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## Tropes of music and poetry

From Wudi (r. 141–87 BCE) to ca 100 CE

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In the present chapter, “rhetoric” will be used to denote not merely figures of speech and writing but also other sign systems of conspicuous articulation, in particular those of ritual display and musical performance. This wider use of the term is justified, indeed necessitated, by the interlocking relations between language, ritual, and music in Han times. Thus Han and later discussions of Han court poetry – especially the poetry of imperial entertainment and representation – were inextricably connected to those of ritual and music and shared the same sets of rhetorical tropes. Embracing both verbal and non-verbal expression, “rhetoric” in this sense corresponds largely with the Han notion of *wen zhang* 文章 as “patterned display.”<sup>1</sup>

In Han China the authorship of political, philosophical, and literary rhetoric rested with the small segment of the society that comprised highly educated men (and probably women) who served as officials or were otherwise connected to those holding political power. The audience of Han rhetorical practice was not the general public of the empire, nor the population of the capital, but primarily the imperial court. It further extended to some of the regional courts of the kings that assumed significant political and cultural stature during specific periods, at times even challenging the imperial court in its genuine domains of political legitimacy and cultural representation. At stake, as there had been since at least Zhanguo times, were the principal ideals of rulership, succession, the socioeconomic order, and representation of political authority. Although the figure of the ruler appeared as the ultimate addressee of all rhetoric, during certain periods – in particular when a child was placed on the throne – the presumed supreme power of the emperor was itself more rhetorical trope than reality. Thus, in different constellations under different reigns, the targets of rhetorical speech and counter-speech included not only the emperor and his closest advisers but also the evolving and complex groups of imperial relatives, learned statesmen, and influential scholars who operated in various salaried positions and informal capacities at the imperial court, from the center all the way to the margins.

Han rhetoric – comprising persuasive, epideictic, and representational modes of expression – was grounded in the mastery of historical precedent, cosmological speculation, ritual practice, and artful literary expression. Much of this knowledge

<sup>1</sup> For this understanding of *wen zhang*, see Kern, “Ritual, text, and the formation of the canon” (2001).

was found in the Five Classics and the body of texts that grew around them. It is through reference to these areas of prestigious traditional knowledge that imperial representation and rhetoric permeated the theory and practice of political, social, economic, and military order and action. In the present chapter, I discuss aspects of representation and rhetoric as manifested in the practices and discussions of music and poetry. To some extent, the historical developments in these areas coincide and indeed merge with developments in other forms of political expression, including those of material display, omen interpretation, and historiography. Larger political shifts went hand in hand with profound changes in cultural attitudes and in the development of court rhetoric. The final decades of the Western Han – that is, from around 30 BCE onward – were a particularly crucial period of change. Within some forty years – years of political decline and ultimately collapse – Han imperial culture redefined itself as based on the Five Classics and their learned exegesis, enshrining the remote past of the Zhou dynasty as the blueprint of cultural identity.<sup>2</sup> Influential officials attempted to reframe the rhetoric of music and poetry in terms of classical, text-based learning. The shifting manifestations of music and poetry were part and parcel of the much broader development that encompassed a range of mutually related phenomena: the gradual consolidation of the Five Classics; new procedures of their exegesis; works of lexicography;<sup>3</sup> a new model for writing history; the collection and collation of writings from across the empire; the compilation of a classified catalogue of the imperial library, entrusted to Liu Xiang 劉向 (79–8 BCE) in 26 BCE;<sup>4</sup> and, last but not least, the establishment of a powerful class of learned men that occupied the ranks of the civil (and to some extent military) administration, who were ready to remind a less-than-perfect emperor of his duties and failures as measured against the standards of the classical models.

**Material splendor and the trope of music**

An important aspect of this ideological consolidation resided in the moral ambivalence toward elegant speech, elaborate music, and profuse material display itself: by the end of Western Han, the lavish expressions of imperial sovereignty that had marked both court literature and state ritual, especially during the reign of Wudi (r. 141–87 BCE), were criticized and to some extent supplanted by a rhetoric of moderation purportedly rooted in the prescriptions of the classical texts of high antiquity. Thus, in 32 BCE, Kuang Heng 匡衡, chancellor (*cheng xiang* 丞相) 36–30 BCE, petitioned to abolish the densely ornamented “purple altar” to the cosmic deity Great Unity (Taiyi 太一) that Wudi had erected close to his summer palace at Ganquan 甘泉. When Kuang opposed the various features of embellishment as being not in accordance with antiquity, he gave account of the earlier court rhetoric of ritual splendor as much as he expressed what was to become the new standard of measured propriety:

<sup>2</sup> Lewis, *Writing and Authority in Early China* (1999), 325–32; Kern (2001); Nylan, “Calligraphy, the sacred text and test of culture” (1999a), and “Toward an archaeology of writing” (2005).

<sup>3</sup> Such as the *Fang yan* of Yang Xiong and items listed in *HS* 30, 1718.

<sup>4</sup> See Van der Loon, “On the transmission of Kuan-tzū” (1952), 358–66.

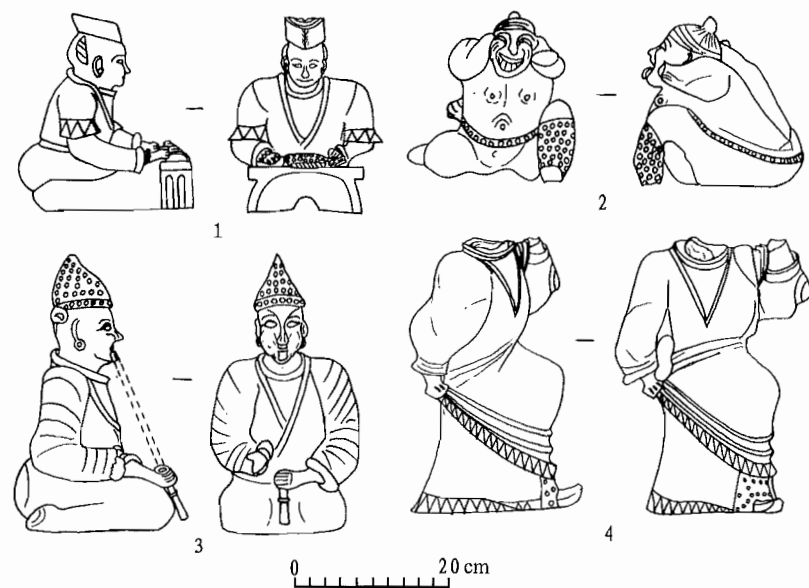


Figure 21.1. Sets of musicians found in a single tomb; from M19 Jiaole, Xingren County, Guizhou; late Eastern Han.

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 Subject has 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, is not appropriate to maintain.<sup>5</sup>

This proposal exemplifies the overall challenge that court classicists, especially during the reign of Chengdi (r. 33–7 BCE), posed to the official cults they had inherited from the period of Wudi. Basing themselves on a range of classical writings, in particular the *Documents* (*Shu* 書) and the ritual texts, these critics argued that Wudi's offerings to Grand Unity, Lord Earth (Houtu 后土), and the Five Cosmic Emperors (Wu di 五帝) had no precedent in antiquity and were excessive in expenditure and style.<sup>6</sup> Kuang Heng also suggested changes in the wording of Wudi's state sacrificial hymns (evidently still in use), replacing the rhetoric of lavish display with

<sup>5</sup> HS 25B, 1256. For Kuang Heng's reforms, see Loewe, *Crisis and Conflict in Han China 104 BC to AD 9* (1974), 154–92. It is unclear whether “female musicians” refers to live performers or to their pictorial or sculptural representation.

<sup>6</sup> On the sacrifices to cosmic deities under Wudi, see Bujard, *Le Sacrifice au Ciel dans la Chine ancienne: Théorie et pratique sous les Han occidentaux* (2000), and Ord, “State sacrifices in the Former Han dynasty according to the official histories” (1967).

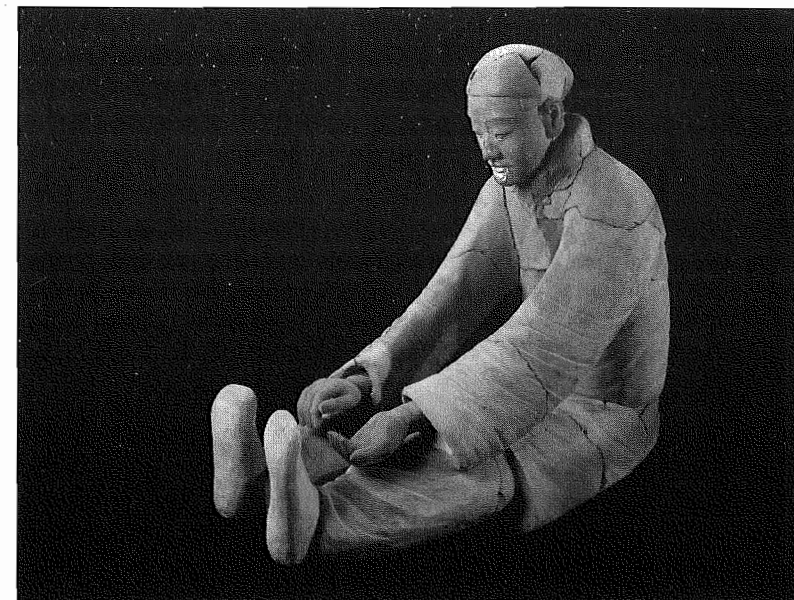


Figure 21.2. Seated terracotta musician. H 90 cm, from pit K0007, tomb of the First Qin Emperor. The figure is thought to have been playing a stringed instrument such as a zither, named yijia.

one of classical sincerity: in text seven of the “Songs for the Suburban Sacrifices” (“Jiaosi ge” 郊祀歌), he asked to change the line “The simurgh carriage [glitters with] dragon scales” to “[We] choose the attainment of blessings”; in text eight, he proposed “Respectfully [We] follow the old statutes” for “The axe-patterned embroideries are spread out in circles.”<sup>7</sup> Here, as with the critique of the imperial altars, Han cultural identity was at stake, including the system of imperial representation and the means to seek political legitimacy. Although ostentatious display hardly disappeared from the imperial court, the purported standards of antiquity were invoked to reject “modern” (*jin* 今) excess.

Kuang Heng's critique of the sacrificial hymns was part both of his larger proposal for ritual reform and of the contemporaneous discussion of music. Since mid-Zhanguo times at the latest, music had been a central theme in reflections on human emotion, morality, ritual propriety, and social order. Both the *Shiji* and the *Han shu* devote considerable space to the discussion of music and are united in their praise of elegant classical music and their condemnation of the notorious “new tunes” (*xin sheng* 新聲, *xin yin* 新音) that in various late Zhanguo and early imperial sources are equated with “lascivious tunes” (*yin sheng* 淫聲), the “tunes of Zheng and Wei” (*Zheng Wei zhi sheng* 鄭衛之聲) or even those of a “perishing state” (*wang guo zhi sheng* 亡國之聲).<sup>8</sup> With Kuang Heng, Yang Xiong 揚雄 (53 BCE–18 CE) and

<sup>7</sup> HS 22, 1057–8. On the “Jiaosi ge”, see Kern, *Die Hymnen der chinesischen Staatsopfer* (1997), 174–303, and “In praise of political legitimacy” (1996).

<sup>8</sup> Diény, *Aux Origines de la poésie classique en Chine* (1968), 17–40.

others, this classical trope of political rhetoric assumed new force in late Western Han times.<sup>9</sup> One text from this period, apparently the fragment of a memorial, is included in the *Han shu* “Monograph on Ritual and Music” (*Li yue zhi* 禮樂志) where it immediately follows the texts of Wudi’s state sacrificial hymns. Seamlessly integrated into the *Han shu* narrative without any indication of its authorship, the text charges that under Wudi, the court had deliberately put aside the elegant classical music and that

today, the poems and songs of the suburban altars and ancestral temple are not devoted to the matters of the progenitors . . . Within the palace are the talents from the women’s quarters, and outside the palace is the Bureau of Music of the imperial hunting park – they all spread the tunes of Zheng across the court!<sup>10</sup>

The explicit reference to “today” (*jin* 今) dates the statement to a time when the Bureau of Music, in charge of the state sacrificial hymns, was still in existence – that is, some time before 7 BCE, when it was finally abolished by imperial edict: “The tunes of Zheng are licentious and bring disorder to music. This is what the sage kings [of antiquity] renounced, [thus] may the Bureau of Music be abandoned!”<sup>11</sup>

Since its inception in Zhanguo times, the rhetorical trope of the “tunes of Zheng” had been used to denote music that was “new” (*xin* 新) in the strongly pejorative sense of deviating from the purported standards of antiquity. It is in this particular sense that Wudi’s “Songs for the Suburban Sacrifices” were “new tunes,” or “tunes of Zheng,” in the view of late Western Han classicists. The eighth of these songs – one of the two texts to which Kuang Heng later introduced changes – had even self-referentially claimed to be just this: “these new tones” (*ci xin yin* 茲新音), giving emphatic expression to the cultural and political confidence of the court of Wudi. In their diction the sacrificial hymns were indeed close to the literary fashion of the day, in many lines recalling the expansive epideictic *fu* 賦 of Sima Xiangru 司馬相如 (179–117 BCE) as well as the “Nine Songs” (“Jiu ge” 九歌), “The Great Summons” (“Da zhao” 大招) of the *Chu ci* and other third- or second-century BCE poems associated with the culture of Chu 楚 in the south.<sup>12</sup> Thus the closing lines of the first hymn evoke the description of pleasures in “The Great Summons” while also sharing Sima Xiangru’s sensual vocabulary:

Flocks of beauties form their lines,  
relaxing in rare and voluptuous patterns;  
with faces resembling rush blossoms –

<sup>9</sup> This is reflected in the *Liji* (*Yue ji* 樂記) and the largely parallel *Shiji* (*Yue shu* 樂書), which at least in part seem to date from late Western Han times; see Kern, “A note on the authenticity and ideology of *SJ* 24, ‘The Book on Music’” (1999).

<sup>10</sup> *HS* 22, 1070–1. The actual location of the Bureau of Music (*Yuefu*) – whether inside the main imperial hunting park (Shanglin) or in a second park – is unclear; see Masuda Kiyohide, *Gafu no rekishiteki kenkyū* (1975), 16–22; Matsumoto Yukio, “‘Jōrin gafu’ no shozaichi ni tsuite” (1993); Knechtges, “The emperor and literature: Emperor Wu of the Han” (1994a), 62–3.

<sup>11</sup> *HS* 11, 335. For the history of the Bureau of Music see Suzuki Shūji, *Kan Gi shi no kenkyū* (1967), 90–115; Loewe (1974), 193–210; Masuda (1975), 16–31; Zhang Yongxin, *Han yuefu yanjiu* (1992), 45–81; Birrell, “Mythmaking and Yüeh-fu” (1989).

<sup>12</sup> Kern (1997) 291–2; note also that the director of the Bureau of Music under Wudi, Li Yannian 李延年 (ca 140–87 BCE) – the brother of Wudi’s favorite consort – is personally credited with “new” (*xin* 新) and “modified” (*bian* 變) tunes, see *SJ* 125, 3195; *HS* 93, 3725, 97A, 3951.

unaccounted are those of sought-after grace.  
Dressed in resplendent patterns,  
entwined in misty gauze,  
drawing satin and batiste,  
dangling pearls and nephrite.  
Embraced by a propitious night,  
angelica and thoroughwort send off their fragrance.  
Insouciant, lissome, and carefree –  
we offer auspicious cups.<sup>13</sup>

From a late Western Han perspective, it did not help that Sima Xiangru was believed to have been among the composers of the hymns;<sup>14</sup> the classicists’ critique of the musical, literary, and material display of Wudi’s reign encompassed not only the state sacrificial hymns but also Sima Xiangru’s elaborate *fu* (see below). Perhaps even worse, Wudi’s court music had also included foreign elements that by definition did not accord with the elegant standard (*ya* 雅) of antiquity.<sup>15</sup> Altogether, the arguments that Kuang Heng and others established during the final decades of Western Han became the standard judgment of Wudi’s music for all later times.<sup>16</sup>

As the “tunes of Zheng” or “new tunes” served as a topos that could be applied to any music considered improper, so was its opposite, the “music of antiquity” (*gu yue* 古樂), largely a rhetorical trope. While other Zhanguo sources occasionally mention some of the old dances and music titles, the *Lüshi chunqiu* 呂氏春秋 shows the first, if still inchoate, attempt toward a genealogy of the “music of antiquity” by pairing individual titles with specific culture heroes.<sup>17</sup> Only in late Western Han (or later?) apocrypha associated with the (lost) *Classic of Music*, and then in the Eastern Han texts *Han shu*, *Bai hu tong* 白虎通, and *Fengsu tongyi* 風俗通義, do we recognize a fully fledged history of ancient music, where each title is assigned to a sage from the past, beginning with the Yellow Emperor and ending with Zhou Gong.<sup>18</sup> None of these musical pieces or dance forms still existed in Eastern Han – in the texts that paired them with the genealogy of the sages, they were but a timeless fiction that correlated the history of good rule in antiquity with the history of ancient music.<sup>19</sup> That this music was beyond actual experience only enhanced the

<sup>13</sup> *HS* 22, 1052; Kern (1997), 187–98.

<sup>14</sup> *HS* 22, 1045, 93, 3725; Sima Xiangru died in 117 BCE whereas the state sacrificial hymns were probably composed only from 113 BCE onward, see Kern (1997), 59–61, 179–81.

<sup>15</sup> Lǐ Yannian is said to have introduced Central Asian tunes to the military music; see *HHS* 47, 1578, n. 4; *Jin shu* 23, 715; Guo Maoqian (ca 1126), *Yuefu shiji* 21, 309. *Ya* – routinely interchangeable with *xia* 夏 – denotes both “elegant/standard” and “Chinese.”

<sup>16</sup> See e.g. Liu Xie (ca 467–ca 522), *Wenxin diaolong*, 7, 235; Shen Yue (441–513) in *Song shu* 19, 550, or the monograph on music in *Sui shu* 13, 286. Wang Xianqian (1842–1917), *Han shu buzhu* 22.25b, has related this criticism explicitly to hymn no. 8.

<sup>17</sup> *Lüshi chunqiu* 5 (“Gu yue”), 284–6. By comparison, the *Xunzi* contains no such concept, and the *Zhouli* and *Liji* mention only some of the ancient titles but without linking them to specific sages. See Kern (1997), 33–8.

<sup>18</sup> *HS* 22, 1038; Chen Li (1809–69), *Bai hu tong* 3, 100–104; *Fengsu tongyi* 6, 217; for the apocryphal Treatise on Music (*Yuewei* 樂緯) in this context, see *Chuxue ji* 15, 366.

<sup>19</sup> The reality of Eastern Han court music is difficult to grasp; it is only clear that most of the Western Han hymns dating from Wudi’s time were no longer used. Cai Yong (133–192) notes “four classes of Han [ritual] music” for different (sacrificial, military, banquet) purposes; in *Sui shu* 13, 286, these are dated to the time of Mingdi (r. 57–75). For the available fragmentary information, see Wu Shuping, *Dongguan Hanji jiaozhu* (1987) 5, 159; *HHS* 25, 1201; *HHS* (tr.) 5, 3131–32; *Tong dian* 141, 3595; Mansvelt Beck, *The Treatises of Later Han* (1990), 41–6; Kern (1997), 51–2, 61–2, 81–2, 87–8.

force and flexible applicability of the rhetorical trope.<sup>20</sup> To the court classicists, the “music of antiquity,” which purportedly embodied the supreme governance of the sage kings, was thus a powerful image to be evoked in discussions of good rulership. The emperor, meanwhile, despite never living up to the purported ideals of antiquity, could seek political legitimacy from showing his best efforts to emulate the sagacity of old.

### Songs and historiography

The theme of music in court rhetoric extended further in several directions, among them literature, historiography, and omen interpretation. All three domains come together in one particular trope of Han historical writing, namely the purportedly ancient custom of an enlightened ruler who sent out messengers to collect folk songs. The *Shiji* – and much more frequently the *Han shu* and later sources – contains verses, including children’s ditties and proverbs, that are attributed to the common folk and said to have been gathered at court.<sup>21</sup> The *Han shu* mentions an ancient “office of collecting songs” (*cai shi zhi guan* 采詩之官) through which “the [Zhou] king observed the local customs, learned about achievements and failures, and [thus was able to] examine and rectify himself.”<sup>22</sup> While the trope occurs repeatedly in Eastern Han and later writings,<sup>23</sup> its historical accuracy is not beyond doubt,<sup>24</sup> as no reliably dated Zhanguo or Western Han text advances similar claims. Invariably, the royal messengers, equipped with wooden clappers (*muduo* 木鐸), are said to have been sent out to proclaim the laws to the people, not to solicit their songs; they acted as the voice of the king, speaking to his people, not the other way around.<sup>25</sup> Thus the idea of collecting folk songs that served as a critical mirror for the ruler, while likely to have been developed from older origins,<sup>26</sup> appears to have

<sup>20</sup> Regrettably, this also means that archaeological finds of musical instruments cannot be brought to bear upon the rhetoric of the “music of antiquity.” Furthermore, while it is well possible that the pictorial representations of musical performances in (mainly Eastern) Han tombs might tell a different story about the rhetoric of ritual, available information has so far been insufficient to argue the case either way. This is particularly true because, as discussed in Chapter 2 of the present volume, the most lavishly decorated – and perhaps rhetorically most ambitious – Eastern Han tombs had their pictorial representations not carved into stone but painted on wood panels and silk hangings, all of which have disappeared without trace.

<sup>21</sup> *SJ* 49, 1983; 54, 2031; 107, 2847; 118, 3080; *HS* 27B (1), 1395–96; 39, 2021; 44, 2144; 52, 2384; 72, 3077; 77, 3248; 78, 3290; 79, 3305; 84, 3440; 87B, 3584; 90, 3674; 92, 3707; 93, 3727; 93, 3730; 94A, 3755; 98, 4024; 99A, 4086; *Qian Han ji* 15.1b, 2a; and Lu Qinli, *Xian Qin Han Wei Jin Nanbeichao shi* (1984), 1, 128–43.

<sup>22</sup> *HS* 22, 1045; 24A, 1123; 30, 1708, 1756.

<sup>23</sup> See e.g. notes by Zheng Xuan (127–200) in *Shi jing* 1A.7a, Du Yu (222–84) in *Zuo zhuan* (Xiang 14) 32.20a.

<sup>24</sup> Yao Daye, *Han yuefu xiaolun* (1984), 1–11; Zhang Yongxin, *Han yuefu yanjiu* (1992), 57–64; Birrell (1989).

<sup>25</sup> See *Zhouli* 3.10b (“Xiao zai”), 3.21a (“Gong zheng”), 11.12b–13a (“Xiao si tu”), 11.18a (“Xiang shi”), 35.6b–7a (“Xiao si kou” and “Shi shi”), 36.24a (“Si xuan shi”); *Liji zhengyi* 10.15a (“Tan gong xia”), 15.5a (“Yue ling”), 31.11a–b (“Ming tang wei”). See also Kern, “The poetry of Han historiography” (2004). In *Analecets* 3/24 Kongzi himself is hailed as Heaven’s “wooden clapper” to instruct the world; see also the commentaries in *Lunyu* (*Shi san jing zhushu*) 3.14a.

<sup>26</sup> In the context of remonstrating with the ruler, the above-mentioned passage in *Zuo zhuan* 32.20a (Xiang 14) cites an earlier “Documents of Xia” (*Xia shu*) text mentioning messengers with wooden clappers who in the first month of spring roam the roads; this quotation was then likely copied into the spurious “ancient-script” *Documents* chapter “Yin zheng.” The *Zuo zhuan* passage contains no reference to the collection of songs, although remonstrations, gathered from the populace, may well have been delivered in poetic form.

assumed full force only in Eastern Han times. As expressed in the first-century “Great Preface” (“Da xu” 大序) to the *Mao Tradition of the Odes* (*Mao Shi zhuan* 毛詩傳), the poetic vox populi was imagined as truthfully and authoritatively reflecting the state of the realm.<sup>27</sup>

From this perspective, the production of song was not arbitrary or subjective but arose involuntarily – indeed, as part of the workings of the cosmos – from the human mind stirred by outside events, and reflected the people’s collective true feeling and judgment. One may well doubt that these songs and ditties indeed originated from the common people and were then faithfully submitted to the court. Be this as it may, they were also (if not primarily) rhetorical devices of early imperial – especially Eastern Han – historical imagination, and as such based on powerful precedent in the late Zhanguo narratives of the *Zuo zhuan* 左傳 and *Guoyu* 國語.<sup>28</sup> Songs and sayings served to represent authentic voices of political judgment that were internal to their own historical situations, endowing history with the capacity to reveal its own evaluation.<sup>29</sup> Only rarely does the historian reveal his presence, as Ban Gu 班固 (32–92 CE) does on the occasion of a song that reportedly circulated among the populace during the reign of Chengdi, foretelling the fall of the Western Han:

Irregular paths destroy the good field,  
slandering mouths bring disorder among fine men.  
The cinnamon tree blossoms without bearing fruit,  
a yellow sparrow nests in its top.  
In the past it was the envy of men,  
today it is what men pity.<sup>30</sup>

From an explicitly post-Western Han perspective, the *Han shu* decodes the text along the color symbolism of Five Phases cosmology: blossoming red, the cinnamon tree symbolizes the Han ruling house; bearing no fruit refers to the absence of an heir; the yellow sparrow presages Wang Mang 王莽 (r. 9–23 CE) who would later declare yellow the color of his rule. Thus the Han are “what men pity.” Through this explanation, the song turns into a judgment of Chengdi, whose failures signal the beginning of the end of the dynasty. The same rhetorical device is applied to another anonymous song from Chengdi’s reign. As the relatives of recently executed criminals bewail their dead,<sup>31</sup> their song contributes to Ban Gu’s condemnation of Chengdi: the situation in Chang’an had gotten out of control because “the emperor was idle in attending to his government, and his honored consorts were arrogant and unrestrained.”<sup>32</sup>

<sup>27</sup> *Shijing* 1A.7a; also in *Liji* 37.4a–b and *SJ* 24, 1181. The preface to the *Mao shi* – recognized as a separate text and labeled “Great Preface” only by Zhu Xi (1130–1200) – is generally attributed to Wei Hong (mid-first century CE), who is also the author of a lost preface to the “Ancient Script” (*guwen* 古文) *Documents*.

<sup>28</sup> For Han historiography, see Kern (2004); for Zhanguo writings see Schaberg, “Song and the historical imagination in early China” (1999).

<sup>29</sup> This rationale also underlies the extensive speeches in *Zuo zhuan*; see Schaberg, *A Patterned Past: Form and Thought in Early Chinese Historiography* (2001).

<sup>30</sup> *HS* 27B (1), 1396. <sup>31</sup> *HS* 90, 3674.

<sup>32</sup> *HS* 90, 3763. “Honored consorts” probably refers to Zhao Feiyan and Zhao Zhaoyi, but not to Ban Jieyu, great aunt of Ban Gu’s father, Ban Biao.

The *Han shu* reports the appearance of anonymous songs as it does for natural portents. Both were considered ominous warnings to the emperor, and both required the active involvement of court officials who “collected” songs or “reported” omens and interpreted them to the emperor, confronting him with irrefutable evidence of his lack of virtue. Moreover, the *Han shu* registers both songs and omens with particular frequency for the final reigns of Western Han.<sup>33</sup>

### Fu

As the principal author of the *Han shu* as well as the imperially commissioned compiler of the *White Tiger Hall Discussions* (*Baihu tong*) of 79–80 CE, Ban Gu – son of the eminent official Ban Biao 班彪 (3–54) and one of the most illustrious writers of the first century<sup>34</sup> – had ample opportunity to advance a classicist alternative to the Western Han court rhetoric of verbal and material display. The same is true for his engagement with the *fu*, the dominant and most complex genre of Han rhetoric and poetry.<sup>35</sup> The *Han shu*’s “Monograph on Arts and Letters” (*Yi wen zhi* 藝文志) – largely the abbreviated version of the catalogue of the imperial library by Liu Xiang 劉向 (79–8 BCE) and Lu Xin 劉歆 (46 BCE–23 CE), including their judgments on the literary tradition<sup>36</sup> – remarks that the “great *ru*” Xun Qing 荀卿 (author of the *Xunzi* 荀子, ?335–?238 BCE) and Qu Yuan 屈原 (fourth–third centuries BCE), embracing the spirit of the ancient *Odes* (*Shi* 詩), had used the *fu* to respond to the political decline of their time. Yet thereafter the genre had declined into excessively ornate language incapable of moral reprimand. In this devastating critique of the *fu* as it had matured during Wudi’s reign, Ban Gu accepted the revisionist stance of Liu Xin and especially Yang Xiong. The latter, originally himself a prominent author of *fu*, formulated his attack on the *fu* in his autobiography, which Ban Gu included in the *Han shu*, and in his *Fayan* 法言.<sup>37</sup> According to Yang Xiong, the purpose of the *fu* was “indirect admonition” (*feng* 諷), but it achieved just the opposite by using “extremely gorgeous and lavish phrases”: with the ornate language overpowering the matter, “it is clear that the *fu* only encourages [further excess] and does not restrain.”<sup>38</sup> Contrasting the *fu* as a recent literary genre to *fu* as the ancient poetic mode of exposition, Yang Xiong concluded that “the *fu* of the *Odes* poets are gorgeous and provide standards; the *fu* of the epideictic poets are gorgeous and lead

to excess.”<sup>39</sup> Such criticism was based on a double assumption: that the *fu* author acted as a politically and morally inspired official, and that his literary compositions were primarily intended to admonish the ruler.

However, Yang Xiong’s narrow emphasis on the monitory function of the *fu* did not fully capture the rhetorical richness and moral ambiguity of the genre as it had developed during Wudi’s reign. In its epideictic form, the *fu* was formally defined by the irregular alternation of rhymed and unrhymed passages that maintained a lively and varied rhythm of speech; by the overall length – often hundreds of lines – of an individual composition; by exhaustive catalogues of various phenomena; and by an abundance of rare words and hyperbolic descriptions as well as alliterative, rhyming, and reduplicative binomes. In addition, many *fu* were given a dialogical setting that mimicked an actual debate. The resulting texture of aural splendor was both panegyric and monitory, simultaneously granting pleasure and edification. Engaged in copious description and the composition of intricate linguistic sound patterns, the authors and reciters of the *fu* at Wudi’s court were primarily considered entertainers, not political advisers; no instance is recorded of a talented *fu* writer being promoted to high rank because of his literary abilities.

An excellent example of the earlier epideictic style is Sima Xiangru’s “*Fu* on the Hunting Excursion of the Son of Heaven” (“*Tianzi youlie fu*” 天子游獵賦),<sup>40</sup> in which the spectacle of the hunt described becomes also the spectacle of verbal virtuosity. An account of supreme imperial pleasure, the description of the hunt is itself turned into an artifact that re-creates this pleasure as text. In a cascade of rare and euphonic phrases, this, by far the largest part of the composition, shows the emperor enacting a carnage of truly cosmic dimensions, indulging in the delights of music (including the notorious “tunes of Zheng and Wei”), and being consumed by the pleasures of erotic desire – until the text suddenly breaks off:

Thereupon, in the midst of drinking and the rapture of music, the Son of Heaven becomes dazed and contemplative, as if having lost something. He says, “Alas! This is too extravagant! I spend my leisure time with [the sensual pleasures of] watching and listening, waste the days with nothing to do! In accordance with [the cosmic cycles of] the Way of Heaven, I slaughter and slay, and from time to time take rest and repose at the present place. I am afraid that later generations become dissolute and dissipated; if they proceed on this path, they will not turn back. This is not how to create a beginning and hand down a tradition to continuing successors.”<sup>41</sup>

Following his reflection, delivered in the diction of classical austerity, the emperor ends the feast and gives a solemn speech in which he extols the virtues of good rulership, restraint, and selfless care for the folk. Having fully savored all sensual pleasures only to find ultimate delight in ritual propriety, he turns into a sage: roaming the world of the hallowed classics, submitting himself to modesty and morality, and serving as a supreme model for other rulers. The same pattern of a sov-

<sup>39</sup> *Fayan* 2/27 (“*Wu zi*”).

<sup>40</sup> The text, preserved under this title in the biographies of Sima Xiangru in the *Shiji* and *Han shu*, comprises what Xiao Tong (501–31) divides into “*Fu* on Sir Vacuous” (“*Zixu fu*”) and “*Fu* on the Imperial Park” (“*Shanglin fu*”). In *Wen xuan* 7, 348 and 8, 361.

<sup>41</sup> *Wen xuan* 8, 376. For the entire text in its two parts as included in the *Wen xuan* see Knechtges, *Wen xuan*, Vol. 2 (1987), 53–113.

<sup>33</sup> See Bielenstein, “An interpretation of the portents in the Ts’ien-Han-Shu” (1950); Eberhard, “The political function of astronomy and astronomers in Han China” (1957); Sivin, “Cosmos and computation in early Chinese mathematical astronomy” (1969); Kern, “Religious anxiety and political interest in Western Han omen interpretation” (2000b).

<sup>34</sup> See Knechtges, “To praise the Han” (1990).

<sup>35</sup> For the issues discussed in the present section, and extensive references, see Kern, “Western Han aesthetics and the genesis of the *fu*” (2003b) and “The ‘Biography of Sima Xiangru’ and the question of the *fu* in Sima Qian’s *Shiji*” (2003a). For excellent recent accounts of the Han *fu*, see also Gong Kechang, *Studies on the Han Fu* (1997), and Guo Weisen and Xu Jie, *Zhongguo cifu fazhan shi* (1996).

<sup>36</sup> Liu Xin, in turn, had abbreviated the original catalogue compiled by his father, Liu Xiang.

<sup>37</sup> *HS* 87A, B, *Fayan* 2/25–47 (“*Wu zi*”); Knechtges, “*Exemplary Sayings*, Chapter 2” (1994b), 530–3; Doeringer, “Yang Hsiung and his formulation of a classicism” (1971), 119–79. The authoritative study of Yang Xiong’s theory and practice of the *fu* remains Knechtges, *The Han Rhapsody* (1976). For Yang’s rhetoric beyond the *fu*, see Chapter 22 of the present volume.

<sup>38</sup> *HS* 87B, 3575, *Fayan* 2/25, 34 (“*Wu zi*”).

ereign's initial indulgence and subsequent transformation appears in Mei Sheng's 枚乘 (d. 141 BCE) "Seven Stimuli" ("Qi fa" 七發) and "The Great Summons," of the *Chu ci* with the latter text likewise shifting from exuberant representation of spectacle and pleasure to soberly phrased moral contemplation. In each case, the sovereign depicted in the text serves as a mirror to the ultimate addressee of the rhetorical performance: the actual ruler who is entertained with extravagant fantasies and verbal pleasures, eulogized for his profound insights, and admonished to follow the path of ideal sovereignty. By contrast, claiming that when the *fu* finally "turns to the rectifying message, the reader has already missed it,"<sup>42</sup> Yang Xiong argued that the *fu* failed not because of its lack of moral intent (which he took for granted),<sup>43</sup> but because the epideictic and entertaining aspects of rhetoric overwhelmed its monitory purpose, leaving the emperor blissfully elated when he should have felt sincerely admonished.

Yang's concern about the fundamental ambiguity of powerful rhetoric – verbal artistry with the potential either to "encourage" or "restrain" moral excess – was a well-worn trope within the rhetorical tradition.<sup>44</sup> During the final decline of Western Han and the brief reign of Wang Mang, it served Yang Xiong and other classicists to redefine court rhetoric and display. As Kuang Heng referred to the *Documents* and ritual canons – now also including the *Rituals of Zhou* (*Zhouli* 周禮) – in order to denounce the purported excesses of the state sacrifices, music, and hymns, Liu Xin and Yang Xiong invoked the *Odes* to challenge the *fu*. Moreover, when Liu Xin and Yang Xiong advocated poetic admonition in the purported spirit of the ancient *Odes*, their view reflected the didacticism of the *Mao Tradition* – itself a partisan classicist reading of the *Odes* that gained imperial sanction only during the reign of Pingdi (r. 1 BCE–6 CE).

Writing in the first century of Eastern Han, Ban Gu was able to build on these developments in various ways. His use of song in the *Han shu* reflected the notion of poetry and music expressed in the "Records of Music" (*Yue ji* 樂記) and "Great Preface."<sup>45</sup> His depiction of ritual music in both the *Han shu* and the *White Tiger Hall Discussions* enshrined the "music of antiquity" as a supreme rhetorical trope of ideal rulership vis-à-vis the alleged Western Han decline into "new tunes." And finally, his acceptance of Liu Xin's and Yang Xiong's verdict on the *fu* became manifest not only in the *Yiwen zhi* but also in his own practice as a *fu* writer. In his two-part "Fu on the Two Capitals" ("Liang du fu" 兩都賦) on Western Han Chang'an and Eastern Han Luoyang, Ban Gu adopted the art of mimetic description for his own purposes. Contrasting the excessive luxury of Chang'an with the restrained display of Luoyang, he shifted his literary style from the ornate and hyperbolic

(for the former) to the classical and simple (for the latter).<sup>46</sup> Ban Gu thus assimilated a central rhetorical device of the earlier *fu* into an altogether new rhetoric of literary composition that claimed to have its ultimate standard of expression in the classics. Of even greater importance, the writings by Ban Gu and other highly esteemed Eastern Han court scholars transformed the *fu* from a genre that offered sumptuous aural pleasure to one that expressed and granted the delights of profound learning, thereby further elevating the status of its illustrious author as an exemplary official in imperial service. The enormous prestige of the "Fu on the Two Capitals," of Ban Gu as both poet and scholar-official, and of his classicist reformulation of earlier rhetoric, was once and for all confirmed when Xiao Tong 蕭統 (501–31) placed the work at the beginning of his *Selections of Refined Literature*.

<sup>46</sup> Gong Kechang (1997), 264–5; Knechtges (1990).

<sup>42</sup> *HS* 87B, 3575.

<sup>43</sup> The belief that Sima Xiangru's *fu* were meant to admonish is also reflected in his biographies in *SJ* 117 and *HS* 57. Of these the *Shiji* biography is most likely a later work, being based on the earlier version of the *Han shu*, which in turn contains the views of Yang Xiong; see Kern (2003a).

<sup>44</sup> As in Su Qin's (fourth-century BCE) famous – if likely fictional – speech to Qin Hui Wang (r. 337–311 BCE), in which he pulled all the stops of persuasive speech to warn against the confusion emanating from skillful rhetoric; see Zhu Zugeng, *Zhanguo ce jizhu huikao* (1985), 118–19. Concerns about the dangers of manipulative rhetoric are, of course, older; see e.g. *Laozi* 老子 81 or *Analec*s 15.11 and 17.18.

<sup>45</sup> *Li ji*, *juan* 37–9 ("Yue ji"); *Shi jing* 1A.1a–20a.

# *China's Early Empires*

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