process that produced these texts from earlier materials. As a result, the Warring States period came to be seen through the prism of competing “schools of thought” in dialogue with one another. Yet while some texts refer in general (usually pejorative) terms to other intellectual lineages and their fundamental tenets, they do not present themselves as the result of an actual intellectual “debate” among their authors or proponents, nor do they engage in direct confrontation based on mutual citation. The works of Warring States

expository prose are best seen as collections of ideas and anecdotes associated with certain eminent masters.

The most important of these masters was Confucius, who is prominently recognized in many texts both received and excavated. “His” principal text, the *Analects*, a collection of hundreds of sayings and anecdotes, is invisible in the Warring States context, although unattributed textual parallels can be identified in other early texts. The text contains different chronological layers possibly ranging from the fifth century through the early empire. As a discrete collection of Confucius’ sayings, dialogues with his disciples, and succinct characterizations of his conduct and ideas, the *Analects* came into focus only in the curriculum of the Western Han Imperial Academy when three different versions are said to have existed. Toward the end of the Western Han, Zhang Yu (d. 5 BC) – tutor to Emperor Cheng as crown prince – produced an authoritative synthesis of the text that has not survived. Following its Western Han canonization, the *Analects* inspired a new edition and commentary by Zheng Xuan that likewise is lost; the received text is based on He Yan’s (190–249) edition that drew on both the Zhang and the Zheng versions. Thereafter the text attracted numerous commentaries throughout premodern China; most importantly, it became one of the “four books” in Zhu Xi’s curriculum.

Like other Warring States works, the *Analects* shows its principal “master” (*zi*) as a man of speech, not of writing. The anecdotes, arranged in twenty chapters in the received version, are mutually independent and do not amount to a systematic and sustained argument as we find in late third-century texts such as *Xunzi* or *Han Feizi*. Stylistically, the *Analects* are terse, sometimes even cryptic, yet the book as a whole is centered on matters of ritual (*li*) and social order together with the ideals of humaneness (*ren*) and rightness (*yi*) and the process of constant learning (*xue*). Apparently, none of these concepts was important before Confucius, who seems to have developed them against the decline of social and moral order, promoting self-cultivation and adherence to the spirit of antiquity as expressed in the *Poetry* and the *Documents*. The Confucian “superior man” was a student and practitioner of cultural memory, a man of profound self-inspection, and a model of both personal humility and moral authority. This “superior man” cultivated himself and taught others, but he did not compromise his moral principles for political influence. A particularly long and famous anecdote that illustrates this ideal is *Analects* 11/26, where Confucius asks four of his disciples about their ambitions:

Zilu answered immediately, “Given charge of a state of a thousand chariots that is hemmed in between great states, suffering from military invasion and moreover visited with famines, I would within three years give the people courage and a sense of the right direction.” The Master smiled at him. “Qiu, what about you?” “Given charge of an area of sixty or seventy leagues square, or just fifty or sixty, I would within three years fill the needs of the people. [Yet educating them] in ritual and music I would leave to a superior man.” “Chi, what about you?” “I am not saying I am able, but I wish to learn. At the services in the ancestral temple or at diplomatic gatherings, I would like to act as a minor assistant, clad in the proper cap and robes.” “Dian, how about you?” After he stopped plucking the zither, letting the last notes fade off, [Dian] put the zither aside and stood up. “My wishes are different from those of the other three.” The Master said: “What harm is there in that! Let’s just each express our intentions.” “In late spring, after the spring clothes are completed, I would with five or six young men and six or seven boys go bathing in the River Yi. We would enjoy the breeze above the Rain Dance altar and then return home, chanting.” The Master sighed deeply: “I am with Dian.”

The anecdote concludes with Confucius expressing to Dian his discontent with the other three and their focus on statecraft, even in the superficial modesty of Chi. By contrast, the text implies, Dian had rightly focused on self-cultivation, from his initial zither playing to his desire for chanting poetry in spring.

Defined by learning, comportment, and morality, the ideal of the “superior man” was not confined to the aristocracy but accessible to men like Confucius himself who dwelled on the fringes of power and prestige. To the tradition responsible for the compilation of the *Analects*, Confucius thus represented a new possibility of being a sage. Himself oriented toward the Western Zhou, the Confucius of the *Analects* and various other Warring States and Han texts was a model that could be followed, a figure of recent memory who had established the very way of remembering. More than any other master of Warring States philosophy, the persona of Confucius was created and perpetuated by those who cast themselves as his successors. Citations attributed to him appeared across a wide range of texts, many of them transmitted and some – like “Confucius’ Discussion of the *Poetry*” – finally known from excavated manuscripts. His undistinguished career did not impede such worship but lent him authenticity: in an era of turmoil and decline, it established the master as the true moral authority vis-à-vis those corrupted by power.

Far beyond the philosophical reception of the *Analects*, the persona of Confucius proved meaningful to many aspects of the later literary tradition.

The balance between demeanor (*wen*) and substance (*zhi*) that the master had attributed to the “superior man” (*Analects* 6/18) became an important trope of literary discourse, beginning already with the late Western Han critique of the poetic exposition (*fu*). Confucius’ steady emphasis on the *Poetry* as the noblest expression of Chinese civilization and his purported role as editor of the anthology secured the preeminent stature of poetry in the literature of premodern China. His turn to the golden past of the early Western Zhou established a culture of remembrance and nostalgia for “antiquity” (*gu*, *Analects* 7/1) that in medieval times developed into a major theme of Chinese poetry. His “subtle phrasing” and historical criticism made him the prototype for both historians and literary authors, who cast themselves in his image of moral judges and political advisers. His celebration of a community of learning, singing, and mutual understanding (*Analects* 11/25) provided the model for groups like the mid-third-century “Seven Worthies of the Bamboo Grove” (*Zhulin qixian*), where like-minded friends cultivated their interests in philosophy, music, poetry, and the Classics. And finally, his attention to self-cultivation even under adverse conditions, and the choice of the “superior man” to retreat from public service at times of political corruption and danger (*Analects* 8/13, 11/24), converged with Zhuangzi’s critique of civilization (see below) to stimulate the powerful literary trope – most famously in the work of Tao Qian – of the writer in reclusion. In sum, Confucius became the ideal person and the ideal author, with the Five Classics held up as the fountainhead of all genres of literary writing. His model was available to scholar-officials of the imperial state as well as to those who declined to serve their rulers.

By the late fourth century BC, the *ru* classicist scholars who in one way or another were inspired by Confucius had generated a wealth of other texts. The Guodian corpus alone contains ten shorter essays that show conceptual and terminological affinities with the ideals of the *Analects*, the *Mencius*, and the *Xunzi*; texts like the “Black Robes,” furthermore, have invited much speculation about the lost textual corpus that in Han times was associated with the figure of Confucius’ grandson Zi Si. By the late third century BC several distinct teaching lineages of *ru* classicist provenance were in existence, most visibly those represented in the *Mencius* and the *Xunzi*.

The late fourth-century BC *Mencius* frequently refers to Confucius and shares many of the central positions of the *Analects*. Its protagonist, Meng Ke, was born in the small northeastern state of Zou next to Confucius’ home state of Lu, and – according to Sima Qian – was taught by one of Zi Si’s disciples. Compared to the *Analects*, the *Mencius*, a work compiled by later generations of followers of “Master Meng” (Mengzi; Latin “Mencius”), shows

a distinctly more mature and systematic architecture of expository prose. Later authors cherished the elegant text, which alternates short sayings with extensive dialogues elaborating specific philosophical arguments, as a model of Warring States prose. Each of its seven chapters is divided into two halves and devoted to Master Meng's dialogues with one or more historical figures: rulers, other philosophers, or disciples. The anecdotes and conversations are longer, more complex, and more historically minded than those of the *Analects*; only the final chapter of the *Mencius* is reminiscent of the short aphorisms so typical of the *Analects*.

Until recently, the *Mencius* could have been called the first work to systematically employ quotations from the *Poetry* to support specific arguments, routinely introducing them with the words "A [song from the] *Poetry* says" (*shi yue*) and concluding with the statement "this [the preceding argument] is what [the song] is about" (*ci zhi wei ye*). However, some Guodian and Shanghai Museum manuscripts such as the "Five Forms of Conduct" or the "Black Robes," while lacking the elegant Mencian style of anecdotal narrative, now show a similar use of the *Poetry* and may well pre-date the *Mencius*. Unlike the manuscripts, including "Confucius' Discussion of the *Poetry*," the *Mencius* at one point (V.A.4) offers an early discussion on how to interpret the *Poetry*. Challenged by the casuist thinker Xianqiu Meng over the song "Northern Mountain" (Beishan, *Mao* 205), which seemingly puts the virtues of political loyalty and filial piety into conflict, Mencius gives his own interpretation of the text and then states a hermeneutical principle that invokes the late Warring States paradigm of "poetry expresses intent": "In explaining a poem, one may not use the rhetorical pattern to violate the phrases, and one may not use the phrases to violate the [author's] intent. [Instead,] one uses [one's comprehension of] the meaning to return to the [author's] intent – this is how one grasps it!"

Here and elsewhere the *Mencius* gives a sense of philosophical competition and, especially compared to the *Analects*, active engagement with the moral and political issues of its age. Fundamental positions such as the claim that human nature is inherently good (VI.A) are developed in conversations with contemporaneous thinkers or disciples, while moral and political counsel to various rulers tends to focus on specific issues. In its most daring passages, the *Mencius* sides with the people against their ruler: the Mandate of Heaven is only given to the just and benevolent sovereign; those who tyrannize their folk are no longer rulers in the proper sense but common criminals, and their elimination shall be regarded as just punishment, not regicide (I.B.8). With positions like this, the *Mencius* contributed to the Warring States ideal of the

political philosopher as an incorruptible agent of truth and justice. In the wake of Han Yu's (768–824) program of “ancient-style prose” (*guwen*), the *Mencius* was canonized as a model of moral, intellectual, and stylistic clarity; in Song times, the text became one of Zhu Xi's “four books” and, furthermore, was added to the *ru* canon of the henceforth Thirteen Classics.

Meanwhile, the late third-century BC work *Xunzi* underwent a different development. The *Xunzi* may be the first voluminous work of expository prose written largely by a single author, Xun Kuang, who happened to be the teacher of both Han Fei (ca 280–ca 233 BC) and the Qin imperial chancellor Li Si. A text of sharp and consistent rationality, which developed the hitherto most systematic discussions on the core *ru* themes of ritual, music, and social order, the *Xunzi* exerted strong influence on Han dynasty thought and writing. When after 26 BC Liu Xiang compiled the thirty-two chapters of the received text, he had to choose from a body of bamboo writing ten times this size (including repetitions of the same material) that in one way or another was associated with the *Xunzi*. With its blend of traditional *ru* classicist ideas and pragmatic analyses (including, for example, of military matters), the *Xunzi* offered what the new empire needed: the legitimacy derived from classicism joined with a realist's approach to strong government. In this *Xunzi* transcended both *Han Feizi*'s radical realism and the utopian idealism of the *Mencius*. Its claim that human nature was bad and needed to be formed by discipline and morality placed it in direct opposition to the *Mencius*. After the Han the *Xunzi* lost out. Its earliest known commentary by Yang Liang dates only from Tang times, and with the Song canonization of the *Mencius*, the text was excluded from the orthodox transmission line (*daotong*) of *ru* classicist ideology.

Most other Warring States works had a less distinguished reception and little impact on later literature. The *Master Zi Si* (*Zi Sizi*), a body of texts attributed to Confucius' grandson Zi Si that the *Han shu* “Monograph on Arts and Writings” lists with twenty-three bamboo bundles, is lost except for, perhaps, four chapters of the *Records of Ritual*: “Black Robes,” “Records of the Dikes” (Fangji), “Records of Exemplary Demeanor” (Biaoji), and “Doctrine of the Mean” (Zhongyong). Together with the “Great Learning” (Daxue), these chapters contain the vast majority of classical quotations in all of the *Records of Ritual*: eighty-two from the *Poetry*, thirty from the *Documents*, and six from the *Changes*; eight other quotations are no longer identifiable. By comparison, there are just twenty-one *Poetry* quotations in the forty-four remaining chapters (all clustered in nine of them) and a roughly equal number of other quotations. In the four presumed *Zi Sizi* chapters, quotation is part of a recurrent formulaic structure: a brief passage begins with the formula “the

master said” (*zi yue*), is then followed by a philosophical statement, and capped with a quotation. “Records of the Dikes” (thirty-eight paragraphs), “Records of Exemplary Demeanor” (fifty-four paragraphs), and “Black Robes” (twenty-four paragraphs in the received text) are entirely composed in such fashion; in “Doctrine of the Mean” the sections are much longer and less uniform in structure. Outside these four chapters, no part of the *Records of Rituals* contains a series of paragraphs all beginning with “the master said.” If these chapters are indeed part of a larger *Zi Sizi*, that text – likely compiled by Zi Si’s disciples – may have used a unique rhetorical structure to build its arguments tightly around the ancient classics.

The Mohists, next to the *ru* classicists the only identifiable intellectual lineage of Warring States times, were best known for their doctrine of “universal caring” (*jian’ai*) and their opposition to aggressive warfare, waste of resources, and ritualism, but never exerted any political influence; their different intellectual currents, at least three of which were compiled into parallel chapters of the received *Mozi*, had dried up already in Western Han times. Likewise, the so-called “terminologists” (*mingjia*) or casuists Hui Shi and Gongsun Long, while (like the late Mohists) contributing to the development of rhetoric and logic, never gained political influence and were inconsequential for the development of literature. By contrast, the rhetorically brilliant *Han Feizi* (late third century BC), attributed to Han Fei but also containing early Han material, provided the most cogent summary of pragmatic realism and rebuttal of the *ru* classicist orientation toward the ancient past. From Liu Xiang’s late Western Han perspective, however, the text was tainted by its association with the “legalist” (*fa*) harshness of Qin imperial rule. As such, it was grouped with the *Book of Lord Shang* (*Shangjun shu*) attributed to Shang Yang (d. 338 BC), mastermind of the political and military reorganization that led to Qin’s powerful rise after approximately 350 BC.

The actual impact of these major (and many other minor) texts in their Warring States contexts is difficult to assess. Aside from the major texts of the *ru* classicist tradition, however, only two Warring States works remained influential far beyond their own times: the *Laozi* (also the *Classic of the Way and the Power – Daode jing*), since Han times attributed to an obscure figure called Lao Dan or Li Er from the sixth century BC, and the *Zhuangzi*, the single work of Warring States prose that comes close to later concepts of “literature” as a form of art. The two texts were to become the seminal works of philosophical Daoism from Eastern Han times onward. From early Western Han times, two complete silk manuscripts of the *Laozi* were found in Mawangdui tomb no. 3. The text contains eighty-one short, rhythmic, and often rhymed paragraphs

of exceptionally abstract style that are divided into two sections: the “Classic of the Way” (paragraphs 1–37) and the “Classic of the Power” (38–81) – an order that is reversed in both Mawangdui versions. The Guodian bamboo texts include three manuscripts containing material known from the first sixty-six paragraphs of the received *Laozi*, albeit in different sequential order. The traditional recension of the Heshang Gong *Laozi* was likely formed some time after the third century, parallel to other commentaries that were often philosophical treatises in their own right. These treatises – Wang Bi’s being the most important one – paved the way for numerous interpretations and philosophical elaborations that have continued ever since. Both the *Laozi* and the *Zhuangzi* focus on the spontaneous and natural “Way” (*dao*), yet only the *Laozi* appears as a political treatise on rulership, advocating quietism and non-interference (*wuwei*) in the natural course of the universe. At the same time, the *Laozi* shows connections to the mystic “Inner Cultivation” (Neiye) chapter of the *Guanzi*, a wide-ranging, convoluted compendium mainly of political and economic thought, as well as to the medical, cosmological, and legalist treatises of the third and second centuries BC that have been found in both transmitted (*Han Feizi*) and excavated (Mawangdui manuscripts) texts. In early Han times, the *Laozi* became further related to a body of texts developed around the mythical Yellow Emperor (Huangdi). The designation Huang-Lao, used in the *Records of the Historians*, may have denoted an amalgam of authoritarian rule, mystic cosmology, and self-cultivation. Yet while Huang-Lao thought did not develop beyond the second century BC, the meditative and mystic streaks of the *Laozi* maintained their appeal. In the religious “Heavenly Masters” Daoism (*tianshidao*) of Zhang Daoling (fl. 142 AD), the figure of Laozi was elevated to the top of the spiritual pantheon; meanwhile, the text *Laozi* was cherished by philosophers and poets who sought for themselves a spiritual way of “spontaneity” (*ziran*), self-cultivation, and distance from social conventions. Especially in the context of the third and fourth centuries, aspects of the *Laozi* (and the *Zhuangzi*) converged with some fundamental ideas of the *Analects*. Learned writers like Guo Pu (276–324), Sun Chuo (314–371), or Tao Qian (365?–427, also known as Tao Yuanming) – to name just the most famous – were equally versed in both traditions and referenced them side by side in their own compositions.

While the *Laozi* owed its popularity primarily to its poetic mysticism, the *Zhuangzi* is the most appealing Warring States work of prose. No trace of the *Zhuangzi* has yet been found in any archaeological context, but the limited number of manuscript findings so far precludes us from relating this absence to the idiosyncratic and extremely unconventional nature of the

Zhuangzi. The received text is the version prepared by Guo Xiang (d. 312), whose commentary is a dense, often highly abstract philosophical treatise. An earlier commentary by Xiang Xiu (third century AD), one of the “Seven Worthies of the Bamboo Grove,” is only preserved in fragments. All thirty-three chapters of the present *Zhuangzi* are accepted as compositions from the fourth through second centuries BC, with the seven “inner chapters” (*neipian*) as their core and most original writings. These are traditionally attributed to Zhuang Zhou, who according to the *Records of the Historian* lived in the fourth century BC. By contrast, the fifteen “outer chapters” (*waipian*) and eleven “miscellaneous chapters” (*zapian*) contain heterogeneous material from various sources, including writings that reflect a particular focus on the well-being of the self, a doctrine associated with the Warring States philosopher Yang Zhu. An imperial edict of 742 elevated the *Zhuangzi* to Daoist canonical status under the title of *True Classic of the Southern Flowerland* (*Nanhua zhenjing*). Like the *Laozi*, the *Zhuangzi* is believed to come from the old southern state of Chu.

The “inner chapters” develop the core ideas of philosophical Daoism: a life of natural spontaneity; unity of the human inner self with the cosmic “way”; distance from social obligations and political engagement; acceptance of death as natural transformation; praise of the useless and the aimless; contempt for social values, hierarchies, and conventional reasoning. These themes are further elaborated upon in the anecdotes of the “outer” and “miscellaneous” chapters that accumulated over time as colorful lore around the figure of Zhuang Zhou. In this spirit, the “miscellaneous” Chapter 32 contains a vignette on the master’s own death:

When Master Zhuang was about to die, his disciples wanted to give him a lavish funeral. Master Zhuang said: “I take heaven and earth as my inner and outer coffins, the sun and the moon as my pair of jade disks, the stars and constellations as my pearls and beads, the ten thousand things as my funerary gifts. With my burial complete, how is there anything left unprepared? What shall be added to it?” The disciples said: “We are afraid that the crows and kites will eat you, Master!” Master Zhuang said: “Above ground I’d be eaten by crows and kites, below ground I’d be eaten by mole crickets and ants. You rob the one and give to the other – how skewed would that be? If you take the uneven to create evenness, then the even is yet uneven. If you take the unproven for proof, then the proven is yet unproven. The clear-sighted man is merely used by others, but the man of spiritual insight produces proof. The clear-sighted man has been inferior to the man of spiritual insight for long already! And yet the fool holds on to what he sees and projects it onto others. His achievement is just exterior, and isn’t it pitiable?”

While other Warring States philosophical texts advance ideals of sociopolitical order, the *Zhuangzi* is fundamentally opposed to any such order imposed on the individual. Apart from their philosophical radicalism, the “inner chapters” also come closest to a notion of fictional writing. Their anecdotal format and mention of historical figures accords with Warring States historical narrative and expository prose, yet the text subverts its historical references through dazzling imagination, hyperbole, and explicit fictionalization. Its imaginary tales and parables are poetic (with ample use of rhyme and other euphonic structures) and humorous, with frequent flashes of sarcasm, shocking images, and an outspoken disdain for the deepest notions of moral thought and ritual propriety.

Many *Zhuangzi* anecdotes display a fictional, even fantastical, nature. A recurrent technique is the shift of events into the sphere of dreams where, for example, a skull, speaking from the perspective of the dead, may serve as conversation partner. In the most famous anecdote, the ambivalence of dream and reality itself becomes the topic: Zhuang Zhou wakes up from a dream of being a butterfly – yet now, “he did not know whether he was Zhou, who had dreamt being a butterfly, or a butterfly who dreams being Zhou.” Throughout the text, the conventional order of things is reversed: those who maintain their uselessness – like human cripples or crooked trees – will not be exploited but live out their allotted time, the social obligations of mourning for the dead run against the natural course of existence, life and death are different phases in the larger scheme of cosmic transformation, and the hallowed texts of old are the dregs of people long dead. Strenuous instruction violates true comprehension and mastery of any art (like wheel-making or butchering), which arises only from one’s complete adaptation to the task. In numerous parables, the social order is rejected as opposed to the natural one.

The text furthermore uses sharp-witted sophistry to resolutely drive conventional logic into absurd conclusions, challenging rationality itself. It shows the manipulative power of eloquent speech together with its limits and possible transcendence. In this, the *Zhuangzi* influenced the “profound learning” (*xuanxue*) of early medieval times as much as the paradoxical riddles of Chan (Japanese “Zen”) Buddhism; at the same time, its philosophy of natural spontaneity and rejection of public service, as well as its mythological fantasies and exuberant imagery, inspired poets, philosophers, and writers of fiction – such as Six Dynasties “Accounts of the Strange” (*zhiguai*) – from Han times onward. The modern term for fiction, *xiaoshuo*, incidentally, appeared first in the *Zhuangzi*, where it means “trivial talk,” perhaps of folklore.

X. The *Verses of Chu*

The anthology *Verses of Chu* contains a series of late Warring States and Han dynasty poems, some of them long, others brief, associated with the southern literature and cultural geography of ancient Chu. Unlike the *Poetry*, the *Verses of Chu* never received imperial recognition, but their influence on all later Chinese literature is no less tangible and significant. By late Warring States times, the state of Chu had developed its own distinct forms of cultural expression (religion, mythology, painting, music, literature) while also remaining fully exposed to the northern traditions, as the evidence of Chu tomb manuscripts amply proves. People in Chu spoke their own dialect, or dialects, and had developed their own calligraphic forms, yet both were clearly Chinese and concurred with their counterparts in the north. The southern poets were entirely familiar with the northern literary tradition while developing their own, highly sophisticated art of literary expression. The earliest texts of the southern anthology are dated to the fourth or third centuries BC, but their poetic brilliance suggests a much larger, and earlier, literary tradition. Outside the anthology proper, the influence of the southern lyrics is clearly manifest in the poetic expositions (*fu*) and shorter songs (*ge*) of Western Han times.

The Western Han taste for Chu poetry, music, and material culture may partly stem from the southern origins of the imperial family. When Liu Bang, the Han founding emperor (Han Gaozu, r. 202–195 BC), had his state sacrifices arranged, his ritual hymns were performed to “Chu melodies” (*Chu sheng*). The Western Han poetry attributed to members of the imperial family shows common traits with the language and rhythms of the *Verses of Chu*, and the *History of the Han* notes the performance of Chu songs at the imperial court. Wang Yi’s *Chapter and Verse Commentary to the Verses of Chu* (*Chuci zhangju*), the basis of the received version of the anthology, attributes roughly half of the songs to Qu Yuan (ca 340–278 BC) and several others to his shadowy third-century “successors” Song Yu and Jing Cuo; however, a number of the Qu Yuan songs are evidently Han imitations. The first anthology of Chu lyrics may go back to Liu An, king of Huainan and uncle of Emperor Wu, whom the tradition credits with the “Summoning the Recluse” (*Zhao yinshi*) poem in the *Verses of Chu*. Liu An – or the scholars assembled at his court – also authored a commentary on “Encountering Sorrow” (*Lisao*), the longest and most prominent poem of the anthology. Wang Yi mentions that Liu Xiang, on the basis of Liu An’s earlier compilation, had assembled the next version of the *Verses of Chu*, and he attributes to Liu the penultimate series of poems in the anthology, “Nine Laments” (*Jiutan*), which are then followed by Wang’s

own “Nine Yearnings” (Jiushi). The received text under the title *Supplementary Commentary to the Verses of Chu* (*Chuci buzhu*) represents Hong Xingzu’s (1070–1135) reorganization of the Wang Yi text. It includes Wang Yi’s original exegesis, the Tang dynasty commentaries on the pieces included in the sixth-century *Selections of Refined Literature* (*Wenxuan*), and Hong Xingzu’s own annotation that partly departs from Wang’s. Influential later commentaries that often reject Wang’s readings include Zhu Xi’s *Collected Commentaries to the Verses of Chu* (*Chuci jizhu*) and Wang Fuzhi’s (1619–1692) *Thorough Explanations to the Verses of Chu* (*Chuci tongshi*).

The *Verses of Chu* differs from the older *Poetry* in its topics, imagery, language, and meter – and, most significantly, must have differed in its (no longer retrievable) musical style. The *Verses of Chu* includes references to the geography and flora as well as to the mythological world of the south. Its rich imagination, especially in the early poems, seems to connect it to the paintings on luxurious lacquerware and silk found at richly furnished Chu aristocratic tombs, including the 433 BC tomb of the Marquis Yi of Zeng (Zeng Hou Yi) in Suixian (Hubei) and the tombs at Mawangdui. The paintings show large numbers of mythological beings riding the clouds or dwelling – as in the famous silk banner from Mawangdui – in the spirit worlds.

The vivid meter and rapid changes of rhyme in the *Verses of Chu* likely reflect southern musical styles that in their tempi and versatility differed starkly from the solemn and slow melodies associated with the hymns from the *Poetry*. Archaeological finds of both string and wind instruments point to the performance of elegant and lithe melodies in contrast to the classical music dominated by bells, drums, and chime stones. Likewise, the somewhat static repetition of syllables in the *Poetry* has made room for a wealth of rhyming and alliterative binomes, and the largely uniform four-syllable meter is replaced by a diversity of verse structures, including alternations between poetry and prose, and variations of the four-syllable form through addition of recurrent particles. The typical couplet of the “Nine Songs” (Jiuge) – perhaps the earliest series of poems in the anthology – has two equal lines of four, five, or six syllables plus the rhythmic particle *xi* after the second or third syllable. In “Encountering Sorrow,” the pattern is further developed by moving the *xi* to the end of the first line while adding another (constantly varying) particle in the middle of each line; the result is a continuous flow of ten words (plus three particles) able to carry a narrative style. This lively rhythm is further accelerated by a slight pause after the first beat: dum dum-dum *particle* dum-dum *xi* / dum dum-dum *particle* dum-dum. Since Han times, this so-called *sao* meter was particularly popular in laments over personal misfortune.

Framed as a celestial journey, the 187 couplets of “Encountering Sorrow” – the longest poem of pre-imperial China – unfold a melancholic narrative of political ambition and frustration that from its earliest reception was interpreted through the tragic biography of its presumed author Qu Yuan. Since Jia Yi’s (200–168 BC) “Lament for Qu Yuan” (Diao Qu Yuan), the text was read as the elegy of a neglected and banished worthy. In Han times alone, Liu An, Sima Qian, Liu Xiang, Yang Xiong, Liang Song (d. 83 AD), Ban Gu, and Wang Yi have all contributed to this interpretation. The *Records of the Historian* provides the principal information on Qu Yuan, but Jia Yi’s “Lament for Qu Yuan” and the patchwork nature of Sima Qian’s account show the existence of earlier and possibly diverging sources. The biography in the *Records* seems to combine at least two partly contradictory sources, one of which refers to the protagonist as Qu Ping. The emerging figure of Qu Yuan/Qu Ping is a minister of Chu, related to the ruling house but slandered by rivals at court, who had warned his ruler against a disastrous military engagement; his advice was not heeded, and he was instead banished to the south, where he wandered around aimlessly and finally drowned himself in the Miluo river. Different sources place “Encountering Sorrow” either before or after the moment of banishment. Either way, in Qu Yuan we meet the first literary author of China identified by name and furnished with a biographical rationale for his writing – a rationale conspicuously reminiscent of the numerous neglected advisers in the *Zuo Tradition* and *Discourses of the States*. Moreover, the reading of “Encountering Sorrow” as self-expression and lament corresponds to the purposes of writing that the “Great Preface” attributes to the unknown authors of the *Poetry*.

The protagonist of “Encountering Sorrow” expresses his inner virtue by donning a wealth of beautiful and aromatic plants – yet only to finally realize that they, and moral integrity, are no longer prized:

In profusion I already had this inner beauty,
And added to it superb comportment.
I dressed in fragrant river rush and secluded angelica,
Twined autumn thoroughwort to make for my girdle.

...

The three kings of old were pure and perfect,
And thus the flocks of sweet fragrance were in their proper place.
Diversely combined were the layered pepper and cinnamon,
How would sweet clover and angelica alone be strung together?

...

I fashioned waterlilies into a robe,
Gathered lotus to make a skirt,
No one understands me, it is over now,
Only my inner self is true and fragrant.

...

The times are in tumult, rapidly changing,
How can I linger for long?
Thoroughwort and angelica are changing and no longer fragrant,
Iris and sweet clover are transforming and turn into straw.
How can these fragrant plants of old
Today have now turned into worthless mugwort?

Throughout the protagonist's mystic journey, his erotic desire, fantasies of immortality, and sovereign command of the cosmic spirits – all metaphors for political ambition – alternate with passages of lament and complaints about a world upside down. To Han readers, the political allegory was unmistakable, and Wang Yi interpreted "Encountering Sorrow" within the same moral-historical framework that the Mao exegesis had already brought to the *Poetry*. This political reading of "Encountering Sorrow," clearly suggested by the poem itself, was then extended to other songs of the anthology. Like the Mao reading of the *Poetry*, Wang Yi's approach to the *Verses of Chu* was explicitly challenged only in Song times.

Modern scholars have doubted the historical persona of Qu Yuan, his authorship of "Encountering Sorrow," and the biographical reading of the text. To Han and later traditional scholars, these issues were off-limits. Qu Yuan was the prototypical poet driven by unbearable despair. To Sima Qian, Qu Yuan – almost as much as Confucius – was a primary ancestor in spirit, and numerous later authors saw his fate as a precursor of their own. Jia Yi's "Lament for Qu Yuan" and Yang Xiong's "Refuting 'Encountering Sorrow'" (Fan Lisao) criticized Qu Yuan's escapism into suicide, but Sima Qian's sympathetic view of a tragic hero prevailed: having tried in vain to avert catastrophe from his ruler and state, Qu Yuan ultimately paid the highest price for his morally superior stance. In modern times, Wen Yiduo (1899–1946) and Guo Moruo (1892–1978), writing during the Japanese invasion of 1937–1945, recast Qu Yuan in their own terms: the exemplary patriot, the politically engaged intellectual, and China's "first poet of the people."

The *Records* biography includes two more songs related to Qu Yuan's life that are also found in the *Verses of Chu*: "The Fisherman" (Yufu), a dialogue with a rustic commoner where Qu Yuan explains himself as the single "clear"

person in a “muddy” world, and “Embracing Sand” (Huai sha), a lament that Qu Yuan “made” (*zuo*) immediately before drowning himself. In the *Verses of Chu*, “Embracing Sand” is one of the “Nine Declarations” (Jiuzhang), a cycle of poems attributed to Qu Yuan that, however, seem like later imitations of “Encountering Sorrow.” Composed in the *sao* style, they aim to capture Qu Yuan’s poetic spirit and sentiment of desolation. The same is true for “The Fisherman,” “Divining the Abode” (Bu ju), and the cycle “Nine Changes” (Jiubian) that is attributed to Song Yu. All these songs, likely dating from the third and early second centuries BC, contribute to the Qu Yuan legend. Most of them are monologues that use the topoi established in “Encountering Sorrow” – the plant imagery, the unsuccessful journey – to complain about the unjust world. They also develop a new depiction of nature far beyond the brief and simple images known from the “Airs of the States”: long, intense descriptions of bleak environments that correspond to the disconsolate state of human existence.

Beginning with “Encountering Sorrow” and then further developed in the subsequent Qu Yuan tradition, a new poetic lexicon unfolds that becomes the hallmark of the Western Han poetic exposition (*fu*): entire catalogues of natural phenomena, cast in the literary form of rhyming and alliterative binomes. The cosmic journey, which takes the protagonists across vast distances and through a rapid succession of landscapes, provides the narrative framework for such descriptions, opening new vistas and their poetic catalogues at every turn. All but one of these journeys are unsuccessful. The exception is “Roaming Afar” (Yuan you), a long piece of 178 lines depicting the ecstatic and mystical flight to the four directions and, finally, the utopian center of the “great beginning” (*taichu*). Likely dating from the second century BC, the poem combines the sensualistic language of the spirit voyage with fantasies of natural elixirs and the attainment of transcendence. Oscillating between religious dreams of immortality and the exploration of the natural cosmos, “Roaming Afar” prefigures the medieval poetry and prose of alchemical experiments and Daoist thought. The precious plants of “Encountering Sorrow” are no longer allegories of inner purity but the source of dietary and spiritual perfection.

Apart from “Encountering Sorrow,” which provided the stylistic and thematic template for much of the *Verses of Chu*, the “Nine Songs” (Jiuge), which possibly pre-date “Encountering Sorrow,” exerted profound and lasting influence on later Chinese literature. According to Wang Yi, Qu Yuan composed these poems during his banishment in the south where he encountered the “excessive” religious practices of the common people; on this occasion, he

adapted and refined their songs to give expression to his personal frustration and political criticism. This Eastern Han reading (maintained also by Hong Xingzu) combined two political tropes of its time: the pejorative view of the south as semi-barbarian and “excessive” (*yin*), and the purpose of poetry as an expression of personal intent. However, unlike “Encountering Sorrow,” the “Nine Songs” offer little to support such an interpretation unless one decoded each of their images in a narrow and tendentious fashion. In fact, the earliest poetic reception accepted the songs fully as religious chants to the cosmic deities of Chu: during the two decades after 114 BC, Emperor Wu’s court poets adapted the diction and vocabulary of the “Nine Songs” for a new set of state sacrificial hymns, the “Songs for the Sacrifices at the Suburban Altars” (*Jiaosi ge*). As so much of the musical, literary, religious, and material culture of third- and early second-century Chu was present in Western Han – and especially Emperor Wu’s – imperial representation and court entertainment, this reception was likely based on some direct knowledge of southern religious rites and their chants. Writing more than two centuries later, Wang Yi, on the other hand, transposed the meaning of the “Nine Songs” onto the plane of political rhetoric.

The “Nine Songs” unfold a pantheon of cosmic spirits that were partly indigenous to the south and partly – like the two “Masters of Fate” (*siming*) or the “Lord of the (Yellow) River” (*hebo*) – shared with the religious culture of northern China. Possibly a repertoire of hymns performed at seasonal rituals, their received sequence might contain a certain performative order, with the first song, “Great Unity, August Emperor of the East” (*Donghuang taiyi*), invoking the spirits and the last one, “Offering Rites to the Souls” (*Li hun*), sending them off. “Great Unity” shows parallels with the first of Emperor Wu’s hymns: it begins with divining an auspicious day for the sacrifice, notes the offerings and ritual music, and finally concludes with a self-referential statement on the success of the performance, stating that the cosmic spirit has assumed his place among the sacrificial community. The formulaic structure resonates with both the subsequent Western Han sacrificial hymns and the venerated models of old, the hymns of the *Poetry* and their contemporaneous bronze inscriptions. The “Nine Songs” may have served to establish the contact with the cosmic spirits and, simultaneously, to celebrate and reaffirm this communication. Thus the final song briefly states the conclusion of the ritual and its eternal perpetuation.

The altogether eleven hymns are devoted to nine spirits and in addition recall the “Fallen of the State” (*Guoshang*) before ending with “Offering Rites to the Souls.” The title “Nine Songs” for a series of eleven poems has found

various explanations, three of which seem relatively persuasive without being mutually exclusive: that “nine” as the highest number of classical numerology signifies “completeness” more than any specific number, and was for this reason used for the various cycles of the *Verses of Chu*; that “nine” refers to the nine spirits worshipped in the cycle; or that the “Nine Songs” includes two pairs of songs so that at each performance, perhaps seasonally adjusted, only one song of each pair was actually performed.

Beyond both the religious reception and political interpretation, and ultimately far more influential than either one, is the inspiration the “Nine Songs” gave to later poetry. The two most beautiful and influential pieces are to the goddesses of the Xiang river, “Lady of the Xiang” (Xiang jun) and “Consort of the Xiang” (Xiang furen). Speaking in the voice of a male shaman, these songs depict the unsuccessful quest for an erotic encounter with the goddess. In both songs, the shaman embarks on a spirit journey through the watery and lush landscape of southern Chu, mapping a hallucinatory world onto the real geography. The magical landscape is filled with precious exotic plants that the shaman now uses for his own purposes. The principal literary structure is, as in “Encountering Sorrow,” the richly varied catalogue of intense description. And yet his quest ends in frustration, as in “Lady of the Xiang”:

With cinnamon oars and thoroughwort sweeps
I cut through the ice, piled up the snow.
Figs I was plucking in the water,
For lotus I reached in the treetops.
With hearts divided, the go-between toils,
Her love was not deep and lightly broken.
The stream rushed swiftly between stones, shallow and shallow,
My flying dragons went soaring and soaring.
As her joining was faithless, resentment lasts long,
Untrue to her vow, she told me she had no time.

The unfulfilled quest for a tryst with the elusive goddess established a new language of erotic desire that was subsequently refined and expanded in ever-new variations: Cao Zhi’s (191–232) “Poetic Exposition on the Goddess of the Luo River” (Luoshen fu), the “Poetic Exposition on Gaotang” (Gaotang fu) attributed to Song Yu (but most likely of a Six Dynasties date), the *yuefu* series “Mount Wu so High” (Wushan gao), the palace-style poetry of Qi and Liang times, Li He’s (791–817) sensual and morbid fantasies of Elysian goddesses, and even Bai Juyi’s (772–846) “Song of Everlasting Regret” (Changhen ge) all draw extensively on the diction of the “Nine Songs.” Meanwhile, the vocabulary of cosmic sovereignty and grandiose representation of songs like

“Great Unity, August Emperor of the East” appealed to later depictions of imperial authority and its ritual manifestations. And finally, the “Fallen of the State” became a political topos for lamenting the martyrs of great causes. When Kang Youwei (1858–1927) remembered in emotional verses Tan Sitong (1865–1898), the executed activist of the “Hundred Days Reforms” from Hunan (the core area of ancient Chu), the language of the “Nine Songs” was his best possible choice.

Within the *Verses of Chu*, one more work and one sequence of three texts stand out for their uniqueness and highly developed diction changing between religious sentiment and literary rhetoric. The first are the 172 mostly tetrasyllabic verses of the “Heavenly Questions” (Tianwen), a catalogue of questions that begins with the origin of the universe and continues to mythical and cosmic phenomena. The main part, comprising more than 80 percent of the text, is devoted to the mythology and history of Chu, told in mostly chronological order, up to 506 BC. Parts of the text seem cryptic and perhaps incomplete; moreover, much of its underlying mythology was lost early on. Originally, the text must have been embedded in a larger context of legends and ritual practice. Wang Yi, who again resorts to a biographical and political reading, suggests that when Qu Yuan wandered aimlessly through the south, he rested in the ancestral temples of former kings and worthies, where he found murals of mythological and historical narratives. He thus wrote his questions directly to these paintings from where they were later copied and put into the form of the “Heavenly Questions.” Wang Yi’s account was perhaps inspired by stone carvings as well as wall paintings in Eastern Han temples and tombs, yet archaeology has produced a wealth of much earlier paintings on silk and lacquerwork that already for late Warring States and early Western Han times prove the technical and imaginative maturity of pictorial representation in ancient Chu aristocratic culture: the star map on the lacquered suitcase from the tomb of the Marquis Yi of Zeng, the Chu silk manuscript from Zidanku (Changsha, Hunan) of around 300 BC, the funerary banner and representations of comets from Mawangdui, and others. In addition, the *History of the Han* mentions pictorial representations at the suburban altars, a depiction of astral bodies on an imperial military banner, and images of imperial ancestors inside the Western Han imperial palace – all perhaps inspired by the southern origins of the imperial house. In short, Wang Yi’s conjecture of a pictorial background to the “Heavenly Questions” may not be entirely implausible; at the very least, both the sophisticated cosmological and mythological images from Chu tombs and the equally developed literary art of the *Verses of Chu* must have emerged from the same southern aristocratic culture. Incidentally,

the protagonist of “Encountering Sorrow” – presumably Qu Yuan – declares himself the scion of the Chu royal clan.

To appreciate the aristocratic origins of the *Verses of Chu*, one may leave aside Wang Yi’s narrow biographical–political readings and their Western Han precursors in the writings of Jia Yi, Sima Qian, and Yang Xiong. As soon as one removes this interpretation, or at least its extension from “Encountering Sorrow” to the “Nine Songs” and “Heavenly Questions,” the early layers of the *Verses of Chu* become more clearly visible as the product of Chu and Han court writing. The “Nine Songs” and “Heavenly Questions” may indeed have been the literary rearrangement of archaic religious knowledge whose original form, function, and context we no longer know. They may have emerged from rituals of sacrifice and religious commemoration where ancient knowledge and identity were ascertained and perpetuated. In the state of Chu, which had long been part of the Zhou realm but in Warring States times increasingly developed its own forms of artistic expression, cultural identity meant the fusion of archaic Zhou traditions with indigenous traits of Chu historical memory and imagination. References to a wide and eclectic pantheon of spirits show the learned authors of “Encountering Sorrow,” the “Nine Songs,” and “Heavenly Questions” being familiar with sources both northern and southern.

The same is true for the last major genre of the early part of the *Verses of Chu*. The two long pieces “Summoning the Soul” (Zhao hun) and “Great Summons” (Da zhao) are literary reworkings of shamanistic incantations to call back the soul of the dying or the deceased, a religious ritual detailed in the *Ceremonial Ritual*. The two texts are largely parallel and follow a simple sequence: speaking in the voice of the ritual specialist, they call back the soul by describing in long catalogues the horrors waiting in each of the four directions (and, in “Summoning the Soul,” also above and below); this terrifying description is then contrasted with even more elaborate accounts of the sensual pleasures and luxury of court life ready for the returning soul to enjoy:

O Soul, come back!
Do not descend into that dark realm
Where the Lord of the Earth lies in nine coils.
With his horns cutting sharp,
His back humped, his bloody flanks,
He is hounding men, pacing fast.
...
O Soul, come back!
Return to your old abode!

...
The chambers faced with minerals, and kingfisher wings
Suspended from carnelian hooks;
Quilts covered with kingfisher pearls,
Glowing with even light.
Thin gauze covers the walls,
Brocade canopies are spreading out.
Ribbons and plaits patterned and plain,
Knotted to half-disks of agate.

Following the (altogether much longer) description of the palace chambers, “Summoning the Soul” then continues with extensive descriptions of the court beauties populating them; next, the text lists the rare delicacies of a banquet before ending with the celebration of a veritable orgy. Finally, shifting into a more measured diction, a coda (*luan*) recalls a former hunting expedition with the king – possibly King Xiang of Chu (r. 298–263 BC) – who is also the addressee of the text.

In their boundless imagination and hyperbolic language, the two “Summons” are related to the rhetoric of the “persuasions” as well as to the grand form of the Western Han poetic exposition (*fu*, see below). Yet the “Summons” also inspired a far more sober variation on their theme of “calling back” a departed soul. This is the poem “Summoning the Recluse” (Zhao yinshi), presumably composed at Liu An’s southern court. “Summoning the Recluse” – which later readers saw as an expression of Liu An’s personal and political troubles – is no longer devoted to the departed soul but to a royal prince (*wangzi*) of high character who has withdrawn from public life into seclusion in nature. The ideal of the recluse was long established by Liu An’s time, and credible Western Han sources mention eremites living in the mountains. Entirely new and of far-reaching influence, however, was the poetic expression given to it in “Summoning the Recluse.” Beyond other early visions of nature, this poem imagines the natural environment of the mountain as a utopian alternative to the social realm – not, however, as an ideal landscape but as a hostile and utterly dangerous space where the prince “cannot linger long.” The wilderness is the sphere of both salvation and deadly threat, a complex balance created from the correspondences between landscape description and the recluse’s inner world of inconsolable melancholy. The princely recluse does not flee into comfort; his moral principles cause him terrifying hardship. In this poem, nature is at once the actual space of reclusion and the metaphor for the trouble and affliction visited upon the man of high character who refuses to compromise his rectitude. “Summoning the

Recluse” is the poetic voice not of escapism but of incorruptible steadfastness, with uncounted echoes resounding throughout the literary tradition of imperial China. A member of the moral aristocracy, now in opposition to raw political power, the “prince,” like the Confucian “superior man” or the Qu Yuan of “Encountering Sorrow,” was a model to emulate.

XI. The poetry of the early empire

The poetry of imperial China begins with the Qin First Emperor. After completing his final conquest and establishing the unified empire in 221 BC, the emperor, accompanied by his court classicists (*ru*), toured the newly conquered eastern regions and between 219 and 210 BC erected seven stele inscriptions on mountaintops or otherwise historically significant locations. At each location, the imperial entourage performed sacrifices to the cosmic powers, recited the emperor’s historical merits and carved the eulogy into stone. Six of the seven inscriptions are included in the *Records of the Historian*; the remaining one from Mount Yi (Shandong province) was well-known in Tang times and has been transmitted in collections of stone rubbings. A recarving of the stele, dating from AD 993, is preserved in the “Forest of Stelae” (*beilin*) in Xi’an.

Little is left of the inscriptions. A stone fragment of ten characters, purportedly from the Mount Tai inscription, is of dubious authenticity; in addition, a fragment from the inscription on Mount Langye (Shandong) includes only lines of a secondary inscription that the First Emperor’s son, the “Second Generation (Emperor)” (Ershi, r. 210–207 BC), is said to have added, in 209 BC, to his father’s monuments. Several traditional sources have attributed the inscriptions, both text and calligraphy, to the Qin chancellor Li Si, while some modern scholars have speculated that the primary inscriptions on Mount Tai and Mount Yi were actually retrospective creations of the son.

All seven inscriptions commemorate not only the unification but also the act of their inscription and recitation, historicizing both the emperor’s accomplishments and their immediate recognition. These texts comprise either seventy-two or thirty-six lines, regular in both line length and the use of rhyme. Their diction, vocabulary, and political rhetoric recall and continue the hymns of the *Classic of Poetry* and pre-imperial bronze inscriptions, celebrating the unification not as an act accomplished by military success but as the establishment of good moral order. While invoking the earlier religious language of political representation, they are no longer limited to the audience of the ancestral temple but address the spirits of the entire cosmos within the framework of a new political ritual: the imperial tour of inspection. Their

relative uniformity across both geographical distances and a ten-year period suggests that the texts followed a blueprint designed by textual and ritual classicists at the Qin imperial court, many of whom had been recruited from the newly conquered eastern states. Written in the unified script of the Qin empire, they inscribe the new political order into chosen, usually religiously significant, sites of nature, integrating the former states and their religious geography into the new universal polity of Qin. In their teleological account, they transform the eastern states from subjects of their own history and memory into objects of Qin imperial historiography and religious representation, as in the inscription on the eastern vista of Mount Zhifu (Shandong) in 218 BC:

Since the sage's laws initially arose,
He cleansed and ordered the land within the borders
And abroad punished the cruel and violent.
His martial terror radiating in all directions,
He shook and moved the four poles,
Seized and extinguished the six kings.
Far and wide he unified all under Heaven,
Disaster and harm were finally put to rest,
And forever halted were clashes of arms.
The August Divine Emperor's shining virtue
Regulates and orders the realm,
Inspecting and listening, he is not idle.
He creates and establishes the great principle,
Brilliantly arranges the assembled implements,
Making all have their insignia and banners.
The officials in service honor their divisions,
Each understanding his task,
And affairs have no doubts or uncertainties.
The black-haired people are changed and transformed,
The distant and near share unified measures,
In approaching the old, they eliminate fault.
The constant duties are now fixed,
Later successors will continue the deed,
Forever upholding the sage's rule.

The second cycle of imperial poetry, immediately following the Qin inscriptions, is of a similar nature: seventeen hymns that the Han founding emperor Gaozu used in his ancestral sacrifices. These "Songs of a Pacified Age for the Inner Halls" (*Anshi fangzhong ge*), composed between 202 and 195 BC, were likely created by another group of court classicists partially inherited from the Qin. In their classical diction, once again oriented toward the Zhou hymns

and bronze inscriptions, the hymns display an attempt toward ritual continuity and textual tradition that transcended the social and political turmoil surrounding the fall of the Qin. Performed to “Chu melodies” (*Chu sheng*, reportedly composed by the emperor’s otherwise unknown consort Lady Tangshan), the hymns show only occasional traces of the southern poetic idiom familiar from the *Verses of Chu*, yet fused with the solemn diction of political liturgy:

Thoroughwort and fig issue their scent,
Moving back and forth the cinnamon flowers.
Piously we present Heaven’s rites,
Complying with the radiance of sun and moon.
[The spirits] mount the four dragons of profound mystery,
Dashing in circles and moving around.
Feathers and banners in rich abundance,
Lush indeed, spreading far and farther.
The Way of filial piety continuous with our age,
We display the brilliant order of ritual!

While the Qin inscriptions and Han hymns were important for the political and religious representation of their newly established polities, the dominant genre of Han poetry was the “poetic exposition” (*fu*) that for Western Han times is best understood as a genre of rhapsodic performance. In early China, the literary term *fu* appears in three partially overlapping meanings: as the verb “to recite” or “to present” (as in poetry recitations in the *Zuo Tradition*); as one of the three poetic modes *fu* (exposition), *bi* (comparison), and *xing* (evocation) named in the *Rituals of Zhou* and the “Great Preface” and subsequently applied to the songs of the *Classic of Poetry*; and as the term denoting the Han dynasty genre of “poetic exposition.” In Han times, the word *fu* is interchangeable with a series of homophones or near-homophones that all mean “to display” or “to spread out,” linking the genre to the poetic mode of “exposition.” A recently excavated manuscript from Yinwan (Lianyungang, Jiangsu), the “Poetic Exposition on the Spirit Crow” (Shenwu fu) of approximately 10 BC, where the word *fu* is written with a variant character, has confirmed this interpretation. *Fu* thus refers to both the comprehensive exposition of a certain subject and its rhapsodic presentation, the latter being captured in the formula “to recite without singing is called *fu*” (*History of the Han*, “Monograph on Arts and Writings”). Without providing a complete tally, the “Monograph” lists the titles of 1,004 *fu* mostly of Western Han times. Today, only a few dozen *fu* are extant from before the end of the Western Han, most of them in mere fragments.

The genre was largely undefined in both form and content. Virtually any poetic text of a certain length could be called *fu*, occasionally also in alternation with terms like “eulogy” (*song*) or “(elegant) phrases” (*ci*). Later sources distinguish specific subsets of the *fu*, such as the “sorrows” (*sao*), in the tradition of “Encountering Sorrow”; the “lament” (*diaowen*); compositions in seven parts, or “sevens” (*qi*); and the dialogical “staged discussions” (*shelun*, also called “responses to questions,” *duiwen*). These terms began to be used as genre designations soon after the Western Han; thus no fewer than thirteen “sevens” are known by title from Eastern Han times alone. Likewise, the staged discussions or responses to questions – compositions where the protagonist successfully defends himself against unjust accusations – generated their own tradition, the origins of which were retrospectively traced to Dongfang Shuo’s (154–93 BC) “Responding to a Guest’s Objections” (*Da ke nan*) and Yang Xiong’s “Justification against Ridicule” (*Jie chao*). The genre died out in the fourth century, leaving merely nineteen titles on record.

For Western Han times, such distinctions are anachronistic; strictly speaking, the concept of genre seems to have emerged only over the second and third centuries. “To recite without singing” points more to a performative mode than to literary form, and this mode applied, for example, also to inscriptions. Thus, apart from the short song (*ge*) largely associated with the southern literary tradition, the Western Han term *fu* covered the entire gamut of poetic forms and topics, ranging from Jia Yi’s four-syllable-line philosophical meditation “The Owl” (*Funiaofu*) to Dong Zhongshu’s lament of personal frustration, “The Gentleman Is Not Accepted in His Times” (*Shi buyu fu*); from Sima Xiangru’s (179–117 BC) grandiose celebration of the imperial park, “Excursion Hunt of the Son of Heaven” (*Tianzi youlie fu*) to Mei Gao’s (fl. ca 130–110 BC) impromptu pieces with which he constantly entertained the emperor; from elaborate expositions on individual items such as Wang Bao’s (d. 61 BC) “The Panpipes” (*Dongxiao fu*) to Yang Xiong’s compositions of moral admonition. Musical instruments, trees, screens, ballgames, or dog races were topics just as valid as accounts of the imperial rituals, processions, and architecture. The personal reflection in the mode of Jia Yi, Dong Zhongshu, or Sima Qian – the latter being credited, perhaps spuriously, with a “Lamenting the Gentleman Who Is Not Accepted in His Times” (*Bei shi buyu fu*) – was the exception; the rule was compositions for delectation, rhetorical display, and moral edification. The audience for these pieces was the ruler – regional or imperial – and his courtiers, who enjoyed them not through individual reading but at oral performances. While no few of the highest officials – indeed Emperor Wu himself – composed *fu*, literary talent did not lead to an official career

but at best some minor appointment. Ban Gu characterized the most prolific of all *fu* authors at Emperor Wu's court, Mei Gao, as a man who "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." Like Dongfang Shuo, a man known for his occasionally bizarre jokes, Mei Gao complained about being treated as a jester.

The Western Han *fu* was related to the southern literary tradition known from the *Verses of Chu*, but its true origin lay in late Warring States rhetorical display and political persuasion. During the early Han reigns, the *fu* was not promoted at the imperial court but emerged at the southern princely courts of Wu (under Prince Liu Pi, r. 195–154 BC), Huainan (Liu An), and Liang (Liu Wu, r. 168–144 BC), which attracted numerous political thinkers, philosophers, rhetoricians, and literary talents. Accordingly, the language and imagination of Mei Sheng (father of Mei Gao, d. 140 BC) and Sima Xiangru, the two greatest stylists of their time, show decidedly southern characteristics in the mold of the *Verses of Chu*. Jia Yi, a native of Luoyang whose "The Owl" is the earliest known Han text called *fu*, wrote in the southern exile of Changsha (Hunan). Mei Sheng hailed from southeastern Huaiyin (Jiangsu), while the three most prominent authors from the reign of Emperor Wu to the end of the Western Han – Sima Xiangru, Wang Bao, and Yang Xiong – all came from Shu (Sichuan); in addition, the *History of the Han* mentions that Wang Bao was skilled in the recitation of Chu poetry, apparently a special and noteworthy art. Indeed, works attributed to Jia Yi and Wang Bao are included in the *Verses of Chu*. The "Monograph on Arts and Writings" credits Liu An with eighty-two *fu* and his courtiers with another forty-four.

The great age of the *fu* began after Emperor Wu, at the age of seventeen, ascended the imperial throne in 141 BC. He soon began to call the southern literary talents to the imperial court at Chang'an – an eclectic group that included rhetoricians like Zhuang Zhu (d. 122 BC), Zhufu Yan (d. 126 BC), and Zhuang Ji (ca 188–105 BC, also called Yan Ji); fortune hunters like Sima Xiangru; and entertainers like Mei Gao. While the old and frail Mei Sheng died en route to the capital, Sima Xiangru, whom the *History of the Han* credits with twenty-nine *fu*, arrived around 136 BC. (The account that Sima was called to Chang'an after the emperor had personally "read" one of his works, however, is clearly a product of later imagination.) Mei Sheng's "Seven Stimuli" (Qi fa) is the earliest extant example of the southern "grand *fu*" (*dafu*), the early climax of the Han *fu*. The grand *fu* is marked by length (running up to five hundred lines or more), a dialogical structure reminiscent of Warring States face-to-face persuasions, a brief historicizing prose introduction,

an irregular meter, the alternation of rhymed and prose passages, constant and extreme hyperbole, the use of rare words (especially onomatopoeia and rhyming), alliterative and reduplicative binomes, a loose use of parallelism within couplets, and extensive descriptive or enumerative catalogues of various phenomena. On the whole, the grand *fu* is designed as a spectacle of language, celebrating at once the subject it expounds upon and its own poetic brilliance. It expresses an extreme sensitivity to language as rhetorical embellishment and aural display, overwhelming its audience in cascades of intricate sound patterns. In its greatest examples, the language of the *fu* mimetically reproduces the very phenomenon it describes, such as in Mei Sheng's account of a tidal bore as the sixth of seven enticements by which a "guest from Wu" tries to cure a Chu prince from an illness caused by overindulgence in luxury and pleasure. Pushing the prince's sensual imagination and perception to its limits, the text for some eighty lines races along with the wave it describes:

Revolving and rushing, a glistening halo,
front and rear conjoined and connected.
Lofty and lofty, lifted and lifted,
roiling and roiling, 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!

Except for impromptu compositions *à la* Mei Gao, it is not clear who performed the *fu* at court and in which context. Did Sima Xiangru and Yang Xiong, purportedly both stutterers, perform their own *fu*? In Sima Xiangru's largely spurious biography in the *Records of the Historian*, which seems to extol the moral and aesthetic attitudes of Yang Xiong's time about a century later, the poet is said to have "presented" (*zou*) his "Great Man" (Daren *fu*), stirring Emperor Wu into a flash of megalomaniac delusion where he felt as elated as if "traversing the clouds" and "roaming Heaven and Earth." The dialogical format of many *fu* that created an arena of rhetorical competition may even suggest polyvocal performances, or at least theatrical techniques to represent the different voices. Furthermore, these competing voices were often explicitly fictionalized, such as those of "Sir Vacuous" (Zixu), "Master Improbable," and "Lord No-Such" in Sima Xiangru's "Excursion Hunt of the Son of Heaven."

Such texts reproduced late Warring States modes of persuasion and verbal embellishment and presented the art of verbal discourse itself as a source of endless pleasure and entertainment. Thus Sima Xiangru's "Excursion Hunt" – in the *Selections of Refined Literature* divided into two distinct texts, "Sir Vacuous" (Zixu fu) and "The Imperial Park" (Shanglin fu) – is far more than an account of the imperial hunt. In a grandiose spectacle of language, it turns the actual park into a mythical landscape inhabited by the creatures of the universe and traversed by the cosmic sovereign. Every wonder of the world becomes part of the larger wonder of verbal artistry, enjoyed by the very emperor who is celebrated in the poetic exposition. Like Mei Sheng's "Seven Stimuli," the text concludes with a shift from the delight in sensual pleasure (including the pleasure of language) to a lesson in moral edification. After indulging in a slaughter of cosmic proportion followed by a veritable orgy with strong sexual overtones, the subject of the text – the emperor – turns suddenly inward and questions his excesses:

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! . . . I am afraid that later generations will become dissolute and dissipated; if they proceed on this path, they will not turn back."

The emperor then ends the feast with a solemn speech in which he extols modesty and morality, immersion in the Classics, and selfless care for the folk. The dramatic semantic shift from excess to contemplation is mirrored in Sima Xiangru's language: the extravagant rhythms and sound patterns used to describe the royal hunt are now replaced by the simple dignity of classical four-syllable verse. The text itself thus embodies the transformation of an unrestrained and violent ruler into an archetypal sage-king of old. Having initially mirrored the splendor of imperial pleasure, it now creates a textual model for a sage ruler. This rhetorical performance is found in the works of Sima Qian and Mei Sheng as well as in the "Great Summons" poem from the *Verses of Chu*. In "Seven Stimuli," after all sensual enticements have failed, it is enough to merely mention the "important words and marvelous doctrines" (*yaoyan miaodao*) to finally cure the prince of his illness:

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 subtle 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.

Through playful fictionalization, relentless hyperbole, and bold pursuit of a modernist literary taste, the grand *fu* of early and mid-Western Han times revealed itself as an illusion for everyone to see through, celebrating the double pleasures of splendid poetic delight and its simultaneous transcendence in classical learning and moral ideals. Later generations were, however, deeply suspicious of this fusion of the monitory and entertaining functions of literature, especially as the unrestrained display of verbal eloquence was rooted in the morally dubious tradition of late Warring States “wandering persuaders.” Beginning in the mid-first century bc, a conservative critique of Emperor Wu’s modernist court culture emerged, which, within decades, culminated in a radical reevaluation of the *fu*. The most forceful criticism, which still carries weight to this day, was delivered by Yang Xiong, the most influential literary author of the late Western Han. Originally an admirer and imitator of Sima Xiangru’s style, albeit always with a more pronounced moral perspective, Yang rejected the *fu* later in life. In his autobiography (included in the *History of the Han*) and in the second chapter of his *Exemplary Sayings* (*Fayan*) – a work written in imitation of the *Analects* – Yang provided the first explicit definition and critique of the *fu* and the first sustained argument of literary criticism in early China. According to Yang, the purpose of the *fu* is “indirect admonition” (*feng*); yet by “adducing analogies,” using “extremely gorgeous and lavish phrases,” and grandly exaggerating its topic, the *fu* achieves just the opposite: its addressee, the emperor, merely indulges in its aesthetic marvels while missing its moral message. Thus, with ornate language overpowering didactic purpose, “it is clear that the *fu* only encourages and does not restrain.” Withdrawing from further *fu* writing, Yang juxtaposed the recent compositions with the poetic mode of “exposition” (*fu*) in the ancient *Classic of Poetry*: “The *fu* of the men of the *Poetry* are gorgeous and provide standards; the *fu* of the epideictic poets are gorgeous and lead to excess.”

This didactic stand on the nature and purpose of literature was embraced and canonized by Liu Xin – whom Yang seems to have held in some light distaste – and then Ban Gu: the entire discussion of the *fu* in the “Monograph on

Arts and Writings” directly descends, via Liu Xin, from Yang’s critique. Going beyond Yang, Liu Xin’s voice in the “Monograph” turns this critique into a tripartite historical narrative of cultural decline: originally, the dignitaries of antiquity had presented (*fu*) works from the *Classic of Poetry* on diplomatic missions, to exert moral influence, and to express their personal thoughts; next, with the political and moral collapse of the Zhou social order, such recitation gave way to expressions of personal suffering and frustration that served, at the same time, as political admonitions. For these, Liu Xin names two authors: Qu Yuan, whose works were regarded as *fu* in the Han, and Xun Qing, the author of the *Xunzi*, Chapter 26 (“Fu”) of which contains five poetic riddles that share some of the formal characteristics of the Han *fu* (rhyme, meter, rudimentary dialogue) together with a complaint about the morally corrupt world. Liu Xin not only places the beginning of the true moral *fu* with Qu Yuan and Xun Qing; in a third step, he also sees its end right there: all subsequent authors, beginning with Qu Yuan’s “successors” Song Yu and Jing Cuo, “vied to compose phrases greatly gorgeous and grossly aggrandizing” and thus “drowned the meaning of indirect suasion and moral illustration” of the genre. Two generations later, however, Ban Gu, author of the *History of the Han* and the leading poet of court eulogies and *fu* of his time, used the preface to his “The Two Capitals” (Liangdu *fu*) to praise the Han *fu* as “a class of the ancient *Poems*.” Concerned with the historical stature of the Han dynasty, he marvels at the more than one thousand *fu* listings in the imperial library catalogue and equates the cultural splendor of the Han with that of high antiquity. Departing from the rigor of Liu Xin’s critique, Ban Gu lists the illustrious poets from the Emperor Wu reign onwards and an impressive group of high-ranking officials – men whose *fu* “were second only to the Court Hymns and Eulogies [of the *Classic of Poetry*].”

While Liu Xin emphasizes the remonstrative purpose of the *fu*, and Ban Gu the eulogizing one, both agree with Yang Xiong’s vision of an autonomous literary author and consider Qu Yuan to be its first incarnation. Nevertheless, Liu Xin’s argument that the *fu* originated in the expression of personal sentiment largely upsets the Western Han history of the genre. Instead of recognizing the combination of entertainment, panegyric, and moral persuasion that seems to have defined the *fu* at Emperor Wu’s court, Liu Xin focuses on a type of *fu* that for most of Western Han times was marginal at best. As Jia Yi and Yang Xiong had expressed their discontent with Qu Yuan’s mere lament and suicide, Liu Xin establishes him as the primary model to follow. Only a few examples of these “frustration *fu*” are known: those purportedly written by Dong Zhongshu and Sima Qian, “Lamenting Time’s Fate” (*Ai shiming*)

attributed to Zhuang Ji and included in the *Verses of Chu*, Dongfang Shuo's "Responding to a Guest's Objection," Yang Xiong's "Dissolving Ridicule," and Ban Jieyu's (Favorite Beauty Ban, d. ca 6 BC) "Self-Commiseration" (Zidao fu), in which she laments her fate as an imperial concubine. The literature monograph in the *History of the Han* notes collectively the existence of a mere dozen pieces of "Miscellaneous *Fu* on the Loyal and Worthy Failing in Their Aims" (Za zhongxian shiyi fu).

As the development of the *fu* was part of the new court culture established by Emperor Wu, Yang Xiong's and Liu Xin's later critique of it belonged to a much larger conservative cultural reorientation, which, toward the end of the Western Han, culminated in the overall rejection of Emperor Wu's court literature, music, and ritual representation. In military, political, and fiscal terms, Emperor Wu had stretched the resources of the young empire in three decades (ca 130–100 BC) of rigorous expansion into Central Asia and northern Vietnam, and toward the Korean peninsula. Following this expansion, foreign goods and customs came to Chang'an and received an enthusiastic reception at court. Furthermore, the southern aesthetics and religious practices from the old region of Chu were introduced to the official state sacrifices. Sometime between 114 and 111 BC, Emperor Wu greatly revitalized and expanded an institution that had existed since Qin times, the imperial Bureau of Music (Yuefu). Under the leadership of the poet and musician Li Yannian – brother of Emperor Wu's favorite consort, Lady Li (Li furen) – this office was part of the imperial privy and thus outside the ritual bureaucracy. Producing the music for both court entertainment and state rituals, the office welcomed contemporary tunes from the various Chinese and even foreign (including Central Asian) regions. At different times between 113 and 94 BC (earlier dates given in the *History of the Han* are doubtful), a set of nineteen "Songs for the Sacrifices at the Suburban Altars" was created. Several of their tunes celebrated cosmic omens – the appearance of strange animals and plants, the discovery of an ancient tripod, unusual atmospheric phenomena – interpreted to signal cosmic approval of Emperor Wu's rule. The hymns were presented in the imperial ancestral temple and at the newly established, lavishly adorned altar to the supreme cosmic deity Grand Unity (Taiyi) located in Ganquan, about 110 kilometers northwest of Chang'an. Their diction is close to the sensual expression of both the "Nine Songs" and some of Sima Xiangru's *fu*, although their traditional association with Sima, who died in 117 BC, seems spurious.

It is for these qualities that Emperor Wu's entire court culture – vivacious music, modernist poetry, rich adornment of the imperial altars – was finally

rejected in late Western Han times. In 32–31 BC, Chancellor Kuang Heng and Chief Censor Zhang Tan petitioned to change the wording of the hymns and to restore the dignified music of old (as opposed to the “licentious tunes” of the present). Their critique of the imperial altar to Grand Unity exemplifies the entire program:

The purple altar is decorated with patterned ornament, multicolored carvings, and white–black and black–azure counterchange patterns. Moreover, it has jade equipment and [representations of?] female musicians. Its stone altars and shrines for the immortals, buried carriages with simurgh-bells, red horses and strong foals, and [wooden] figures of dragon steeds cannot find their models in antiquity. According to the principle of the burnt offerings to the [cosmic] emperors at the suburban altar that Your Subjects have learned, one [simply] sweeps the ground and sacrifices – this is venerating substantial simplicity . . . Everything relating to the artificial adornment of the purple altar, female musicians, carriages with simurgh-bells, red horses and strong foals, dragon steeds, and stone altars, should appropriately not be maintained.

In 7 BC, the Bureau of Music was dismantled and 441 of its 829 musicians dismissed. The remaining 388 were transferred to the Ministry of Rites, and the hymns on cosmic omens were deleted from the ritual repertoire. At precisely the same time, scholars like Liu Xin and others moved to establish new traditions of learning in the Five Classics – exegetical works like those of the *Mao Tradition* and the *Zuo Tradition* – that purportedly were of higher antiquity, and thus of superior moral authority, compared with the more recent interpretations (see below).

Beyond the *fu* and the ritual hymns, the range of poetry that can be dated with certainty to Western Han times is more limited than is traditionally assumed. The *History of the Han* includes only two early Western Han songs that are partially in the five-syllable line. Both of them are brief: a lament by Lady Qi, consort of the founding emperor Gaozu, and the following poem in which Li Yannian praises his sister’s beauty:

In the north, there is a beauty;
Unique in her own era, she stands alone.
With one glance, she topples a city;
with a second glance, she topples a state.
How could we not know her toppling the city and toppling the state?
Yet such a beauty will be hard to find again.

All other songs in the five-syllable line attributed to early Western Han times appear only in sixth-century or later sources. Four other partly

five-syllable-line songs included in the *History of the Han* are dated into the second half of the first century BC. To the literary tradition, this did not matter: by late Six Dynasties times, the anonymous “Nineteen Old Poems” (Gushi shijiu shou), the also anonymous eighteen “Songs for the Short Pan-pipe and the Nao Bell” (Duanxiao naoge, apparently military songs), poems attributed to Li Ling (d. 74 BC) and Su Wu (140–60 BC), and a whole series of other anonymous songs and ballads were assigned a Western Han date. At this time, many of them were labeled *yuefu* – “Music Bureau (songs)” – after the designation of the Western Han institution presumably in charge of their composition and performance. While the literature monograph in the *History of the Han* notes the existence of 314 short songs (*ge*), most of them were clearly ritualistic in nature, and none can be matched with the anonymous songs anthologized in Six Dynasties times.

The later assumptions about Western Han poetry are related to the idea that the Bureau of Music was devoted to collecting the folk poetry from the “lanes and alleys.” According to Eastern Han and later sources, the Zhou kings had already sent out messengers to gather such songs in order to gauge popular sentiment. This idea became widespread and influential in Eastern Han times but cannot be ascertained for pre-imperial or even Western Han times. If the practice of collecting folk songs at court indeed existed, it was not yet the profound political trope envisioned by Eastern Han scholars.

This is not to say that there was no Western Han poetry beyond the *fu* and the state ritual hymns. The *Records of the Historian* and especially the *History of the Han* contain many songs attributed to members of the imperial family and several other important historical figures. Some poems are metrically close to the “Nine Songs” and thus suggestive of southern tunes, yet the *History of the Han* extends the term “Chu melodies” (*Chu sheng*) also to pieces in classical verse in the four-syllable line. As no traces of Han music have been preserved, it remains speculative to fill the term with specific contents; in literary terms, it may have referred to meter and rhythm, to Chu dialect words and pronunciations, or to the use of rhyme that gradually shifted away from the classical conventions of the *Classic of Poetry*. After being still observed in the Qin stele inscriptions and Emperor Gaozu’s ancestral hymns, these conventions weakened significantly already with the rhymed parts of the *Huainanzi* and the early Han dynasty layers of the *Verses of Chu*. “Chu melodies” may hence have referred to a combination of musical and linguistic features; however, the Han songs associated with “Chu melodies” are far removed from the intricate imagery and ornate vocabulary of the “Nine Songs.”

All the songs included in Han dynasty historiography that are attributed to prominent figures share several features: they are intensely personal, relatively short, and simple and straightforward in their expression; moreover, they all are attributed to moments of personal despair, often with the protagonist extemporizing the song on the verge of his or her imminent demise. Thus Xiang Yu (232–202 BC) sang in desperation when surrounded by Liu Bang's troops in 202 BC; Liu Bang sang – and danced – “The Great Wind” (Dafeng ge) at the end of his life, worrying about his succession; after Liu Bang's death, Lady Qi sang while being incarcerated by the Empress Dowager (and suffered horrible physical mutilation and the killing of her son in response to her lament); Liu You (prince of Zhao, d. 181 BC), slandered and imprisoned by the Empress Dowager's clan, broke into song while being starved to death; Liu Dan (prince of Yan, d. 80 BC) and his consort exchanged songs at a banquet before Liu committed suicide because of his failed *coup d'état*; Liu Xu (prince of Guangling, d. 54 BC) sang (and then killed himself) at a banquet, incriminated in a witchcraft case against the emperor; Emperor Wu fell into a poetic lament over the death of his favorite consort, Lady Li; and Liu Xijun, a Han princess, agonized in song over her fate in Central Asia:

My family married me off to the other end of Heaven;
far away they gave me to a foreign land, to the King of Wusun.
A domed hut is my chamber, felt are the walls.
I take flesh as my food, sour milk as my drink.
Dwelling here, I always long for my soil – my heart is wounded.
I wish I were a yellow swan, returning to my old homestead.

These extemporized performances of song and dance, drenched in the tears of the protagonists and their audiences, mark the climactic moments of the historical narratives they are embedded in. In most cases, the song is quoted as the protagonist's last utterance.

The *Records of the Historian* includes such songs not just in the biographies of Western Han figures but also for earlier heroes such as Qu Yuan (with “Embracing Sand”); Jing Ke (d. 217 BC), who sang before trying to assassinate the Qin First Emperor; or the brothers Boyi and Shuqi, who chose starvation over “eating the grain of Zhou” after the violent conquest of the Shang dynasty. Such quotation of song was a rhetorical device of early historiography, adding drama and authenticity to the historical narrative. It is highly dubious how any such song – performed just once – could have been transmitted to the historian, especially in cases like those of Qu Yuan (who sang in utter isolation), Liu Xijun (who was in a faraway land), Boyi and Shuqi

(who starved as hermits in the mountains), or those dying in prison. Yet all these songs were plausible to the early historians and their audience as truthful utterances in moments of suffering and death. Most likely the songs were integral to the biographical lore, written and oral, that had formed over decades before reaching Sima Qian and Ban Gu, and were thus part of a larger culture of poetry performance and historical imagination. In this they reflected the dictum that “poetry expresses intent” and emerged as the natural and immediate response to an actual experience, especially one of suffering. As poetry served to dramatize and authenticate the historical narrative and to condense the essence of this narrative into the stable and durable medium of song, it also reaffirmed the Han view of poetry as something intensely personal and autobiographic. This view – noticeable also in Liu Xin’s emphasis on the “frustration *fu*” – corresponded to the Mao interpretation of the *Classic of Poetry*: where historiography showed song as emerging from history and individual experience, the Mao reading attempted to retrieve such history and authorship from the songs. For the next two millennia, this expressive theory of literature, enshrined in the “Great Preface,” remained the single most influential statement on the nature and purpose of Chinese poetry.

In addition to the songs by prominent historical figures, the early historical texts include dozens of anonymous ditties and proverbs that are attributed to “the people of Chang’an,” “all under Heaven,” “the villagers,” “the folk,” or even children. In the *History of the Han*’s coverage of the final decades of the Western Han dynasty, appearances of such songs were regarded as quasi-natural omens foretelling political and social disaster. Where songs and proverbs are quoted in this way, they are invariably validated by the subsequent historical events, betraying the ordering hand of the historian. As with the poetry attributed to named individuals, anonymous songs were seen not as artificial creations but as inevitable phenomena in a cosmos that was at once natural and political.

XII. Western Han historical and anecdotal narrative

The relation between poetry and historiography did not originate in Western Han times. Nevertheless, while in the *Zuo Tradition* and the *Discourses of the States* quotations from the *Classic of Poetry* far outweighed the occasional anonymous ditty, Han historiography showed a decisive shift from recitation to composition-in-performance, and thus a strong emphasis on genuine authorship. This emphasis now also marked historical writing itself. The

single monument of Western Han historiography, and by far the largest Western Han narrative text altogether, is the *Records of the Historian*, a privately composed work that began with Sima Tan and was completed by his son, Sima Qian. Especially since Song times, the work has become tightly connected to Sima Qian's autobiography and read both as historical account and as the expression of its author's resentment and political criticism. This was not the dominant reading of the text before late Six Dynasties times, at the earliest. One must therefore contextualize not only the *Records* but also its later interpretations, instead of anachronistically collapsing the former into the latter. The three principal extant commentaries to the *Records* are Pei Yin's (fifth century) *Collected Explanations* (*Jijie*), Sima Zhen's (eighth century) *Retrieving the Hidden [Meaning]* (*Suoyin*), and Zhang Shoujie's (eighth century) *Correct Meaning* (*Zhengyi*).

The 130 chapters – the final chapter being Sima Qian's account of his work and life, and Sima Tan's outline of the “six lineages” – cover the time from the mythical Yellow Emperor to roughly 100 BC. In a radical departure from earlier annalistic narrative, the text is organized in five sections: twelve “Basic Annals” (*benji*) cover in terse annalistic format the dynasties and reigns from the Yellow Emperor to Sima Qian's own Emperor Wu (the received chapter on the latter being a later substitution); ten “Tables” (*biao*) note in geographic and chronological order the main events and historical protagonists since 841 BC; eight “Monographs” (*zhi*) discuss the technical subjects of ritual, music, calendrics, astrology, sacrifices, waterways, and agronomy; thirty chapters of “Hereditary Families” (*shijia*) trace the hereditary nobility of the major Zhou states, including the family of Confucius, down to the dignitaries enfeoffed by the early Han emperors; and sixty-nine “Arrayed Traditions” (*liezhuan*) provide individual and group biographies – including such subjects as *ru* classicist scholars, mild or cruel officials, roaming knights, sycophants at court, jesters, fortune-tellers, assassins, and merchants – as well as accounts of several non-Chinese neighbors and regions from Korea to Vietnam and Central Asia.

The circulation and early reception of the *Records* is not sufficiently clear. The received text contains a significant number of later additions, interpolations, and substitutions of original chapters. An early layer of explicitly marked additions, spreading across a number of chapters, came from Chu Shaosun (ca 105–ca 30 BC), an imperially appointed erudite (*boshi*). Sima Qian's biography in the *History of the Han* speaks of ten lost chapters, of which by the first century AD only the titles had survived. The third-century commentator Zhang Yan identifies these chapters as the two “Basic Annals” of emperors Jing and Wu, the three “Monographs” on ritual, music, and warfare, the “Table”

of early Western Han generals and high officials, the “Hereditary House” of the princes of Qi, Yan, and Guangling, and the three “Arrayed Traditions” of diviners, fortune-tellers, and Fu Kuan and Jin Shi. Except for the “Monograph” on warfare, all these chapters are included in the received *Records of the Historian* and hence are regarded as later replacements (the “Basic Annals” of Emperor Wu largely duplicates the “Monograph” on the *feng* and *shan* sacrifices). The authenticity of other chapters, especially several that have counterparts in the *History of the Han* and may have been reconstructed from that work, remains under discussion. Beyond these direct interventions, the *Records of the Historian* – like all early texts – underwent substantive later editing that probably went beyond mere orthographic standardization. The assumption of Sima Qian as the single author of the *Records*, and of the text as his personal response to the suffering inflicted upon him, is thus complicated by three facts: the principal authors include both Sima Tan and Sima Qian, and it seems dubious to attribute specific sections to one or the other; both authors accepted hundreds of earlier sources into their work; and the *Records* contains significant portions of later additions and rewritings. As a result, the vast text has frustrated attempts to find a coherent interpretation both of the historical account and of Sima Qian’s authorial self-expression.

The complex narrative structure of the *Records* contributes to its appearance as a text of multiple perspectives. Most historical protagonists appear not only in a number of chapters across the five divisions, but also within the “Arrayed Traditions,” where their actions intersect with those of their contemporaries. Events are related in different versions and may often reflect sources of different types, and individual biographies – for example, the Qu Yuan account – are clearly a patchwork of diverse materials. Modern scholarship has identified about seventy different sources of the *Records* by title, with many more remaining in obscurity. The term “arrayed traditions” may refer not to the overall lineup of chapters but to the compilation of different oral and written narrative traditions within each chapter. This has not prevented later imperial scholars – not to mention virtually all modern Chinese and Western readers – from taking the *Records* as a monument of Sima Qian’s self-expression. This reading is based especially on two partially overlapping texts attributed to him: his autobiography in Chapter 130 and the “Letter in Response to Ren Shaoqing” (Bao Ren Shaoqing shu) preserved in his biography in the *History of the Han*. These two writings, taken together, provide a dramatic account of how and why Sima Qian began and ended his work as a historian, an account that places the *Records* squarely into the emerging Western Han ideas of strong authorship, the compulsive production of literature

out of suffering and frustration, and the powerful truth claims related to such literary creation. It shows the *Records* not only as a work of historical writing, but – very much like the poetic performances it relates – as a text that itself is driven by historical necessity.

According to Sima Qian's account, his father Sima Tan, Emperor Wu's court astrologer involved in calendar calculation, divination, and the correct performance of the imperial sacrifices, died in 110 BC out of grief and despair over having been excluded from the most solemn cosmic ritual, the imperial *feng* and *shan* sacrifices. On his deathbed, he bequeathed to his son the charge to complete his private work of history. The second, no less dramatic, moment came a decade later, when in 99 BC Sima Qian defended the general Li Ling, who during a campaign beyond China's borders had surrendered to an overwhelming enemy. Sima Qian fell into disgrace and was ordered to choose between suicide and castration. He opted for the unbearable shame of the latter in order to complete the *Records*. Explaining his choice as driven by his sense of duty, he offers a noble genealogy of earlier writers – among them King Wen of Zhou, Qu Yuan, Confucius, Zuo Qiuming, and the anonymous authors of the *Classic of Poetry* – who all had composed their works when in dire straits. Thus Sima Qian presented himself as the filial son of his father and the successor of earlier moral paragons, eager to rescue the worthy men of the past from oblivion while simultaneously securing the lasting memory of himself and his father for the “sages and nobles of future generations.” In terms heavily charged with religious overtones, Sima Qian stated his intent to “explore the junction of Heaven and Man, comprehend the transformation of past and present, and establish the exposition of one lineage” – that is, to explore human history in a cosmic framework, and to transcend the biological end of his family through its textual future of a newly established intellectual tradition. If authentic, this account is the earliest extant self-interpretation of a literary author and a fundamental statement on the nature and purpose of writing. Here Sima Qian presented himself as a most self-conscious author and one obsessed with the posterity of his name. At the same time the *Records* is the earliest text to establish a series of sages – King Wen, Confucius, Qu Yuan, and so on – as strong authors in Sima's own image.

The autobiographical reading aligned the *Records* closely with the *Spring and Autumn Annals* that in Western Han times – prominently by Sima Qian's teacher Dong Zhongshu – was interpreted as Confucius' historical judgment expressed through “subtle words” (*weiyán*) of “praise and blame” (*baobian*). In the *Records* this criticism was seen as directed at Sima's own ruler, Emperor Wu. Large parts of the text are indeed devoted to the four decades from 141 (the

date of Emperor Wu's ascent) to roughly 100 BC when Sima stopped writing. Moreover, Sima's sometimes (though not consistently) sharp criticism of the Qin First Emperor as a tyrant and megalomaniac, deluded by fantasies of immortality, has been read as being ultimately directed at Emperor Wu, who in later Western Han times was cast in similar terms.

Sima Qian's explicit authorial presence in the *Records* itself is limited to certain chapters (e.g. the introductions to some of the "Tables") and to brief comments appended at the end of each chapter. The narrative proper unfolds as a seemingly objective record, driven by events and the moral forces of history. This pattern of writing follows the model of the *Zuo Tradition* – one of Sima Qian's key sources – with its appended judgments under the name of the "Gentleman" or Confucius. In the *Records* the historian's comments are often intensely personal. He tries, on occasion, to rationalize a course of events that contradicts both reason and morality; elsewhere, he expresses frustration over the impossibility of doing so. He points to a protagonist's moral deficiencies or praises his character; he explains improbable outcomes or defers to an unfathomable Heaven as the ultimate force behind them. He sighs over what he finds in his sources or concludes with series of real or rhetorical questions. Altogether, the comments reveal his moral and rational stand and show him as both narrator and judge of history, retrospectively setting right what history had allowed to go wrong.

By far the most lively parts of the *Records* are the biographies presented in the "Arrayed Traditions." Rich in minute detail, vivid in narrative and description, and dramatic in the frequent use of dialogues and flashbacks, they focus on concrete situations that display the protagonists' personalities. Attention to supernatural phenomena and uncounted instances of well-crafted speech may raise questions about the narrative as a truthful and authentic account, stacking the literary qualities of the *Records* against its factual reliability. Eastern Han writers like Ban Gu and Wang Chong (27–ca 100) complained about Sima's interest in the fanciful, but later readers – especially Song and later advocates of "ancient-style literature" (*guwen*) – have cherished his stylistic eloquence and forceful expression as the reflection of Sima's personality.

Among the biographical chapters, the first – the "Arrayed Traditions of Boyi and Shuqi" (Chapter 61) – deserves particular attention as it frames the narrative with extensive considerations about the historian's purpose and moral predicament. The brief narrative relates how the noble brothers Boyi and Shuqi preferred starvation to a life under the Zhou dynasty that had just violently overthrown the Shang. The historian faces a dilemma of judgment: here were the loyal subjects whose ruler had been killed, there was King Wu

of Zhou who had ended the oppressive Shang rule (and in the process had neglected piety toward his just-deceased father). Sima Qian sides with Boyi and Shuqi, but only through a series of rhetorical questions that lead him to query the justice of Heaven: “I am deeply confused by this – is this what is called the Way of Heaven? Is it true? Is it false?” He quotes both the ancient Classics and Confucius, whom he praises for having preserved the memory of Boyi and Shuqi. Like so many other good men of the “cliffs and caves,” Sima Qian self-consciously concludes, these virtuous hermits would have fallen into oblivion were it not for the effort of the historian to preserve their names.

This reflection on the duties of the historian shows him interested in more than the bare facts. His charge is to create the memory of the past as a model for the present and the future. Thus, according to an “adage from among the rustics” – quoted in Jia Yi’s lengthy essay “Finding Fault with Qin” (Guo Qin lun) that is in turn included in Sima’s appended judgment to the “Basic Annals of the Qin First Emperor” – “those who do not forget past affairs will be the master of the future.” Toward this end Sima Qian presents himself as a tireless researcher who travels the empire to gather local memories, searches the archives of old and laments that the Qin had destroyed all records except their own, or weighs the available evidence and on occasion considers it insufficient.

While the *Records* is the largest and most prominent work of Western Han narrative literature, it is not isolated. It draws on a number of earlier works such as Lu Jia’s (ca 228–ca 140 BC) *Spring and Autumn Annals of Chu and Han* (*Chu Han Chunqiu*, a work surviving only in fragmentary quotations and borrowings) that details the founding of the Han dynasty. Parts of its vast repertoire of anecdotes are further shared with other Han compilations. In the “Arrayed Traditions,” anecdotes from oral and written sources are organized to create specific biographies; in other texts, such anecdotes are retold in smaller, mutually independent units that may more accurately reflect their original form of transmission. The earliest of these compilations is *Mr. Han’s Exoteric Tradition of the Poetry* (mid-second century BC), with 306 historical anecdotes illustrating philosophical or moral thought. Each passage closes with a quotation from the *Classic of Poetry*, and the text is considered part of Han Ying’s exegetical tradition of the *Poetry*. About a third of Han Ying’s anecdotal material can be found in Warring States texts, and other parts appear elsewhere in Han writing, testifying to the general popularity of such anecdotes both before and after the establishment of the empire. While Sima Qian became viewed as the author of the *Records*, Han Ying, lacking a personal agenda, has been perceived as a compiler of anonymous material. The same is

true for the other four transmitted Western Han collections of historical narrative that are all attributed to Liu Xiang, the imperial collator and bibliographer. In comparison, Sima Qian's perceived authorship of the vast and variegated *Records* is completely unique in all of Western Han times, as is his writing, on either wood or bamboo, of a personal letter of such remarkable length.

Liu Xiang's anecdote collections are the *Intrigues of the Warring States* (with some parallels in a silk manuscript from Mawangdui), the *Matters Newly Arranged* (*Xinxu*), the *Garden of Persuasions* (*Shuiyuan* or *Shuoyuan*), and the *Biographies of Exemplary Women* (*Lienü zhuan*). After the voluminous *Intrigues* (see above), the next-largest collection is the *Garden of Persuasions*, containing 639 (of a presumed original 784) sections in the received text. The *Persuasions* is also closely related to the *Matters Newly Arranged* that contains 166 sections; in addition, fifty-nine more fragments are known. In the "Monograph on Arts and Writings," the two titles appear as a single, ambiguous listing that combines the received titles as *Xinxu shuiyuan*, which may in fact refer to only a single work, a *Newly Arranged Garden of Persuasions*. Both collections are organized by topic and serve as repertoires of moral illustration, especially between rulers and ministers. *Biographies of Exemplary Women* is likewise arranged topically, in this case according to six cardinal virtues represented by the individual women. Each set of virtues ("motherly deportment," "worthiness and sagacity," "humaneness and wisdom," "purity and obedience," "chastity and rightness," "judgment and comprehension") is given its own chapter and illustrated by fifteen examples; in addition, the concluding seventh chapter furnishes fifteen instances of "waywardness and depravity." (Chapter 8 of the received text, complementing the seven categories, is a later addition.) Like Liu Xiang's other collections, the *Biographies* is historical and didactic in outlook. It introduces women from high antiquity through the Western Han, and from royal wives to peasant ladies, in each case illustrating their exemplary behavior through a brief anecdote. At the end of each anecdote, the compiler enters the text. First, he quotes briefly from the *Classic of Poetry* and adds the formula known from *Mencius* and other texts, "this is what [the text] is about" (*ci zhi wei ye*). Then he concludes with a separate rhymed appraisal of eight four-syllable lines, which is introduced by the words "the appraisal says" (*song yue*). Thus imitating the appended authorial statements of the *Zuo Tradition* and the *Records of the Historian*, Liu submits his text as a supplement to historical narrative. Didactic in intent, it presents the *Classic of Poetry* as the single canonical text that encompasses all human behavior.

Despite their historical gestures and didactic purpose, Liu Xiang's compilations depart from the grand narratives of the *Zuo Tradition* and the *Records*

in the arrangement of their material. The latter combine a wide range of sources into elaborate, integrated stories; Liu Xiang groups individual anecdotes under topical categories. This choice shows a methodic compiler from the end of the Western Han determined and explicit in his didactic purpose. Through their systematic arrangement, his texts give clear guidance to the reader; they are unambiguous in their moral positions and straightforward in language, lending them to a wide circulation that no longer depended on personal instruction or learned hermeneutic efforts. In particular the *Biographies of Exemplary Women* came to enjoy broad popularity and inspired numerous later works in praise of female virtue. Since Eastern Han times images of Liu Xiang's female paragons were placed on the walls of houses, temples, and tombs, and illustrated versions of the book had circulated since the early Six Dynasties. By contrast, the fifteen titles of "trivial talk" (*xiaoshuo*) that are listed in the "Monograph on Arts and Literature," some of them comprising hundreds of chapters, fell by the wayside and are no longer extant. Presumably less didactic in outlook, their anecdotes may have lacked the support of the post-Han tradition to be continuously circulated and preserved.

In addition to poetry and historical narrative, a large number of texts in other formats were composed over the two centuries of the Western Han. Some – for example, philosophical works, technical treatises, or interpretations of the Classics – are listed in the "Monograph on Arts and Letters"; others, such as edicts and petitions, personal letters and inscriptions, or all kinds of administrative, legal, and economic records, are generally not. While only a fraction of the titles listed in the "Monograph" are transmitted, recently excavated manuscripts from numerous sites point to a large amount of writing that never entered the imperial catalogue. Cao Pi's (187–226) "Discussion of Literature" (*Lun wen*) lists "petitions and discussions," "letters and discourses," "inscriptions and dirges," and "songs and poetic expositions" as the primary genres of writing, pointing to a notion of literature that was defined by its pragmatic purpose and application. Inscriptions, dirges, and personal letters appear to have become common only in Eastern Han times. The famous letter exchange between Li Ling and Su Wu, for example, is of dubious authenticity; the earliest credible exchange still extant is the one between Liu Xin and Yang Xiong over Yang's dialect dictionary, *Regional Expressions* (*Fangyan*). Given that paper became only gradually available after approximately AD 100, the writing of long personal letters – either on the bulky materials of wood or bamboo, or on expensive silk – was certainly not the norm. Letters by soldiers, local administrators, and envoys, or – on behalf of the dead and buried with

them – to the authorities of the netherworld (for example, at Mawangdui) are now archaeologically documented, but they are a far cry from the elaborate and intensely personal composition attributed to Sima Qian. Archaeology has produced very large numbers of legal, administrative, military, and economic documents written on wood and bamboo. From the imperial court to the local administration in even remote border areas (as in evidence, for example, from manuscripts finds in Juyan, Inner Mongolia/Gansu), Western Han government agencies produced a continuous stream of bureaucratic writing. Neither the *Records of the Historian*, the *History of the Han*, nor Liu Xiang in his compilation of the imperial library catalogue paid much attention to this type of bureaucratic and technical writing.

XIII. Qin and Western Han political and philosophical discourses

Liu Xiang appears to have most valued those kinds of Western Han texts that corresponded to the prestigious writings from earlier times, including historical narrative, the exegesis of the Classics, and philosophical discourse. Of these the later tradition has preserved but a handful of major Western Han works, erasing the vast majority of early texts and with them much of the intellectual context of the surviving ones. While a small but coherent body of writings has thus come to define Western Han intellectual and literary history, several of even these texts are later imperial reconstructions. As a result, the authenticity of some key texts of early Western Han political discourse – among them Jia Yi's *New Writings* (*Xinshu*), Lu Jia's *New Discourses* (*Xinyu*), and Dong Zhongshu's *Luxuriant Dew of the Spring and Autumn Annals* (*Chunqiu fanlu*) – are shrouded in doubt.

Lu Jia's *New Discourses* in twelve sections set out the traditional principles of good rulership and was purportedly composed at Emperor Gaozu's request. Jia Yi's *New Writings* includes "Finding Fault with Qin," Jia's petitions to Emperor Wen (r. 180–157 BC), historical anecdotes, and discussions of ritual. Both texts have come to represent traditional political thought from the early years of the Western Han and are closely related to the imperial court, where both Lu and Jia served as officials. Both authors point to the purported moral corruption and political failures of Qin in order to legitimize Han imperial rule. Addressing the pragmatic needs of successful rulership, their arguments are rooted in Warring States classicist political thought and supported by quotations from the Classics. Their ideal ruler is regal, oriented toward the

examples of the early Zhou kings, and intent on self-cultivation and ritual propriety. He rewards the worthy and the virtuous, listens to his advisers, and adapts his decisions to the new circumstances of a changing world. This notion of “changing with the times,” advocated already by Qin officials like Li Si and later often despised as an expression of Qin “legalism,” was a key argument in Western Han classicist political thought and appears in a diverse range of texts including the *Records of Ritual*, the *Huainanzi*, and a series of imperial edicts, petitions to the throne, and court debates throughout Western Han times.

The emphasis on change and “newness” (*xin*, a word that recurs in titles of Western Han political writing) was in an uneasy relationship with a concomitant claim for reviving pre-Qin “antiquity” (*gu*). The master metaphor of the divide that separated past and present was the purported destruction of classical culture under the Qin and its subsequent resurrection by the Han. This ideological construct developed gradually over the course of the Han and has served as the foundational myth of imperial, and now post-imperial, Confucianism ever since. Meanwhile, the idea of “timeliness” or “changing with the times” connected Western Han political and administrative needs to contemporaneous cosmology. The three largest compendia of late pre-imperial and early imperial political and cosmological thought – all three profoundly eclectic – are *Mr. Lü’s Spring and Autumn Annals* of 239 BC, the *Huainanzi* of 139 BC, and the *Records of Ritual* that comprise a range of texts from late Warring States through Western Han times. They all contain versions of the “Monthly Ordinances” (*Yueling*) that define the ideal ruler as acting – both ritually and administratively – in accordance with cosmic time and cyclical change. This notion is further expressed in the “Canon of Yao” of the *Classic of Documents* (placing the chapter squarely into late Warring States or even Qin times) and several additional chapters of the *Huainanzi*. Over the course of the Western Han, it became fully integrated with the correlative cosmology of the Five Phases. In this cosmology, the emperor became a cosmic sovereign at the center of the universe, who through his actions secured the well-being of his domain as well as of the natural cosmos altogether.

With *Mr. Lü’s Spring and Autumn Annals* composed on the eve of Qin imperial unification and the *Records of Ritual* compiled into a single work not before late Western and possibly Eastern Han times, the largest and most influential Western Han philosophical text is the *Huainanzi*, compiled by a large group of scholars at Liu An’s southern princely court of Huainan. It was likely a challenge to Emperor Wu’s political and cultural authority, and Liu An, the emperor’s cousin and rival, in 122 BC was finally forced into suicide. The text

shares the language, mythology, and imagery of other southern writings (the *Verses of Chu*, the *Zhuangzi*, the early *fu*) and makes frequent use of rhyme. Drawing on diverse strands of political and philosophical thought, it outlines a cosmological order that integrates ancient mythology, the notion of the self-perfected “true man” (*zhenren*) as the ideal of a cosmic ruler, and Five Phases correlative thought. Like *Mr. Lü’s Spring and Autumn Annals*, the work is listed among the “miscellaneous” or “mixed” traditions (*zajia*) in the “Monograph of Arts and Writings.” Already in Eastern Han times it attracted commentaries by Xu Shen and Gao You (ca 168–212, also the earliest commentator of *Mr. Lü’s Spring and Autumn Annals*) with which it is still transmitted.

The Han integration of cosmology and political thought replaced the ancient notion of political legitimacy, rooted in genealogy and expressed in the ancestral sacrifice, with one in which the ruler answered directly to the cosmic powers. This notion enabled Emperor Wu’s grandiose claims of universal sovereignty that were celebrated in a new set of cosmic sacrifices, ritual court hymns, and poetic expositions; yet over the course of the Western Han, it served the court scholars and learned officials better than it did their monarchs. Their arena consisted of edicts, petitions to the throne, and court debates – new forms of writing that developed together with the imperial state and were considered eminent forms of refined literary expression.

Numerous Western Han examples of edicts and petitions are preserved in the *Records of the Historian* and the *History of the Han*. Often shaped by the rhythmic speech of traditional rhetoric (sometimes even employing rhyme and four-syllable meter), they draw on analogies and historical precedent and evoke the Classics. While prepared for specific occasions, these texts are not ad hoc utterances but stylistically sophisticated political arguments that were, presumably, preserved in the imperial archives. Cases of substantially different versions of the same text, however, suggest that even documents of central importance could be subject to later rewriting, or reimagining. In their political philosophy, many petitions share a view of the world as an organic and well-ordered universe open to cosmological as well as moral explanation. Extensive political arguments could be developed within the framework of correlative cosmology and supported by quotations from the Classics in their new Western Han interpretations. Thus in his famous three statements to the emperor that Dong Zhongshu presented in 136 BC, he portrayed the ruler as a universal sovereign in communication with the universe. Heaven was seen as directly responsive to good or bad rulership; omens and natural disasters were warnings to the ruler. When a fire broke out in the founding emperor Gaozu’s funerary park in 135 BC, Dong accordingly drew on events recorded

in the *Spring and Autumn Annals* to argue against Emperor Wu's practices of ancestral worship and continued from there to offer further policy recommendations. These almost led to his execution and seem to have cautioned Dong against further interpretations of contemporary portents. Nevertheless his use of historical precedent to read cosmic events in political terms remained intact.

Following Dong Zhongshu, all major Western Han interpreters of cosmic portents were, first of all, scholars steeped in the Five Classics – especially in the *Spring and Autumn Annals*, the *Classic of Changes*, and the *Classic of Documents* – who could demonstrate how the Classics were eminently applicable to contemporary matters. This becomes clear with the extensive “Monograph on the Five Phases” (Wu xing zhi) that uses the framework of Five Phases cosmology to list and discuss the numerous auspicious and inauspicious omens from the Spring and Autumn period down to the Western Han. Its most prominent voices after the *Gongyang* scholar Dong Zhongshu are Jing Fang (77–37 BC), Sui Meng (originally Sui Hong, fl. ca 78 BC), Xiahou Sheng (fl. ca 70 BC), Liu Xiang and his son Liu Xin, Gu Yong (d. 8 BC), and Li Xun (fl. ca 5 BC). Each of these men, credited with impressive accounts of omen interpretation, was a specialist in one of the Classics. Consequently, during the first century BC, a large new corpus of texts submitted the Classics to an exegesis driven by cosmological and prognostic speculation. These esoteric writings, later labeled “prognostic apocrypha” (*chenwei*), were, however, subsequently excluded from the commentarial tradition and have survived only in fragments of quotation.

Over the first century BC, omen interpretation became a powerful way by which the court classicists asserted their authority toward the emperor. The imperial promotion of traditional learning had produced a new class of thousands of scholars, educated both privately and at the Imperial Academy, who came to occupy offices high and low in the central government. Within less than two centuries, the scholarly elite of early imperial China had thus positioned itself as a formidable, self-sustaining, and continuously reproducing power at the heart of the Chinese empire, organized around a body of supremely authoritative texts from antiquity. These texts were not under the emperor's control; on the contrary, they served to limit his actions and ambitions. The court-appointed *ru* classicist erudites had maneuvered themselves into a win-win situation: virtuoso insiders of imperial politics, their familiarity with the Classics provided them with the moral high ground and critical stance toward the emperor.

XIV. The status of the Classics

The texts around which their learning was arranged were the Five Classics. The term *wu jing*, a Western Han coinage, initially overlapped with the older one of the “six arts” (*liu yi*) that was still used in Liu Xiang’s imperial catalogue and the subsequent “Monograph on Arts and Writings.” At the time of the Stone Canal Pavilion discussions (51 BC), the canon of music – from the beginning likely a loose assembly of writings – had receded into the background, leaving the classics of *Changes*, *Documents*, *Poetry*, *Spring and Autumn Annals*, and *Ritual* as the foundation of court-sponsored *ru* classicist learning. The Five Classics were in many respects problematic and unwieldy: much of them was composed in terse archaic language that required commentary to become fully intelligible to a Han audience; they were transcribed into the new standard script and as such open to questions about authenticity and accuracy; each Classic gave rise to a number of competing exegetical traditions, some sponsored by the court, others not; and as presumably perfect texts, written and edited by the sages (especially Confucius, who in one way or another now became related to all of them), they embodied the unquestionable ideal of political and moral order. The imperial court, eager to draw political legitimacy and moral authority from the ancient writings, responded to these issues repeatedly.

The first move was the proscription of private book ownership by the Qin dynasty in 213 BC, following Chancellor Li Si’s argument that the *Classic of Poetry* and the *Classic of Documents* were used to denigrate present rulership. While the people outside the court were allowed to keep manuals on agriculture, divination and other technical subjects, only the erudites at court could study the Classics. The proscription, aimed at suppressing the “talk of the hundred intellectual lineages” (*baijia yu*), remained in place until 191 BC. Since Eastern Han times, the Confucian tradition has interpreted the decision of 213 BC as a wholesale destruction of classical learning and has further connected it to reports that, in 212 BC, the Qin had executed more than 460 scholars in the capital. This traditional account has served Confucian identity remarkably well, but there are several problems with it. First, no text before Sima Qian’s *Records of the Historian* mentions the execution, and no text before Wei Hong’s first-century AD preface to a (since lost) version of the *Classic of Documents* identifies the *ru* classicists as the victims of the execution. The earliest known source for the famous formula “burning the books and executing the *ru* classicists” (*fenshu kengru*) to condemn Qin cruelty and

anti-classicism is the preface to the forged Kong Anguo version of the *Classic of Documents* that emerged in AD 317. Second, the early sources report in unison that the Qin court employed erudites (*boshi*) for the study of the Classics, among them the *Documents* scholar Fu Sheng and the ritual expert Shusun Tong (fl. ca 209–195 BC). In 213 BC, the erudites were granted a monopoly to study, teach, and probably also edit the Classics; they also designed the imperial rituals and inscriptions. Those said to have triggered the First Emperor's ire that then purportedly led to the mass execution were two well-known "masters of methods" (*fangshi*) – that is, representatives of non-canonical learning – and no *ru* classicist scholar known by name is reported to have suffered under the Qin. Third, extensive references to the Classics, especially to the *Documents* and the *Poetry*, can be found in Qin and early Han official writing, suggesting the continued availability of these texts at court. Furthermore, quotations from the Classics in excavated manuscripts before and after the presumed bibliocaust show no difference in the degree of classical learning.

It therefore appears that the Qin court classicists were not the victims but, if anything, the beneficiaries of the proscription of private learning. Their stance was further strengthened in 136 BC when – in a move remarkably parallel to that of the Qin – Emperor Wu of the Han proclaimed the *ru* Classics as the sole objective of official learning. While erudites were appointed to each of the Five Classics, the learning of the "talk of the hundred intellectual lineages" was censored. As a group the *ru* erudites had meanwhile successfully maintained their presence at court, securing a ritual and textual continuity from the Qin through the Western Han. Recently excavated manuscripts, especially the bamboo slips from Zhangjiashan, have confirmed the same Qin–Han continuity also in the legal and administrative realm. Altogether, the traditional account of collapse and revival of classical learning seems at least greatly exaggerated if not largely a self-serving assertion by later generations of Confucians.

From the Qin through the Han, the officially appointed erudites were in charge of the Classics, controlling not only the interpretation but also the very text of the received canon in its different versions. The establishment of the Imperial Academy (*Taixue*) in 124 BC further solidified the status of the Classics. While most appointments in the central administration of the empire were still based on recommendation and inherited status, proficiency in at least one of the Five Classics was now officially promoted as a career path. The double quest for eloquent literary expression and political engagement, honed through the study of the classical texts and practiced in exegetical

writing as well as in the production of petitions, discursive essays, and other court documents, conjoined the interests of the imperial state and its classical scholars.

This is not to say that classical scholarship was always the exclusive domain of the imperial court. Well into Emperor Wu's reign, princely courts like those of Liu An in Huainan and Liu De in Hejian rivaled and sometimes surpassed the Chang'an court in the sponsorship of classical learning and literary production. Liu De, the patron of the *Mao Tradition*, was famous for his love (and physical possession) of old writings in pre-Qin script, and he nourished a culture, complete with its own group of erudites, that promoted classical ritualism and the study and performance of elegant orthodox music. Emperor Wu's energetic appropriation of the Classics at the imperial court may thus be understood as an attempt to gain control over the textual resources of traditional authority. It parallels his efforts to summon the literary talents and masters of political debate – two groups of eloquent speakers and writers that largely overlapped – from the southern princely courts to Chang'an. Both the study of the Classics and the performance of poetic rhetoric were directly tied to the emperor's quest for political legitimacy and cultural prestige. As noted above, poetic expositions like those attributed to Mei Sheng and Sima Xiangru turned explicitly to the Classics to underscore their message of moral edification.

Considering the imperial ambition to concentrate classical learning in the hands of the official erudites, it is remarkable that at no time during the Western Han was adherence to any particular exegesis enforced. When classical learning became the "official learning" (*guanxue*), and when its proponents turned from Warring States independent thinkers to Qin and Han court appointees, the study of each of the Five Classics was not reduced to a single tradition but continuously allowed for competing interpretations. These diverging teachings could each receive a chair at the Imperial Academy, which by the time of Emperor Ping was home to thirty erudites for the Five Classics, reportedly teaching more than three thousand students. We do not know how studying at the academy was organized, or how closely the official teachers interacted with their students. Yet it is clear that the promotion of official learning led to a flurry of discussions and writings on the Five Classics as well as to their application to political issues and matters of ritual representation. One result of these constant debates was the compilation of learned petitions, such as in the case of the Stone Canal Pavilion conference of 51 BC. Another outcome was an increasing number of written commentaries of various kinds, including works of word glosses, exegetical and narrative

traditions, illustrative anecdotes, and so-called “chapter-and-verse” (*zhangju*) commentaries on individual Classics that are said to have been excessively long and detailed, sometimes running to over a million words. Little is left of the many chapter-and-verse commentaries from late Western and then Eastern Han times, but the ones we still have – such as Wang Yi’s commentary on the *Verses of Chu* – do not seem to fit that pejorative characterization.

In addition to commentaries and the use of the Classics in literary composition and political argument, another aspect of late Western Han textual culture built around the Classics was the compilation of glossaries and dictionaries. The only extant glossary that presumably dates from pre-imperial times is *Approximating Elegance* (*Erya*), a text of probably late Warring States origins that is first mentioned in the *History of the Han* and quoted repeatedly in Eastern Han sources; its earliest known commentary was written by Guo Pu. *Approximating Elegance* was likely created as a collection of word glosses on the Classics; thus, in the *History of the Han*, the text was listed next to the *Classic of Filial Piety* (*Xiaojing*) and the *Analects* that in Western Han times both served as primers. It was treated as a canonical text from late Six Dynasties times and in the Song finally became one of the Thirteen Classics. Under the section “elementary learning” (*xiaoxue*), the “Monograph of Arts and Writings” contains entries of four other early lexicographic works that are lost: the *Scribe Zhou* (*Shi Zhou*), a text attributed to a Western Zhou official but almost certainly a late Warring States text; the *Eight Character Forms and Six Techniques* (*Bati liuji*) of unknown origins; the *Cang Jie* glossary, named after the legendary inventor of the script and attributed to the Qin chancellor Li Si; and the *Fan Jiang* by Sima Xiangru. In addition, it notes the existence of several other Qin and early glossaries that partially overlapped with the *Scribe Zhou* or were compiled into a larger *Cang Jie* of more than three thousand characters.

In late Western Han times, a new series of other lexicographic works appeared: the *Jijiu* by Shi You, director of the palace gates under Emperor Yuan; the *Yuanshang* attributed to Li Chang, court architect under Emperor Cheng; and several works by Yang Xiong. Yang compiled the dialect glossary *Regional Expressions* (*Fangyan*), also known under the title *Separate Graphs* (*Biezi*), the *Compendium of Glosses* (*Xunxuan*), the *Cang Jie Tradition* (*Cang Jie zhuan*), and the *Cang Jie Compendium of Glosses* (*Cang Jie xunxuan*). Except for the much longer *Regional Expressions* – a work still extant – all these glossaries are listed in the “Monograph” as rather short texts of a single bamboo bundle (*pian*) each. Following Yang, the palace attendant Du Lin compiled two more glossaries in the *Cang Jie* tradition.

With the exception of *Regional Expressions*, all these works were fundamentally concerned with two aspects of the Chinese script: first, the correct reading of pre-Qin classical texts and their “ancient,” that is, non-standardized character forms; and second, the mastery of the newly established official (clerical) script established under the Qin. In other words, the glossaries served both classical learning and the use of the script in the administration of the early empire – the two central uses of writing in the Qin and Western Han. Their accumulation toward the end of the Western Han, the concomitant imperial collection of books from around the empire, and Liu Xiang’s systematic account of the textual heritage all signal the beginning of a new era in the importance of the written text. It is precisely at this time that Liu Xin promoted the superiority of the *Zuo Tradition* over those of the *Gongyang* and *Guliang* on the grounds of an argument whose time had finally arrived: that the former text was written in “ancient script” while the latter two had only recently been transcribed from oral tradition.