
KERN, Martin and Stephen Owen, eds. *Qu Yuan and the Chuci: New Approaches. Studies in the History of Chinese Texts, vol. 15. Leiden: Brill, 2024. Pp. 481.**

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We don't know a hell of a lot about Qu Yuan 屈原. In 1922, Hu Shi 胡適 (1891–1962) published an incisive critique of the traditional understanding of Qu Yuan and the internal contradictions of his biography, summing up his arguments with a brilliant image: “Qu Yuan was a composite figure, a kind of ‘arrow-target-type’ personage” 屈原是一種複合物，是一種「箭垛式」的人物。¹ The “arrow target” metaphor evokes the way that numerous, often mutually contradictory, legends seem to have gathered around the persona of Qu Yuan, including the putative authorship of a huge literary corpus, and culminating in his divinization and worship in the Dragon Boat Festival.² Hu is explicit that he is not denying Qu Yuan's existence wholesale, since he affirms that Qu Yuan may have been the author of some of the poems in the *Chuci* 楚辭 (Elegies of Chu) anthology. But the elaborate record of Qu Yuan's counsel to the kings of Chu and ultimate suicide, as presented by Sima Qian 司馬遷 (ca. 145–86 BCE) in the *Shiji* 史記 (Records of the grand scribe), can hardly serve as an adequate basis for reading the rich contents of the anthology as a whole. Instead, Hu argues, we need to examine the literary value (*wenxue jiazhi* 文學價值) of the anthology for its own sake. Hu Shi's argument is at times slapdash; for instance, his claim that no loyal minister could have existed before the Han dynasty is self-evidently wrong, and the fact that the *Shiji*

* The suggestions and insights of Lucas Klein and Travis Chok Meng Chan have greatly improved this review.

1 Hu Shi, “Du *Chuci*” 讀《楚辭》，rpt. in *Hu Shi wencun erji* 胡適文存二集 (Beijing: Waiwen chubanshe, 2013), 1:141. Originally published in *Dushu zazhi* 讀書雜誌 1 (Sep. 3, 1922): 2–3.

2 The best study in English of Qu Yuan's cultural and political mystique remains Laurence A. Schneider, *A Madman of Ch'u: The Chinese Myth of Loyalty and Dissent* (Berkeley, Calif.: University of California Press, 1980).

biography contains inconsistencies does not in itself constitute proper grounds to reject its contents wholesale.³ Nonetheless, he established a modern critical framework for reading the *Chuci* that stands up well today. The issue is not so much that the biography is unreliable, as that none of the historical sources available shed light directly on the *composition* of the poems in the *Chuci*. Thus, an understanding of the “Lisao” 離騷 (Sublimating sorrow) and other masterworks in the anthology needs to begin with careful reading of the texts themselves, in the manner of New Criticism.⁴

Another way to put this is that the study of the *Chuci*, even if it must begin with Qu Yuan, needs to pass through the figure of Song Yu 宋玉 (3rd century BCE). If Qu Yuan is a target, Song Yu is more like an empty space, with no biography to speak of. Song Yu is something like Foucault’s author function in its purest form, a name attached a complex assortment of poems: the “Nine Phases” (Jiubian 九辨), “Summons to the Soul” (Zhaohun 招魂), and a large number of *fu* 賦 poems.⁵ And yet precisely because Song Yu represents a distillation of late Warring States and Western Han literariness, liberated from historical context, he also presents a useful image of how Qu Yuan himself was perceived. “Nine Phases,” which was placed second only to “Lisao” in one early version of the anthology,⁶ and was perhaps the single piece in the anthology most closely studied and beloved by premodern literati, is an enticing, repetitive plaint from the point of view of an ordinary person, not an

3 See the careful rebuttal by Wen Honglong 溫洪隆, “Chongping ‘Qu Yuan—jianduo renwu’ lun” 重評「屈原——箭垛人物」論, *Huazhong shifan daxue xuebao (Zhaxue shehui kexue ban)* 1985.5: 43–51.

4 I have made my own effort in this direction already with my translation of the anthology as Williams, *Elegies of Chu: An Anthology of Early Chinese Poetry* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2022).

5 In addition to four *fu* and one dialogue with the King of Chu in the *Wenxuan* 文選 anthology, and six *fu* in the *Guwenyuan* 古文苑, he also appears in the Han manuscript excavated from Yinqueshan 銀雀山 in 1972. On this piece see Xing Wen 邢文, “‘Tang Le’ canjian yu Zhanguo sanfu” 〈唐勒〉殘簡與戰國散賦, *Jianbo* 1 (2006): 429–44. For a general study, see Gao Qiufeng 高秋鳳, *Song Yu zuopin zhenwei kao* 宋玉作品真偽考 (Taipei: Wenjin chubanshe, 1999), though later in this paragraph I will reject the framework of authentication.

6 For convincing speculation on this early configuration, see Tim Wai-Keung Chan, “The *Jing/zhuan* Structure of the *Chuci* Anthology: A New Approach to the Authorship of Some of the Poems,” *T’oung Pao* 84.4 (1998): 293–327.

aristocratic advisor to monarchs.⁷ “Summons to the Soul,” which, according to a popular interpretation, is directed at the lost soul of Qu Yuan himself, would then be a lament written for Qu Yuan rather than by him.⁸ This is not to say that the Song Yu literature is valuable because it is authentic, or datable in any precise way. Rather, it is valuable because it shows us in an extremely early form how other writers attempted to make sense of the Qu Yuan corpus from outside of it, as a source of their own literary production; hence it is in a sense the earliest attempt to work out the agenda set forth by Hu Shi.⁹

This brief sketch of two pivotal moments in *Chuci* interpretation, Hu Shi and Song Yu, may serve as an initial framework for evaluating the edited volume under consideration here, *Qu Yuan and the Chuci: New Approaches*. Considering the range of interpretations of Qu Yuan that have appeared between Song Yu and Hu Shi, it is an open question to what extent this volume does present the “new approaches” of its subtitle. While some of the approaches I will assess below are relatively new, others do not seem fully to have assimilated Hu Shi’s cautionary advice, nor to have addressed some of the key moments in *Chuci* interpretation that have preceded it. After all, just in the twentieth century, scholars have read the anthology with the literary approach recommended by Hu Shi, or in context of Chu language and religion, or by means of comparative literature and mythology. By contrast, this volume gives precedence to Qu Yuan in its very title. The contents of the volume are also not as new as the publication date indicates; while the volume was published this year, four of the essays contained within it have been published previously (and one of them, Michael Hunter’s essay, has been published already both in article and book chapter form, so this is its *third* appearance in print). One might then better characterize the approaches here as “refurbished” rather than new, but that is all to the good; the finest readings in the book are the ones that attempt to explain the *Chuci* tradition rather than to vaunt their own novelty.

7 For my own appreciation of this piece, see Williams, “Translating Song Yu’s *Jiu Bian*: Phases of Appreciative Perception,” in *Encountering China’s Past: Translation and Dissemination of Classical Chinese Literature*, ed. Lintao Qi and Shani Tobias (Singapore: Springer, 2022), 249–69.

8 For a broader study of the significance of “Summons to the Soul” and the ritual around which it is structured, see Williams, *Chinese Poetry as Soul Summoning: Shamanistic Religious Influences on Chinese Literary Tradition* (Amherst, N.Y.: Cambria Press, 2022).

9 That is, even though the Song Yu pieces are poems, they can also be read as literary criticism or even as commentary (*zhuan* 傳), just as suggested by Chan in “The *Jing/zhuan* Structure of the *Chuci* Anthology.”

Whether old or new, the contents of the volume are certainly diverse, with the authors frequently adopting methods or proposing theses that contradict other voices within it. In this review, then, I will attempt to discuss each of the chapters separately, with special attention to how each one succeeds or fails in elucidating the literary achievement of the *Chuci* anthology—not just Qu Yuan and the myth surrounding him, but the actual poems, whether attributed to Qu Yuan or Song Yu or others, which are often recited still today.

Deconstructing Qu Yuan

The volume opens with Martin Kern's long essay "Reconstructing Qu Yuan," which presents in greater detail an account of the *Chuci* for which he has already prepared the way in previous publications. Kern reconstructs a Qu Yuan epic beyond the "Lisao" itself, departing from individual poems, and concludes that "we may better conceive of the Han dynasty Qu Yuan as a quasi-mythological configuration of cultural memory into which was inscribed the foundational early Western Han *imaginaire* that represented the nostalgic ideals and shifting aspirations of Han imperial literati" (88). This is a splendid characterization of the reception of Qu Yuan in the Han, with which I concur. Moreover, Kern finds that, rather than an author and texts, the anthology "responded to the concerns of Han dynasty court intellectuals, and in this [*sic*] can be fruitfully analyzed from the theoretical perspective of 'cultural memory'" (22). There was a "Qu Yuan epic" (27) consisting of the various works of prose and poetry that survive to us from the Han dynasty; it was a "living tradition in which many participated and to which many contributed: authors, performers, and audiences" (39). Overall, this is a highly informative chapter, which contains most of the materials one needs to assess the historical origins of Qu Yuan and the *Chuci* as we are familiar with them today.

A large section of the chapter also revives the work of the great Okamura Shigeru 岡村繁 (1922–2014), in a 1966 article, and Galal Walker in his 1982 dissertation, both of whom looked at intertextuality within the anthology. While Kern's effort is admirable, nonetheless, the results of this approach, just as with the work of Okamura and Walker, are inconclusive. That there are many expressions shared among the "Lisao," "Jiuzhang" 九章 (Nine avowals), and "Jiuge" 九歌 (Nine songs), is well known, but does not in itself lead to any

obvious further inferences that are reliable.¹⁰ To give just one example, Kern extrapolates from his analysis the claim that: “It is abundantly clear which poetic idiom underlies the ‘Li sao’: the one that has otherwise sedimented in the ‘Jiu zhang’” (67), which seems to suggest that some of the “Jiuzhang” poems might predate the “Lisao,” but Kern provides no evidence to support such a hypothesis.

Throughout the chapter, just as with this example, Kern repeatedly attempts to push beyond the texts themselves to make claims about their origins. In particular, while he does not quite state it so baldly, he seems committed to the view that none of the *Chuci* poems originate before the Han dynasty, and *could not have* so originated, because “the figure of the individual author had little purchase before the empire and is fundamentally an early Han construction at the hands of Liu An, Sima Qian, Liu Xiang, Yang Xiong, Ban Gu, and others” (25). This will at first seem a puzzling claim, when one considers that there is a famous Western Zhou bronze called the “Shi Qiang pan” 史牆盤 whose inscription describes its own creation;¹¹ that several poems in the *Shijing* 詩經 (Book of odes) have authors named intratextually;¹² and that two recently excavated manuscripts from the Tsinghua collection, *Zhougong zhi qinwu* 周公之琴舞 and *Qiyè* 耆夜, both describe the Duke of

10 See the invaluable discussion by Li Rui 李銳 of the various potential implications of repeated lines in ancient texts: “‘Chongwen’ fexifa pingxi” 「重文」分析法評析, *Qinghua daxue xuebao (Zhaxue shehui kexue ban)* 23.1 (2008): 127–34.

11 The inscription concludes: “Qiang does not dare to stop, and in response extols the Son of Heaven’s illustriously beneficent command, herewith making (this) treasured, sacrificial vessel.” Translation quoted from Edward L. Shaughnessy, *Sources of Western Zhou History: Inscribed Bronze Vessels* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991), 4.

12 These references to authorship can be interpreted in various ways, but are real and have considerable “purchase” for readers of Chinese literature. Aside from the well-known example of Jifu 吉甫, there are also cases where an anonymous author speaks of his own composition, as in *Shijing* #252, and it seems uncharitable to disregard such poets even if they were not able to preserve their actual names in print. We scholars may aspire to have some decisive influence on the understanding of certain complex questions; but our names will be forgotten nonetheless.

Zhou making (*zuo* 作) poems.¹³ What Kern means to say, at least as best I can understand it, is merely that the concept of authorship in ancient China was different from that of modern times, where we have a robust legal conception of individual authorship and attendant notions like copyright. While Qu Yuan obviously never earned royalties from the “Lisao,” the fact that there were no authors as self-conscious of authorship as Qu Yuan before the Western Han cannot in itself help us to place “Lisao” in literary history, let alone show that the poem could only have been created in the Western Han dynasty. After all, Qu Yuan has never been considered merely one pre-Qin author, *primus inter pares*; he has always been believed to be *sui generis*.

It is true of literary works in general that, even though it is possible to categorize them according to genre and stylistic features and so on, they can only be interpreted properly as unique texts. As Hans-Georg Gadamer (1900–2002) has written, “When we are interpreting a text, it is not to prove ‘scientifically’ that this love poem belongs to the genre of love poems ... if that conclusion is the only result of investigating a poem, then we have failed. The intention is to understand this love poem, on its own and in its unique relation to the common structure of love poems.”¹⁴ The same applies to the literary study of the *Chuci*, whatever we may believe or suspect about the historical formations of the anthology. Here Kern’s essay fails. For instance, he offers a useful analysis of formulaic features of the “Lisao” which concludes by asserting that “the internal complexities of the ‘Li sao’ itself and its relation to other early texts related to Qu Yuan are staggering and—as proven by the numerous different interpretations—not resolvable” (53). But literary works, from Homer to Li Qingzhao to Shakespeare to Bei Dao, have always had “numerous different interpretations,” so I have trouble identifying what specific claim Kern is making here about the “Lisao.” Even when we have elucidated the common structure of *sao* poetry, we still need to identify the unique relations to that structure possessed by individual poems.

13 See Rens Krijgsman, “Collection and Canon: The Formation of a Genre,” in *idem, Early Chinese Manuscript Collections: Sayings, Memory, Verse, and Knowledge* (Leiden: Brill, 2023), 101–45. Krijgsman translates *zuo* as “perform” but also comments: “The collection presents the Duke of Zhou as an author with the ability to create in performance.... acts of authorship in ancient cultures are hard to pin down, let alone how they were conceptualized. They range along a spectrum of possible configurations, including but not limited to, single, collective, attributed or conventional authorship, and take form as variedly as composition, performance, the writing of a text, or some combination of these” (125).

14 Gadamer, “The Hermeneutics of Suspicion,” *Man and World* 17 (1984): 322–23.

If my defense of reading “Lisao” as poetry seems woefully “wrong but wromantic,”¹⁵ I could alternatively place Kern’s “Reconstructing Qu Yuan” in a more avant-garde critical context, by addressing one issue of central concern within the essay, namely the coherence, or lack thereof, of “Lisao.” Kern concludes by characterizing the “Lisao” as follows: “that transmitted text of ours today is not a unified poem but a collection of fragments, some of them related to the Qu Yuan story, others clearly not ... it is discontinuous, fragmentary, repetitive, non-linear, and highly polyvalent” (88). All these adjectives are correct, but this rich characterization of the “Lisao” text does not tell us anything directly about Qu Yuan or the origins of the poem (that would be a classic example of the intentional fallacy); poems can be discontinuous because they are composed by multiple authors—but also for other reasons. In particular, a poem can be discontinuous because it is a portrayal of discontinuous states of feelings, as with many modern poems and other works of art. Kern’s characterization of “Lisao” sounds like nothing so much as the poetry of Eliot and Pound, the fiction of Joyce and Faulkner, the music of Schoenberg and Hindemith, so one might say that Kern has successfully identified modernist elements in the “Lisao.” Yet he seems to eschew this inference and instead claims to have discovered something about the actual authorship of this poetry. This might be because he does not believe that the ancients were capable of similar modes of literary production, and if so he would not be the first of our contemporaries to think so.¹⁶ I merely want to point out here that an observation about form is not obviously decisive with regard to historical origins.

But more importantly with regard to methodology, Kern himself sees his project as proceeding “in the poststructuralist tradition of Julia Kristeva, Roland Barthes, and Renate Lachmann (all going back to Mikhail Bakhtin)”

15 Borrowing a useful expression from Walter Carruthers Sellar and Robert Julian Yeatman, *1066 and All That: A Memorable History of England, Comprising All the Parts You Can Remember Including One Hundred and Three Good Things, Five Bad Kings and Two Genuine Dates* (New York: E.P. Dutton, 1931), 63.

16 As Sam Bankman-Fried wrote in 2012, “About half of the people born since 1600 have been born in the past 100 years, but it gets much worse than that. When Shakespeare wrote almost all of Europeans were busy farming, and very few people attended university; few people were even literate—probably as low as about ten million people. By contrast there are now upwards of a billion literate people in the Western sphere. What are the odds that the greatest writer would have been born in 1564? The Bayesian priors aren’t very favorable.” See <https://measuringshadowsblog.blogspot.com/2012/08/the-fetishization-of-old.html>. Accessed June 6, 2024.

(36). This is a theoretical legacy which still has much more to offer sinology, particularly insofar as it helps us to destabilize the East-West binary, as Lucas Klein has shown in a recent article.¹⁷ Yet in citing this tradition as one theoretical underpinning of his approach, Kern seems to me to miss an important point. The deconstructive approach to authorship undermines *all* of our claims to authorship, reminding us how much all our own articles, poems, and even thoughts are no more than palimpsests of unmarked citation from past discourse. Barthes' *S/Z* is about a story by Balzac, and Bakhtin's best-known studies are devoted to Rabelais and Dostoevsky; polyphony can occur within the works of individual authors, just as it can be absent from AI-generated essays or conference volumes. Again, it is true that "Lisao" is discontinuous and non-linear, but an alternative strategy would be to interrogate this rhetoric on its own terms. To borrow the language of a different avatar of deconstruction, one could identify the interplay of blindness and insight within the text.¹⁸ The protagonist of "Lisao" repeats so often how urgently he is hurrying along in his quest: "Restless I scurry and scamper, both ahead and behind – / to keep in step with the traces of the former Kings",¹⁹ and he is constantly preparing to depart without actually departing: "As the season dims to dusk I prepare to depart – / knotting up recondite eupatory I linger a while."²⁰ What sense of futility, what deep anxiety about human action, underlies this rhetoric of desperate inaction? There is an opportunity for a deeper study here, drawing on the resources Kern has so helpfully gathered for us, only deploying them not so much to reconstruct Qu Yuan as to deconstruct him.

17 Klein, "Decentering *Sinas*: Poststructuralism and Sinology," *Journal of Chinese Literature and Culture* 9.1 (2022): 79–104.

18 I have in mind not so much any particular statement but more the mode of criticism employed by Paul de Man in *Blindness and Insight: Essays in the Rhetoric of Contemporary Criticism*, 2nd ed. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1983). But de Man's reading of the Romantics is often suggestive for the *Chuci* as well: "... allegory designates primarily a distance in relation to its own origin, and, renouncing the nostalgia and the desire to coincide, it establishes its language in the void of this temporal difference" (206).

19 Lines 37–38; my translation, from *Elegies of Chu*, 4.

20 Lines 209–10; *Elegies of Chu*, 9.

A Panoply of Interpretations

The next three chapters of the book consist of articles published in 2019 by Du Heng, Lucas Bender, and Michael Hunter. Since they are already well known to specialists in the field and others interested in early Chinese culture, I will not discuss them in great detail here. Du Heng's chapter on "The Author's Two Bodies: The Death of Qu Yuan and the Birth of *Chuci zhangju* 楚辭章句" follows Kern's in highlighting, once again, the figure of Qu Yuan, even in its title. In practice, however, it is a meticulous study of the paratexts within the *Chuci zhangju* anthology, particularly the prefaces to each individual poem, and how they build up the future of Qu Yuan as putative author. By offering close readings of each of these important texts and paying attention to their specific contexts within the anthology, Du provides a major service to readers of the anthology, and is right to observe that these paratexts make their own creative contributions to our understanding, rather than simply reflecting well-accepted facts. A particularly salutary feature of her study is Du's recognition that Wang Yi 王逸 (ca. 89–158), compiler of the *Chuci zhangju* anthology, is likely *not* the author of all the paratexts and commentaries, most of which must predate him. However, in devoting unusual attention to the paratexts, Du occasionally forgets that these survive and communicate meaning only because of the texts to which they are attached, even writing of the three "Summons" poems: "I accordingly interpret them as representations of the compilers who were interested in closing Qu Yuan's corpus" (122), as if the real significance of these poems lay in their editors (attractive as such a view must be to a professional scholar).

Lucas Rambo Bender's "Figure and Flight in the *Song of Chu*" is a clever study of a particular trope in the anthology: roughly speaking, how the same types of images or metaphors are used twice within a single poem, in each of the two thematic areas characterized by David Hawkes (1923–2009) as *tristia* and *itineraria*. This chapter is particularly valuable for its attention to literary technique and appreciative look at some of the later Han pieces in the anthology, which are too often neglected. However, some of the images Bender discusses are so common (above all, the road) that it is not clear how distinctive this feature is. More fundamentally, it is a mistake to rely as much as Bender does (and occasionally some of the other authors in this volume also) upon Hawkes's rough distinction between *tristia* and *itineraria*. In practice, the journeys of the *Chuci* protagonists are always melancholy. Moreover, many of these journeys are not corporeal or geographical; they are instead the journeys

of the skysoul (*hun* 魂), which is separated from the body in times of distress and peril, through celestial and spiritual realms. This important fact about the anthology in turn leads me to view with suspicion Bender's emphasis on the poems' aspiration towards the transcendence of literary fame, since this view would risk neglecting the religious element in the poems, whose central importance ought to be indisputable.

Michael Hunter's "To Leave or Not to Leave: The *Chuci* 楚辭 (Verses of Chu) as Response to the *Shijing* 詩經 (Classic of Poetry)" is a valiant attempt to examine just what its subtitle indicates, the role of the earlier anthology of 305 poems in the Han anthology of works attributed to Qu Yuan and epigoni. As Hunter rightly notes, he is following the guide of early Chinese critics, like Wang Yi himself, who asserted the place of the *Chuci* within the proper poetic lineage of the *Shijing* (188). Hunter does not mention, however, the critical piece of context for these assertions, which is that Han dynasty critics needed to believe in the continuity of the *Chuci* with Confucian tradition, so as to assert the moral legitimacy of the dominant verse form of their time, the *fu* 賦 (rhapsody). That is, while literary critics have indeed often recognized or asserted affinities between the two traditions, this was as much out of necessity as scholarly acumen. Moreover, when Hunter attempts to substantiate his claim with textual evidence, he relies almost exclusively on thematic, not textual affinities, such as concerns with travel, home, separation, and longing, which are some of the fundamental topics of literature in any language. If a longing for home were enough to identify a textual lineage, the same methodology could be used to read "Lisao" as a response to the *Odyssey* (which could be a fruitful venture, to be sure—perhaps more fruitful than the comparison with *Shijing*).

It is unfortunate that Hunter was unable to consult—since it is published here for the first time—Stephen Owen's "Reading the 'Li sao,'" which states explicitly that "one characteristic of *Chuci* discourse is clear: by and large it excludes northern *textual* material" (230). This is just one of many excellent observations in Owen's rich essay, nearly one hundred pages long, which consists of a close reading and translation of the entire poem, embellished with thought-provoking and detailed annotations, primarily based on the modern Chinese commentaries. This *magnum opus*, which would have been well worth publishing as an independent volume, is now the richest study of the poem in English and will be indispensable for future scholarship on the anthology as a whole. The translations are accompanied by lavish discussions of poetic diction and syntax that are well worth close study. Owen has even provided detailed references to modern scholarship, and phonological reconstructions (albeit to

the Baxter-Sagart version of Old Chinese, not ideal for these purposes since its goal is to describe a far earlier stage of the language). I was startled, but pleased and grateful, to come upon what is surely the finest scholarly apparatus in any Owen production since *The Great Age of Chinese Poetry* back in 1981. The essay is also full of memorable *aperçus*: “Becoming the original person within and reunifying the divided self is a visionary goal in the *Mencius*; in the ‘Li sao’ it is an agony” (241); “Finding the right woman has been overwritten by the ruler finding the right minister: allegoresis has been written into the text itself” (308); Qu Yuan “is the man who can never find his double because he is radically singular” (322).

Some of Owen’s interpretations are debatable. For instance, Owen points out the striking fact that the latest datable historical reference in the poem is to the 7th century BCE (234). The fact that the “Lisao”—like “Tianwen” 天問 (Heavenly questions) in which the latest such reference is to the 6th century BCE—steadfastly avoids reference to recent Chu history, suggests to me that it may comprise materials that predate the historical Qu Yuan. Owen prefers, with Kern, to understand the poem as a Han performance of ancient myth. But in a context when Han scholars were keenly interested in the recent history and fall of Chu, one wonders why they would refrain from inserting germane historical references or even anachronisms into a work that, according to Owen himself, “grew and changed in the process of transmission and reperformance” (229). In light of his view of the fluidity of the text, it is also startling to see him describe one passage as an interpolation (314), and particularly odd for to him to represent this analysis as if it were his own discovery, when it was already identified explicitly as such by the eminent scholar, Lin Geng 林庚 (1910–2006).²¹

Construing Jiang Correctly

These questionable points are not blemishes but rather evidence of the opinionated and bold readings that are integral to Owen’s sensitive and even profound reading of the poem. There is, however, one gross error early in the chapter, having to do with the fourth line of the poem, 惟庚寅吾以降. Owen

21 That Lin Geng identified an interpolation in the text is not hard to discover because the title of his piece is “‘Lisao’ zhong cuanru de wenzi” 〈離騷〉中竄入的文字. It is conveniently reprinted in *Lin Geng Chuci yanjiu liangzhong* 林庚楚辭研究兩種 (Beijing: Qinghua daxue chubanshe, 2006), 102–6.

translates “*gengyin* was the day that I came down,”²² and follows Gopal Sukhu in understanding *jiang* 降 as a verb that can only apply to divine beings coming down from Heaven, not to mortal birth. This in turn supports Owen’s understanding of the whole poem as a mythological narrative disassociated from historical events.

But this interpretation is simply wrong; it is easily falsifiable on the basis of standard reference works and canonical sources, and can only be maintained by means of willful blindness. I feel some personal interest in the issue of *jiang*, because I have already dealt with it in a review of the book where Gopal Sukhu propounded it over a decade ago, and it is distressing to see it reappear in print today.²³ As I mentioned in my previous review, the Morohashi dictionary has an explanation of this usage as meaning “Bringing down the harmonious energy of the divine to give birth to a great man” 神靈の和気を降ろして大人物を生ずる; thus, Qu Yuan describes himself as a great man possessing divine energies, and in asserting his own pride in his aristocratic lineage, he describes his birth in elevated terms as descending from Heaven.²⁴ This is conceited, to be sure, but otherwise conforms with the standard usage of the term. Owen’s resurrection of Sukhu’s argument states that “Almost all commentators interpret this as ‘being born,’ though the word is not used elsewhere in that way in early texts” (244). To the contrary, *jiang* is used in precisely the same way in two separate stanzas of *Shijing*, poem #304, “From Long Ago Manifesting” (Chang fa 長發), from the “Eulogies of Shang” (Shang song 商頌) section at the end of the anthology. The five “Eulogies of Shang” are widely understood not to originate in the Shang dynasty, but rather to have been composed or compiled in mid-Zhou dynasty in the state of Song 宋,

22 Owen represents the *sao* meter with a strong caesura, sometimes marked by the particle *xi* 兮, by inserting several spaces in the middle of the line. One problem with this approach is that it provides no way to indicate the presence of *xi* at the end of a line.

23 My review of Sukhu, *The Shaman and the Heresiarch: A New Interpretation of the Li sao*, in *Journal of Chinese Religions* 41.1 (2013): 86–87.

24 As cited in my earlier review, see the second definition of *jiang shen* 降神 offered in Morohashi Tetsuji 諸橋轍次, *Dai Kan-Wa jiten* 大漢和辞典 (Tokyo: Taishūkan shoten, 1955–1960, rev. ed. 1985), 11:12365.

which traced its own heritage back to the Shang.²⁵ Rather than being documents of the Shang, they are “posthumous eulogies of the Shang kings’ virtue long after they passed away.”²⁶ Since the *Chuci* likely preserves linguistic strata from before the Warring States (which, in light of the conservatism of literary usage in general, is hard to dispute), while the *Shijing* texts may not have been fixed till the Warring States, the usage of *jiang* here may not even be any older than that of “Lisao.”

Since this poem constitutes a total refutation of the claim that *jiang* can apply only to divine beings, I will here quote and translate it in entirety.²⁷

- | | | |
|---|---|---|
| 1 | Of scintillating wisdom was the Shang,
From long ago manifesting its blessedness.
When the waters flooded boundlessly broad,
Yu set in order all corners of the earth below,
So the great states beyond were its border,
And the territory all around had expanded.
The Yousong were mighty indeed,
The Lord enthroned their son and bore the Shang. ²⁸ | 濬哲維商
長發其祥
洪水芒芒
禹敷下土方
外大國是疆
幅隕既長
有城方將
帝立子生商 |
| 2 | That Mystic King was mighty in his rule: ²⁹ | 玄王桓撥 |

25 Wang Guowei 王國維 argues that they were “composed by men of Song in the middle period of the Zhou” 宗周中葉宋人所作; see “Shuo Shang song xia” 說商頌下, in *Guangtang jilin* 觀堂集林 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1959), 2.22a. For the connection with Song, see also the *Guoyu* 國語, which mentions that twelve Shang eulogies were transmitted by Zheng Kaofu 正考父, who was a scholar of Song. *Guoyu jijie* 國語集解 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 2002), 5.205.

26 As incisively characterized by Chan Chok Meng, “The Ambivalence of Eulogy: A Study of the Chinese Sòng Genre’s Evolution from Seminal Verse Form to Independent Literary Genre” (Ph.D. diss., University of Hong Kong, 2023), 206n.

27 The primary text is *Mao Shi zhengyi* 毛詩正義 (Beijing: Beijing daxue chubanshe, 2000), 20D.1707–19. I have benefited from the modern commentaries of Wang Ching-chih 王靜芝, *Shijing tongshi* 詩經通釋 (Taipei: Furen daxue wenxueyuan, 2016); and Shirakawa Shizuka 白川靜, trans. and annot., *Shikyō: Ga Shō* 詩經以雅頌, vol. 2 (Tokyo: Heibonsha, 2009).

28 Yousong is the clan of the mother of Xie 契, Shang ancestor. Xie’s supernatural birth after his mother Jian Di 簡狄 swallowed an egg is referred to in the previous *Shijing* poem #303, “Mystic Bird” (Xuanniao 玄鳥).

29 The Mystic King again refers to Xie, born from the Mystic Bird. I adopt the Mao gloss of *bo* 撥 as *zhi* 治.

He succeeded in incorporating the lesser states,	受小國是達
He succeeded in incorporating the greater states.	受大國是達
Following in his tread the people did not transgress, ³⁰	率履不越
And all thrived according to his inspection.	遂視既發
Xiangtu was mighty and magnificent, ³¹	相土烈烈
So that as far as the ocean all was regulated.	海外有截

3 The mandate of the Lord was not violated,	帝命不違
And all the way to Tang was kept consistent.	至于湯齊
<i>Tang's coming down was not belated,</i>	湯降不遲
And his sagely reverence proceeded forth daily.	聖敬日躋
His radiance penetrated far and wide, ³²	昭假遲遲
The Lord on High was honored by him,	上帝是祗
And the Lord commanded him to be a model to	帝命式于九圍
the Nine Reaches. ³³	

4 Receiving the small gems and the large gems,	受小球大球
He was the intertwined pennants of the lower states, ³⁴	為下國綴旒
Receiving the blessings of Heaven.	何天之休

30 The Mao commentary glosses *lü* 履 as *li* 禮. Rather than taking this as a linguistic gloss, I prefer to understand it as a metaphorical one.

31 Xiangtu is said to be the grandson of Xie, and the clan leader first enfeoffed with the territory of Shang. See the note by Song Zhong 宋忠 (d. 219 CE) to *Shiji* 史記 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1963), 3.92. However, Lin Ya-ting 林雅婷 argued that Xiangtu was never used as a proper name in the oracle bone inscriptions, and should actually be understood as meaning simply “inspected the territory” here. See Lin Ya-ting, “‘Shang song’ ‘Chang fa’ ‘Xiang tu lielie, hai wai you jie’ quanjie: Shi cong buci ‘tu’ zi lun qi” 〈商頌·長發〉「相土烈烈·海外有截」詮解——試從卜辭「土」字論起, in *Di si jie xian Qin liang Han xueshu quanguo yanjiusheng lunwen fabiaohui lunwenji* 第四屆先秦兩漢學術全國研究生論文發表會論文集 (Taipei: Furen daxue Zhongguo wenxue xi, 2004), 279–95.

32 I follow the Mao gloss of *chichi* 遲遲 as “far and wide” 長遠, not in this poem but in *Shijing* #167, stanza 6, see *Mao Shi zhengyi*, 9C.696.

33 The “Nine Reaches” or *jiuwei* 九圍 are understood as referring to the Nine Provinces of the world. Cf. “Nine Regions” in the sixth stanza of this poem.

34 That is, Tang served both as functional and symbolic leader, joining together by his government but also leading by example the subordinate states. I follow Zheng Xuan’s explanation of *zhui* 綴 as *jie* 結. The Mao commentary glosses *zhui* 綴 and *liu* 旒 as *biao* 表 and *zhang* 章 respectively, identifying the metaphorical significance of the terms as referring to the appearance and insignia of the states.

- | | |
|--|--|
| <p>Neither disputatious nor precipitate,
 Neither inflexible nor pliant,
 He administered his rule in amiable calm,
 And the hundred blessings united in him.</p> | <p>不競不綖
 不剛不柔
 敷政優優
 百祿是道</p> |
| <p>5 Receiving the small jade-discs and the great
 jade-discs,³⁵
 He was the stallion and shelter of the lower states,³⁶
 Receiving the favor of Heaven.
 Displaying and vaunting his courage,
 He was not shaken or displaced,
 He did not fear or tremble,
 And the hundred blessings all joined in him.</p> | <p>受小共大共
 為下國駿彪
 何天之龍
 敷奏其勇
 不震不動
 不難不竦
 百祿是總</p> |
| <p>6 That Martial King, carrying his pennants,
 Forcefully wielded the battleaxe.
 As fierce and dreadful as a flame,
 So that none dared to resist us.
 Out of abundance grew three separate shoots,³⁷
 But none succeeded, none thrived,
 As everywhere in the Nine Regions was pacified.
 Thus Tang vanquished the Wei and the Gu,</p> | <p>武王載旆
 有虔秉鉞
 如火烈烈
 則莫我敢曷
 苞有三蘖
 莫遂莫達
 九有有截
 韋顧既伐</p> |

35 The Lu School text has 珙 for 共. See Wang Xianqian 王先謙, *Shi sanjia yi jishu* 詩三家義集疏 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1987), 28.1111.

36 As with the parallel line in the previous stanza, there are various attempts to reinterpret this, but it is already compelling as a bold pair of metaphors. I follow Shirakawa's reading of *mang* 彪 as loan for *meng* 蒙, and also treat the final phrase as being employing a bold pair of metaphors parallel to those in the second line of the previous stanza.

37 This line is challenging. *Nie* 蘖 represents fresh growth off of a severed stump or branch, but interpreted as a kind of outgrowth alien to the original structure of the tree, i.e. a sort of rebel. Thus it is closely related to the graphically and phonologically close *nie* 孽, "villain" or "rebel." *Wang Li gu Hanyu zidian* 王力古漢語字典 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 2002) has an excellent discussion of this point (pp. 1126–27). Three rebels are named at the end of the stanza, so this is hard not to take as a botanical metaphor in this way. The Mao commentary glosses *bao* 苞 as *ben* 本 "root," but the more normal sense of *bao* makes sense too, particularly as *nie* is emphatically different from one of the main branches of a plant growing directly out of the root. Zheng Xuan 鄭玄 (127–200) glosses *bao* as *feng* 豐 "flourishing."

And Kunwu as well as Jie of the Xia. ³⁸	昆吾夏桀
7 In that intervening era of antiquity	昔在中葉
He was thunderous, he was superb:	有震且業
Verily unto the son of Heaven	允也天子
<i>Was granted to come down a minister:</i>	降予卿士
This one indeed was Aheng,	實維阿衡
This one aided the Shang King.	實左右商王

The poem applies the verb *jiang* in stanzas 3 and 7 to the appearance of both Tang, founder of Shang and Aheng, a.k.a. Tang's own minister Yiyin 伊尹, who aided Tang in his conquest of the Xia. The two key passages are as follows:

1) <i>Tang's coming down was not belated ...</i>	湯降不遲
2) <i>Verily unto the son of Heaven</i>	允也天子
<i>Was granted to come down a minister...</i>	降予卿士

I have translated both in as neutral a manner as possible, but it is worth noting that James Legge (1815–1897), who knew the language of the *Shijing* rather well, translates: “T’ang was not born too late” and “But truly did Heaven [then] deal with him as its son, / And sent him down a minister.”³⁹ In other words, in both cases *jiang* means to be bestowed by Heaven as a gift to humanity, and is applied to sovereigns or outstanding ministers like Qu Yuan. It is consistent with the more common usage of *jiang* in the *Shijing*, which refers to blessings bestowed by Heaven for humanity (or disasters inflicted in a parallel manner). In each of these cases, that which “comes down” from Heaven is not a supernatural deity, but is instead a participant in the realm of human affairs, who is seen as being imbued with the intentionality of Heaven.

It is only possible to read *jiang* in the “Lisao” as excluding a mortal hero if one is ignorant of the parallel here and also of the Morohashi dictionary. How Owen would read the *Shijing* usages is unclear because he does not discuss any of the pertinent evidence. However, attempting to “steel man” the Sukhu-Owen hypothesis, I would concede that there is one shard of truth in it,

38 The Wei, Gu, and Kunwu were three clans of the Xia, the three offshoots anticipated above, while Jie was the tyrannical ruler of the Xia deposed by the Shang.

39 James Legge's translation in *The Chinese Classics, vol. 4: The She King or the Book of Poetry* (Rpt. Taipei: SMC Publishing, 1991), 642–43.

which is that *jiang* does not mean “to be born” in a purely biological sense, but rather has powerful religious connotations having to do with the ineradicable relation between Heaven and man. The parallel with *Shijing* 304 is thus an interesting demonstration of consistency between the implicit cosmologies in the *Shijing* and the *Chuci*, which could have been worth exploring further in Hunter’s chapter. But the word *jiang* in itself absolutely does not imply that the protagonist of “Lisao” is divine or immortal. This interpretation is wrong and should be discarded. I hope my discussion above has made the point sufficiently clear; if some future monograph resuscitates this erroneous claim, I hereby vow that my review of that publication will translate and discuss all forty occurrences of the verb *jiang* in the *Shijing*, not to mention relevant usages in other pre-Qin sources.

History, Religion, Poetry

The verb *jiang* is significant not just because of its usage in the opening of “Lisao,” but also because it is emblematic of some of the complex currents intersecting within that poem and throughout the anthology as a whole. After all, the protagonist of “Lisao” may have mundane anxieties, but he is endowed with a heavenly birthright; his journey is a political and poetical one but is also framed by spiritual aspirations and progresses along a celestial itinerary. For the most part, though, the editors of this volume choose to downplay the religious dimension to the poems. They put a historical personage, Qu Yuan, at the forefront of their own title, and the first five chapters of the book all foreground issues related to historical authorship and literary composition. A quite different approach to the anthology has been prominent in much modern scholarship, however. This alternative strategy would focus on the distinctive aspects of ancient Chu religion, and how they are represented within the anthology. Moreover, the different approaches must ultimately be intertwined, I believe; the literary merit of the poems rests in no small part upon their transcendent implications.

The religious dimension becomes inescapable when one turns to the “Nine Songs,” as does Owen in the sixth chapter of the volume, “Reading ‘Jiuge.’” This chapter has much in common with the previous one, presenting exquisite translations and detailed exegeses of each of the poems in the “Nine Songs.” Here again, Owen is admirably attentive to rhyme schemes and interpretive debates, although the absence of Japanese scholarship in both chapters is more unfortunate here, since the work of scholars like Aoki Masaru

青木正兒 (1887–1964) has been so important, historically, in “Nine Songs” interpretation, and in fact underlies many of the readings from which Owen is drawing. As with the “Lisao” chapter, this one is full of fine observations; for instance, that the two poems for goddesses of the Xiang 湘 River share a set of ritual procedures. This is a useful elaboration of Waley’s interpretation of the series, even if it does not quite prove Owen’s theory that the two are different performative instantiations of the same Ur-song.

But I do not find this chapter as useful, overall, as that on the “Lisao,” mainly because of the tendentious agenda underlying its sensitive readings of individual verses. Owen is not content to rest with the uncertainty about dating and formation that attends the poems, but puts forth instead the thesis that the set of poems was composed (or adapted) for purposes of performance at the court of Emperor Wu 武 of the Han (r. 141–87 BCE). Owen is strangely coy about presenting this hypothesis, perhaps because he is at some level aware of its deep inadequacies, and offers it as a “counterfactual” (323), but it is clear that he does believe in it as the most likely origin of the series, since in his “Lisao” chapter he writes, “Presuming that the core of ‘Jiu ge’ is only rather late (Han Wudi’s reign, I will argue)...” (230). I will only mention two of the many difficulties with this strategy for reading the “Nine Songs,” one specific and one general.

The specific case has to do with Owen’s reading of the title of the song, “Yunzhong jun” 雲中君. This deity is mentioned in the *Shiji* as one worshipped by shamans of Jin 晉, so Owen wants to identify it as the Lord of Yunzhong, with Yunzhong referring to a place name in Jin, unrelated to ancient Chu. In support of this reading, he further points out that the song refers to the northern region of Jizhou 冀州 not far from Yunzhong.⁴⁰ These are curious facts that have prompted much discussion over the years. Rather than consider

40 The precise contours of Jizhou evolved over time, but Owen splits the difference by writing, “... Jizhou is well attested as a region and a Han prefecture lying just east of Yunzhong, with narrow Bingzhou 并州 in between, appropriate for the ‘Lord of Yunzhong’” (350 n. 45). Owen does not explain that his “region” and “Han prefecture” are two quite different geographical concepts. As one of the nine provinces in the “Tribute of Yu” 禹貢 chapter of the *Book of Documents*, it would have encompassed the whole area within the crook of the Yellow River, including the territory of both modern Hebei and Shanxi. Jizhou is the first of the nine provinces mentioned in that chapter, perhaps because it was the site of Yao’s capital, according to the commentary of Kong Anguo 孔安國; see *Shangshu zhengyi* 尚書正義 (Beijing: Beijing daxue chubanshe, 2000), 6.160. For an audience familiar with the *Documents*, it would have been natural to understand it as synecdoche for the entire realm.

the various potential interpretations, however, Owen writes with breathtaking self-assurance that “this deity is, unambiguously, the Lord of Yunzhong, and not the ‘Lord in the Clouds,’ except in poetic literalization of the place name” (350); “*all* the evidence cited to show that this deity is the Lord of Yunzhong is older and more reliable than *any* of the evidence that it is by Qu Yuan — or was even linked to other *Chuci* before the end of the Western Han” (351). This might be compelling, had Owen provided any evidence for his proposed deity of the northern site of Yunzhong (incidentally not in Jin but in Zhao 趙). But since he neglects to mention the devastating piece of contrary evidence that Yunzhong can also be used to refer to Yunmeng 雲夢 Marsh in the ancient state of Chu, it is hard to spare him the benefit of the doubt here. It is true that the *Chuci zhangju* gloss of Jizhou to refer to all of China appears unlikely on its own, but it is in fact well motivated by its immediate context, in parallel opposition to “the four seas” 四海.⁴¹ Yet it is even more baffling to me that Owen would dismiss as an aside the idea that the term might refer to the “Lord in the Clouds” as “except in poetic literalization,” for after all, what are this chapter and this whole book dedicated to, but an anthology of poems? Poetics is ultimately all we have to guide us with confidence here, as Hu Shi rightly argued, and when we give that up we are truly lost, not just somewhere north in Shanxi but well beyond even the four seas.

Another issue with Owen’s thesis, which is more or less pertinent throughout the first six chapters of this book, is a willful inattention to the religious dimension of the *Chuci*.⁴² The anthology refers to several religious beliefs and practices that have an affinity with shamanism as practiced in other parts of the world, and all of which have occasioned much lively discussion over the past hundred years: the shamanic impersonation of divinity, the ascension to heaven, romance with deities, the summons to the soul ritual, belief in soul duality, etc.⁴³ It is not that the authors are unaware of this

41 Not to mention by the priority of Jizhou among the nine traditional provinces of China, discussed in the previous note.

42 Sukhu, by contrast, has his own sophisticated understanding of the significance of shamanism in the anthology, which explains why he would be attracted by the *jiang* theory. I am not sure how to reconcile Owen’s lack of interest in the religious background elsewhere with his adherence to the *jiang* theory.

43 Perhaps the most useful overview is Fujino Iwatomo 藤野岩友, *Fukei bungakuron* 巫系文學論 (Tokyo: Daigaku shobō, 1969). I have discussed my own view of these issues, and the practical use of the term “shamanism” in this field, in Williams, “Shamans, Souls, and *Soma*: Comparative Religion and Early China,” *Journal of Chinese Religions* 48.2 (2020): 147–73.

dimension of the anthology, precisely, but they have for the most part chosen not to engage explicitly with this scholarship. Kern gives a cursory overview of the numerous religious elements in the “Lisao,” but then comments that, “instead of reading these various ‘religious’ elements as literal, we should probably read them as rhetorical” (69)—as if anyone had ever argued that the “Lisao” protagonist’s encounter with Shun is “literal”! Hunter writes “to identify the ‘Jiu ge’ as primary sources of (Chu) shamanistic practice requires reliable sources of shamanistic practice to identify them against” (192), a wild standard by which to read any early text, given the difficulty of obtaining “reliable sources.” And even Owen, in spite of his brilliant suggestions as to the ritual performance of the songs, mentions that the “Eulogies of Zhou” (Zhou song 周頌) and “Songs for Suburban Sacrifices” (Jiaosi ge 郊祀歌) are more “literary” (339) than the “Nine Songs,” but does not reflect on the underlying disparity between the religious practices implied therein.

Unlike these formidable scholars, I follow the line of interpretation that sees all these poems as richly laden in reference to beliefs and practices scantily referred to in other received texts, though attested in some of the excavated documents from the Chu region.⁴⁴ It is not only that these rituals structure and motivate the poems, most obviously in the case of the “Summons to the Soul,” but also inescapably in the “Lisao”; the hypothesis of local religious inspiration specific to Chu also helps to explain the difficulty of reading and explaining these texts in the Han dynasty. Following in the wake of the standardization of the script and the violent break between pre-Qin and Han cultures, much of the underlying tradition was lost and forgotten, and Han scholars struggled even to read the early stratum of *Chuci* poems—“Lisao,” “Heavenly Questions,” “Summons to the Soul.” Thus, in many cases where these authors see the *Chuci* text as the product of creative work by Han scholars, I see the potential for a multi-stage process of exegesis, editing, recompilation, and interpolation as the Han scholars labored to deal with the difficult sources they had inherited. This is after all the complex process described already in the prefaces in the *Chuci zhangju*, as Kern rightly notes and identifies as the “lead” for his own notion of authorship as “communal, composite, and distributed across the roles of compilers, editors, collators, and commentators” (40); a lengthy list of roles, all of which are significant here, and to which I would only add poets and shamans. The most blatant contradiction in the approaches

44 For this evidence, the best source is Yan Changgui 晏昌貴, *Wugui yu yinsi: Chu jian suo jian fangshu zongjiao kao* 巫鬼與淫祀——楚簡所見方術宗教考 (Wuhan: Wuhan daxue chubanshe, 2010).

to the anthology suggested by both Kern and Owen is that they cannot explain why the Han inscribers of the “Qu Yuan epic” failed so abjectly in their editing that they did not make clear Qu Yuan’s authorship *within* the “Lisao,” nor why the Han compilers of the “Nine Songs” neglected so grossly to identify Emperor Wu as the audience *within* their text. By contrast, the hypothesis that some (obviously not all) of the *Chuci* poems contain authentic remnants from a remote and spirit-drenched age, already mysterious to their Han readers who relied excessively on the crutch of the Qu Yuan persona to resolve their doubts, seems to me to offer a clear and plausible framework for analysis.

The volume concludes with two essays by Paul W. Kroll which are somewhat different in nature than any of the preceding ones, each being dedicated to a single poem within the *Chuci* anthology that is of modest size (relative to the “Lisao,” at least). The seventh chapter, “Unwinding ‘Unreeling Yearnings,’” presents a translation of “Chousi” 抽思 in the “Nine Avowals” (Jiuzhang 九章), along with brief introduction and copious commentary; the eighth and concluding chapter offers similar treatment for “Far Roaming” (Yuanyou 遠遊). Both chapters are characterized by their modest argumentative ambitions; though the introductory portions do put forward some original and important insights with regard to the *Chuci* anthology, Kroll does not assert the unprecedented and novel quality of his thesis, as do most of the preceding chapters in the volume. Like Hu Shi, he is willing to content himself with a state of ignorance as to authorship, as when he says of the “Nine Avowals,” “Exactly who the authors are will never be known, nor is it of any importance for them to be known” (405). It is perhaps worth noting that he adds a qualifier to this statement in a note, pointing out the exceptional nature of the two poems in the series quoted by Sima Qian, “Lamenting Ying” (Ai Ying 哀郢) and “Embracing the Sand” (Huaisha 懷沙) (406n); I would add a further qualifier, which is that careful examination has long ago revealed that several of the poems must belong to a later stratum of the anthology than the “Lisao.”⁴⁵ But agnosticism about authorship is a good place to start.

I have previously discussed the “Chousi” in an article that drew attention to “strange loops” in the *Chuci*, following Douglas R. Hofstadter,⁴⁶ but Kroll’s article offers a much more focused and detailed study of the language of the

45 See my discussion in Williams, “Tropes of Entanglement and Strange Loops in the ‘Nine Avowals’ of the *Chuci*,” *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies* 81.2 (2018): 281 and 299, n. 89.

46 See “Tropes of Entanglement and Strange Loops,” 293–96. More or less the same translation appears in my *Elegies of Chu*, 58–60.

poem. If I would fault the translation for anything it is perhaps making the poem appear more lucid and logical than it really is in Chinese; where I see a loopy confusion in the poem's rhetoric, Kroll traces a clear trajectory in the speaker's argument throughout the poem. In any case, his exquisite translation effectively sustains his interpretation, for instance with his precise use of alliteration in translating descriptive compounds: "For my soul realizes the ceaseless coursing of the road" 魂識路之營營; "Broad rocks pinnacled and poised / Do impede my desires" 軫石巖崑，蹇吾願兮 (412). The commentary adds much valuable nuance, particularly in an excellent discussion of literary form (414–15) that draws out the implications of shifts in formal structure for all the poems in the anthology. The commentary to individual lines parallels Owen's commentaries earlier in this volume in giving wonderfully detailed and explicit justifications of translation choices that might well serve as a textbook of literary translation from the Chinese. Kroll is perhaps too scrupulous in noting many speculative emendations of modern Chinese scholars, only to reject them himself. Given the proliferation of classical commentaries over the past several decades, we would do better not to rehash the less convincing proposals that have surfaced.

The volume concludes with an essay that is considerably older than any of the other previously-published chapters: Kroll's translation of "Far Roaming," originally published in 1996, and here reprinted with few modifications apart from those made to conform to the formatting of the volume. Yet it remains fresh and indeed one of the newest of the "new approaches" contained in the volume. In fact, it places this reviewer in a curious but not unwelcome position to review an article that I have previously read and cited many times, and which has shaped my own attitude towards the *Chuci*. Kroll took a poem which had often been discussed solely in regard to the Qu Yuan debate, and instead examined it solely as a work of religious literature from the Han, drawing subtly but effectively on the results of modern scholarship on religious Daoism. He thus showed the utility of religious studies for interpreting *Chuci* lyricism, and at the same time fulfilled Hu Shi's agenda of explicating the literary value of the anthology, achieving both in a more sophisticated fashion than any previous attempts in English. Because of the exceptional nature of "Far Roaming," none of the other poems in the anthology could be approached in quite the same manner, but the essay has nonetheless been an inspiration to all of us involved in *Chuci* studies.

I am grateful that Kroll's essay has been republished here, along with other worthy investigations of this anthology. Though the *Chuci* anthology has already endured two millennia of rash speculation, passionate enthusiasm,

and critical skepticism, it still calls out for close enquiry and exploratory translation. As opaque as the historical Qu Yuan is destined to remain, the poems preserved under his name continue to call out with some urgency: “The times are in tumult, ever transforming. / how then may a man linger here long?” (“Lisao,” quatrain 77, tr. Owen). The meaning of these pieces remains open to debate, “ever transforming,” in spite of the best efforts of these scholars to fix them precisely.

Postscript

In the spirit of responding to the openness of this text, then: although in my discussion above I have evaluated this volume on its own terms as a work of sinological scholarship, I would like to add one further point in conclusion. If there is one thing missing from the volume of the whole, it is engagement with the *Chuci* as an anthology of poetry to be compared with parallel masterpieces from world literature. I point this out not at all as a “gotcha” attack, because it is a deficiency of my own scholarship as well, but nonetheless it is worth reflecting on how the study of Chinese literature tends to stay confined within its own domain. One notable exception in recent years is the work of Lucas Bender, both here and also in his recent monograph *Du Fu Transforms*, since his consideration of Chinese tropes of self-representation is couched in terms that call out for comparison with Western literature. But most of the essays here, like most recent scholarly work on early Chinese literature, eschew explicit comparison.

Thus I would like to conclude by proposing that we might understand the “Lisao” better, not by more rigorous examination of its internal structure or paratexts, rather by referring to more exotic comparanda, such as the life and work of the prodigy Arthur Rimbaud (1854–1891). Shoshana Felman wrote a seminal essay entitled “You Were Right to Leave, Arthur Rimbaud,” in which she shows how Rimbaud’s famous renunciation of literature and of Paris society is prefigured in his earlier writings, and how an awareness of the essential aporia in language is intrinsic to literary modernity.⁴⁷ Felman characterizes Rimbaud’s rhetoric of departure and renunciation as follows: “The

47 Felman, “‘Tu as bien fait de partir, Arthur Rimbaud’: Poésie et modernité,” *Littérature* 11 (1973): 3–21; translated by Barbara Johnson as “‘You Were Right to Leave, Arthur Rimbaud’: Poetry and Modernity,” in *The Claims of Literature: A Shoshana Felman Reader*, ed. Emily Sun, Eyal Peretz, and Ulrich Baer (New York: Fordham University Press, 2007), 70–107.

last word is precisely what never stops recommencing. Departure is an endless task, and constantly needs to be begun again. The ‘Adieu’ thus signifies not the ultimate leave-taking, the definitive break, but the open system of the repetition of breaks and ruptures.”⁴⁸ It is hard to think of a better characterization of how the incessant repetition of key motifs in “Lisao” is its own formal representation of the plight of the protagonist, condemned to his interminable task. Indeed, I submit that this analysis of quintessentially modern poetry is a better characterization of what is going on in the “Lisao”—in spite of its remote antiquity—than most of what we have come up with by attempting to restore the poem to its original circumstances of composition.

Kern has rightly called our attention to the repetitive nature of the “Lisao” structure, with some quatrains resembling each other closely even though they are separated within its long, episodic structure. But the same point can be observed on the microscopic level; it is an intimate part of the glorious rhetoric of the “Lisao” that it employs a deluge of adjectives, a stream of synonyms, harping on the very endlessness of the protagonist’s ever-deferred departure. In the middle of the poem, for instance, the hero laments (lines 177–80, my own translation):⁴⁹

Redoubling sighs and suspirations, I am shrouded in sorrow –
I grieve that I have not met with the right moment.
Culling the soft leaves of sweet clover I wipe the tears –
that soak my collar billow upon billow.

In light of this incessant repetition of its own imagery, raising billow upon billow of sentiment that are only just saved from sentimentality by the internal political references that give the poem a cutting undertone, it seems to me that Felman’s reading of Rimbaud has much to teach us about the *Chuci* as well. After all, just as Hu Shi instructed us a century ago, the critical “Adieu” of the *Chuci* needs to be interpreted in literary terms, not just compared to the pseudo-historical framework of Qu Yuan’s biography; the heart of the “Lisao”

48 Translation quoted from *The Claims of Literature*, 96. The original text is: “Le mot de la fin est précisément celui qui ne cesse de recommencer. La figure de la disparition est vouée à sans cesse réapparaître. Le départ est une tâche sans terme, toujours à recommencer. L’« Adieu » ne signifie donc pas l’avènement du déplacement final, de la rupture définitive, mais le système ouvert de la répétition des ruptures.” See Felman, “Tu as bien fait de partir, Arthur Rimbaud,” 14.

49 Williams, *Elegies of Chu*, 8.

lies not in Qu Yuan's actual departure, the "definitive break" of suicide, but rather throughout the "open system of the repetition of breaks and ruptures" in its textual fabric, the trauma of the speaking subject severed from its own intentions, the perennial occasion of literary creation.