

## O N E

# CONTEXTUALIZING THE TEXT: THE DISCOVERY, COMPILATION, TRANSMISSION, AND TRADITIONAL APPRECIATION OF THE *Mu T'ien-tzu chuan*

**I**n the tenth month of the fifth year of the Hsien-ning 咸寧 era of the Chin emperor Wu-ti 武帝 (A.D. 279), the scholarly tradition met with the startling discovery of what appears to have been a personal library of texts—some theretofore unknown—written in ancient script on bamboo strips.<sup>1</sup> The vault containing the texts and various objects of jade and precious metal is generally believed to have been the tomb of King Hsiang of Wei 魏襄王, who died in 296 B.C.; this means that the texts could not have been written any later than that date.<sup>2</sup> Antedating as they do the later intellectual trends of the Han dynasty (206 B.C.—A.D. 219), these texts offer a record of how pre-Han dynasty writers viewed their world and their cultural tradition.

The process of transcribing the ancient script (*ku-wen* 古文) into clerical script (*li-shu* 隸書) and the editorial work of transforming into texts the great mass of bamboo strips discovered in Chi 汲 district constitutes one of the first great paleographical enterprises in Chinese history. According to Li Xueqin 李學勤, the work of the scholars who contributed their efforts to the project serves even

today as a model for paleographers.<sup>3</sup> The story of this process is fascinating in its own right, but it is also critical for this particular study, because only when issues surrounding the provenance, the redaction, and the exegetical tradition of the text are elucidated can one begin to appreciate the literary nature of the *Mu T'ien-tzu chuan*, one of only two of the fifteen discovered texts that has survived to the present. This chapter summarizes the pertinent facts of the discovery, transcription, and transmission of the *Mu T'ien-tzu chuan* and so sets the context for the literary analysis that follows. Indeed, the analytical point of departure stems in part from "clues" provided by the comments and analyses of the earliest redactors of the text.

## 1

The first issue to be examined concerns the provenance of the texts. As noted above, the vault containing the texts and various objects of jade and precious metal is generally believed to have been the tomb of King Hsiang of Wei, who died in 296 B.C. Notwithstanding the antiquity of this view, however, there are several problems with the identification. As Chu Hsi-tsu's analysis of these problems is the most lucid and illuminating, it bears citing in full.

As for those [texts] that claim the Chi vault was the tomb of King Hsiang of Wei, there is the *Annals of Emperor Wu* in the *Chin shu*, and the *Calendrical Treatises* ("Lü-li chih" 律曆志) which is in the sixteenth *chüan* of the *Chin shu*; Hsün Hsü's preface to the *Mu T'ien-tzu chuan*; Wei Heng's *Ssu-t'i shu-shih* 四體書勢. As for those texts that claim the vault was the tomb of King An-li 安釐 of Wei, there is the biography of Su Hsi 束皙 by Wang Yin 王隱. As for that text which claims the vault was the tomb of either King Hsiang or King An-li of Wei, but which never cites a source for this information, there is Su Hsi's biography in the T'ang revised edition of the *Chin shu*. All of these claims lack concrete evidence. For those who claim that the vault was the tomb of King Hsiang of Wei, [the claim] is based on the fact that the *Annals* [discovered in the vault] terminates in the twentieth year of the "present king" of the Wei state. Hsün Hsü, in his preface to the *Mu T'ien-tzu chuan*, states: "Based on the *Annals* that were obtained [from the vault] it is probable that the vault is the tomb of the 'present

king,' the son of King Hui-ch'eng 惠成 of Wei. According to the *Shih-pen* 世本, this was King Hsiang. . . ." If we search in the *Shih chi* 史記 under King Ai 哀, we will find that he is referred to as King Hsiang in the *Shih pen*.<sup>4</sup> King Ai died in the twenty-third year of his reign, therefore he is referred to as the "present king" in his twentieth year. Yet, if in his twenty-first year the king had not yet died, how could these *Annals* be used to accompany his burial? Therefore, it must be that the years noted by Hsün Hsü more likely referred to the years after the recording of the *Annals* was terminated. Later scholars misunderstood his reference to indicate the year that the text was itself entombed; hence no one was clear about [the significance of the dates]. Given these circumstances, there were also scholars who claimed that King Ai's death was in his twentieth year, in order to defend their original identification [of the vault as King Hsiang's tomb]. The *Suo-yin* 索隱 commentary to the 44th *chüan* of the *Shih chi*, the "Hereditary Houses of Wei" 魏世家, states: "The *Annals* from the Chi vault terminate in King Ai's twentieth year. King Chao 昭 mourned for three years and only then established the first year of his own reign."<sup>5</sup> The intended meaning of this commentary is to suggest that although King Ai died in his twentieth year, the *Shih chi* refers to a twenty-third year of his reign because it was only until the end of that third year that King Chao established his own reign title. Rare are those cases when during the Warring States era a mourning period of three years was observed. There were cases when a year was skipped before a new reign title was established, but I have never heard of skipping three years. Moreover, if King Ai had died, why was he referred to as the "present king"? It does not make any sense. . . . [F]rom ancient times to the present I have never heard of a ruler being buried with his state's history, and I have never heard that a state history destined to accompany a ruler's entombment must terminate with the last year of the said ruler. [Previous scholars] simply did not know that the *Annals* were a comprehensive history and not the official annals of any one state; they represent the private record of a citizen of Wei, and do not represent the records of Wei officials. For this reason every explanation [of the provenance of the tomb] has been far-fetched. . . . [T]hose theories claiming the vault was the tomb of King Hsiang or King An-li of Wei are nothing more than nonsense.<sup>6</sup>

Chu Hsi-tsu contends that the problem of deciding which Wei king was buried in the tomb derives solely from the assumption that the *Bamboo Annals* was the official history of Wei.<sup>7</sup> This observation must be qualified, however, because Chu himself never questions the assumption that the tomb is a royal tomb. Whereas he takes the discovery of a jade pitch pipe, bells, and a *ch'ing* 磬 to be proof of a royal provenance,<sup>8</sup> we now know from the discovery of the Warring States tomb of the Marquis I of Tseng 曾 in Sui 隨 county, Hupei, that access to riches was not restricted to kings. The stunning set of bells and other bronze and jade objects found in this tomb, as well as in the much later Ma-wang-tui 馬王堆 tomb, attests to the level of grandeur enjoyed by people of "lesser rank" than a king.<sup>9</sup> Moreover, even in the case of lesser officials, texts were frequently among the mortuary objects, which qualifies any premise that the presence of bamboo strips must point to royal provenance.<sup>10</sup> Given this archaeological evidence, Chu Hsi-tsu's suggestion that the *Annals* constitute a comprehensive history, the product of a private scholar and not a public state official, in fact contains a clue about how to identify who was entombed in the vault: even if the last year entered refers to the reign of King Hsiang, it does not necessarily follow that King Hsiang was the "tomb master." The discovery of a set of *Annals* (*nien-piao* 年表) in the tomb of the Marquis of Ju-yin 汝陰 in Fu-yang 阜陽 in 1977 reveals that records of historical events were accessible to and preserved by people outside the immediate royal domain.<sup>11</sup> The case of the almost personalized *Annals* (*ta-shih-chi* 大事紀) of a local official, Hsi 喜, which were discovered in the latter's tomb at Shui-hu ti 睡虎地 and which begin with the first year of King Chao of Ch'in 秦峯王 (306 B.C.) and end (abruptly) in the thirtieth year of the First Emperor's reign (217 B.C.), points to a similar conclusion.<sup>12</sup> The fact that the last date of the *Annals* is the year in which the deceased died offers perhaps a more realistic and logical explanation of the significance of the closing year of the Chi vault *Bamboo Annals*.

Wei T'ing-sheng offers a different hypothesis about the provenance of the tomb. He argues that the absence of any mention of a corpse or of any other mortuary items suggests that the vault was not a tomb at all.<sup>13</sup> Instead, he postulates, the objects retrieved from the vault were a part of a corpus of treasures belonging to the royal family of Wei that were buried in the mound to hide them from enemy states or to protect them from the floodwaters of the Yellow River. As evidence that the vault was used for storage and not burial, Wei cites the presence of a text entitled *Treasures of Liang Hill*

(*Liang-ch'iu tsang* 梁丘藏) among the discovered bamboo strips. This text recorded "Wei's hereditary houses along with a list of gold and jade objects kept hidden in the mound."<sup>14</sup> The mound, that is, must have been the said Liang Hill.

The thesis is intriguing, especially in light of the absence of any mortuary evidence. Nonetheless, as Wei concedes, it is possible that the thief Pu-chun took those items before officials were alerted to his thievery. Moreover, if the vault were indeed just a cache of royal treasures, one would expect the number of texts, presumably belonging to the Wei library, to be more representative of the vast number in circulation at the time. As it is, because many of the texts discovered seem connected thematically, it is more likely that the cache represents a personal rather than a royal library.

While we may never know the true provenance of the Chi vault, or whether or not it ever had a "tomb master," certain conclusions based on the texts can be drawn and can shed at least some light on the significance of the corpus as a whole, and more specifically on the literary significance of the *Mu T'ien-tzu chuan*.<sup>15</sup> Wei T'ing-sheng observes that the texts found in the vault have much in common with the thought of the philosopher Tsou Yen 鄒衍 (305–240 B.C.), who was said to have spent several years as an adviser and teacher of King Hui of Liang 梁惠王.<sup>16</sup> Although one would be hard pressed to accept Wei's argument that all the texts were penned by Tsou Yen for the king in appreciation of the latter's patronage, the fact that many of them seem connected thematically, and that the themes concern major tenets of Tsou Yen's philosophy—the relationship between history and the workings of the cosmos—deserves attention.

The best description of the texts discovered at Chi is found in the biography of Su Hsi, one of the redactors of the texts. This important passage, recorded in the *Chin shu*, warrants citation in full:

Previously, in the second year of the T'ai-k'ang 太康 reign (A.D. 281),<sup>17</sup> a bandit named Pu-chun 不準 from Chi prefecture, broke into the tomb of King Hsiang of Wei, or, as some claim, the tomb of King An-li of Wei.<sup>18</sup> From this tomb were recovered ten cartloads of texts written on bamboo strips. Amongst them the *Annals* (*Chi-nien* 紀年) of thirteen sections recorded events beginning with the Hsia 夏 dynasty down through the time when King Yu 幽 of Chou was exterminated by the Ch'üan-jung 犬戎 barbarians; from there the events recorded

all concerned the state of Chin.<sup>19</sup> The *Annals* focused on events concerning the state of Wei after Chin was separated into three states (i.e., ca. 376 B.C.); it records these events up till the twentieth year of King An-li's reign. The *Annals* probably constitute a Wei history. For the most part it accords with the records of the *Spring and Autumn Annals* (*Ch'un-ch'iu* 春秋), although there are places that differ significantly from it and the *Tso Commentary* (*Tso chuan* 左傳). For example, the years ascribed to the Hsia dynasty outnumber those of the Yin dynasty . . . [the number of years that passed] from the time that the Chou received Heaven's Mandate until King Mu ascended the throne [is given in the *Annals* as] one hundred years; it was not [as is traditionally recorded in other texts] that King Mu [himself] lived to be one hundred years old. When King Yu had fled, there was one Earl Ho of Kung 共和伯 who usurped the king's power, it was not that there were two ministers called Kung and Ho. As for the *Book of Changes* comprised of two sections, it is similar to the *Chou-i* 周易. A text of two sections entitled *I Line Statements and Yin-yang Hexagrams* 易繇陰陽卦 is somewhat similar to the *Chou-i*, although the line statements are different. There is a text, the *Classic of I Below the Hexagrams* 卦下易經 of one section that is similar to the *Explanation of Hexagrams* (*Shuo-kua* 說卦), yet also different. A text called the *Kung-sun Tuan* 公孫段 of two sections comprises a dialogue between Kung-sun Tuan and Shao Chih 邵陟 on topics concerning the *Book of Changes*. Three sections of the *Kuo-yü* 國語 deal with events of the Chin and Ch'u 楚 states. A text entitled *Names* (*Ming* 名) of three sections resembles the *Book of Rituals* (*Li chi* 禮記) yet also resembles the *Erh-ya* 爾雅 and the *Lun-yü* 論語. The *Shih Ch'un* 師春, comprising one section, deals with divinations that occur in the *Tso Commentary*; Shih Ch'un appears to be the family and given name of the author of this text. The *Fragmented Dialogues* (*Suo-yü* 瑣語), made up of eleven sections, is a book that deals with prognostications, dreams and strange events that occurred in many different states. A text of one section called the *Treasures of Liang Vault* (*Liang-ch'iu tsang*) first narrates the hereditary houses of the state of Wei and then speaks of the metal and jade objects related to the vault. The *Chiao-shu* 繳書 of two sections contains discourses on methods of archery. The *Sheng-feng* 生封 of one section relates the fiefdoms established by various kings. The *Great*

*Calendar* (*Ta li* 大曆) of two sections is similar to those texts of Tsou Yen's cosmology. The *Narrative of the Son of Heaven, King Mu*, of five sections, relates the journey of King Mu of Chou to the four seas and his visits to Ti T'ai 帝臺 and Hsi-wang-mu. The *T'u-shih* 圖時 of one section belongs to the genre of paintings with colophons. There are in addition nineteen sections of miscellaneous texts referred to as *Tsa-shu* 雜書: *Procedures of Enfeoffment of the Chou* (*Chou shih t'ien-fa* 周食田法); the *Book of Chou* (*Chou-shu* 周書) in which affairs of Ch'u are discussed; and a piece which concerns the death of King Mu of Chou's concubine, Sheng Chi. In all there are about seventy-five sections. Of them seven were ripped so that the original title could not be discerned. . . . The texts of the bamboo strips were written in tadpole script. The first one who discovered the vault burned the strips to provide light to pilfer the objects. When the officials finally collected them, there were many burnt strips that were broken and fragmented. The texts had decomposed, and the strips were not in their correct order. Emperor Wu-ti ordered that the books be added to the Palace Library and that the strips be arranged according to their proper order, organized and transcribed with the [clerical] script used today.<sup>20</sup>

Notwithstanding the likelihood that these texts do not constitute the entirety of what was originally entombed, the texts as a corpus nonetheless lend themselves to interpretation. If we accept the hypothesis that the texts found in recently excavated tombs at Yin-ch'üeh shan 銀雀山, Shui-hu ti, and Pao-shan 包山, for example, represent those that would have had the greatest value to the deceased while he was alive and thus were buried with him to provide reference in the afterlife as well, then what are we to make of the significance of the Chi vault corpus?<sup>21</sup>

Consider first the obvious pragmatic bent to the corpus: not only are histories such as the *Chou-yü* and the *Bamboo Annals* represented, but there is also an evident interest in enfeoffment procedures and in other ritualistic practices.<sup>22</sup> Of significance as well are calendrical or perhaps more accurately astronomical and cosmological issues along with the proper elucidation of terms.<sup>23</sup> Presumably these texts had a practical function: replete with historical precedents, they would have been an important resource for a reader looking to implement his own affairs properly.<sup>24</sup>

But the texts concern more than just political history or ritual-

istic and bureaucratic statutes; almost half of the corpus deals with topics of divination, dreams, and "strange" events.<sup>25</sup> Noteworthy, too, is the apparent historical context—and a textually derived context at that—within which the supranatural events are anchored. For example, the topic of the *Shih Ch'un* is divination, but specifically those divinations that take place during the Spring and Autumn era as recorded in the *Tso chuan*. Likewise, the *Fragmented Dialogues* record dreams, divinations, and strange events that are placed in a historical setting. The mix of the historical and the supranatural also characterizes the *Mu T'ien-tzu chuan*. While the narrative at first appears to be a historical account of King Mu's journey to the western region of China, the nature of the narrative, in terms of both content and style, changes when King Mu arrives at a location called Yang-yü. Indeed, it was probably its numinous tone that prompted one of its redactors, Hsün Hsü, to comment "Although its content is not canonical, it is [truly] an ancient book."

There is, then, a unifying theme to the corpus of texts unearthed at Chi, aptly characterized by Benjamin Schwartz as "a strain toward transcendence." Schwartz so describes the nature of philosophies emerging late in the first millennium B.C., which he identifies as China's "axial age."<sup>26</sup> In speaking of the admittedly polysemous term "transcendence," Schwartz writes: "What I refer to here is something close to the etymological meaning of the word—a kind of standing back and looking beyond—a kind of critical, reflective questioning of the actual and a new vision of what lies beyond."<sup>27</sup>

The "strain toward transcendence" reflected in the texts discovered in the Chi vault involves a revalorization of the meaning and significance of human action. The combination of texts represents human action from at least two different perspectives. On the one hand, the historical representation, often using the literary form of the annal, organizes human experience in a framework that emphasizes relationships among events and people. On the other hand, the texts centering on divination, dreams, and strange events focus on conveying particular nuances of various personalities (mostly rulers) and of the circumstances in which they find themselves. The main focus is not action itself but rather motivations and facets of personality that contribute to the actualization of action. The supranatural texts thus emphasize the particularity of each individual's experience and in this way complement the one-dimensionality of annalistic history, which is much more of an abstract conceptual framework.



The Chi vault corpus of texts, therefore, reflects an interest in "transcending" ways of representing and evaluating experience that presumably can lead to a new understanding of the significance of human action. The interplay of perspectives reflected in the various texts seems to emphasize the idea of man as agent; they reveal a sensitivity to how man's actions can be evaluated and how this evaluation may be conveyed by subtle manners of verbalization.

To appreciate the literary value of the *Mu T'ien-tzu chuan*, one must really understand the context of the Chi vault corpus as a whole. A. F. P. Hulswé also recognized this and suggested that given the strong representation of supranatural texts accompanying the *Mu T'ien-tzu chuan*, the latter text may perhaps be a religious text similar in function to the Egyptian *Journey of the Dead* texts.<sup>28</sup> David Hawkes has argued that the journey of King Mu is similar to other magical journeys in Chinese literature that affirm the value of acquiring power, usually over the cosmos.<sup>29</sup> King Mu's travels, then, can be understood as an allegory for the legitimization of a divine right to rule. Both observations were made without the benefit of an in-depth study of the *Mu T'ien-tzu chuan*, yet are remarkably apt. I would qualify these comments modestly, by suggesting that rather than see the text as a literal "guide" to the underworld, or as an affirmation of King Mu's power, it seems more in line with the theme of transcendence that permeates the corpus to view the *Mu T'ien-tzu chuan* as a symbolic narrative of a personal journey in search of a new identity. King Mu's excursions, like the texts that accompanied the *Mu T'ien-tzu chuan*, may have served as a medium for introducing the question of the role of the individual in social transformation. Indeed, my analysis of the literary significance of the *Mu T'ien-tzu chuan* bears out this interpretation.

Before proceeding to these issues, however, it is necessary to review the textual history, including the initial compilation of the *Mu T'ien-tzu chuan*, the transmission of the narrative throughout the centuries, and the way the text was appreciated by readers and bibliophiles. Consideration of these issues should enable us to establish a "definitive" text upon which to base a literary analysis.

## 2

Almost one and a half years had elapsed after the initial discovery of the texts in the Chi vault before work began on the transcription and collation of the strips. The delay was due to the

understandably difficult logistics of transporting ten cartloads of strips to the Palace Library (*pi-shu chien* 秘書監), a problem compounded by the fact that many officials were engaged at that time in an attack against Sun Hao 孫皓, the emperor of Eastern Wu 東吳, and thus could not assist with the management and organization of the strips.<sup>30</sup> Emperor Wu Ti conquered Sun Hao and exterminated the Eastern Wu in the third month of the following year, the first of the T'ai-k'ang reign (A.D. 280). It was still some time, however, before bureaucratic affairs once again took precedence over military concerns and it was not until the spring of the next year, the second of T'ai-k'ang's reign (A.D. 281), that Hsün Hsü was finally commissioned to begin transcribing the ancient graphs into clerical script.<sup>31</sup>

Just what those ancient graphs looked like has been a source of some confusion and dispute. Chu Hsi-tsu lists three different opinions: (1) one view holds the graphs were written in small seal form; (2) another claims that the graphs were written in a "tadpole" form; (3) and yet another holds that the graphs were written in what is simply called an "ancient script" (*ku-wen*).<sup>32</sup> According to Chu Hsi-tsu, the graphs could not have been written in the small seal script, which was recognizable by most scholars of ancient texts; he concludes that the texts were written in the "ancient script," that is, the "script that was used during the Chou era"; "tadpole script" was simply a popular way of referring to the "ancient script of the Chou period."<sup>33</sup>

Although most scholars of the Chin dynasty were not familiar with ancient script, they had at their disposal a set of thirty five steles, the *Stone Classics of Three Graph Forms* (*San-t'i shih-ching* 三體石經) to aid them. Inscribed in the middle of the Cheng-shih reign (ca. A.D. 240-48) of the Wei dynasty, these stelae preserved the *Book of History* (*Shang shu* 尚書), the *Spring and Autumn Annals* and a section of the *Tso chuan* in three different scripts: ancient script, seal script (*chuan* 篆), and clerical script.<sup>34</sup> Since the graphs comprising the text of the *Bamboo Annals* were for the most part used in the classics, it was fairly easy for the compilers to complete the transcription of that work. The *Mu T'ien-tzu chuan* posed a greater challenge, because many of the graphs, such as the names of the steeds that King Mu used to draw his chariot, not only were unfamiliar but also were not written consistently throughout the text.<sup>35</sup> Nonetheless, within the remarkably short span of one year, Hsün Hsü and his colleague Ho Chiao finished the transcription and compilation of the *Mu T'ien-tzu chuan*.<sup>36</sup>

This edition of the *Mu T'ien-tzu chuan* was not the only one, however. After it had been in circulation for almost ten years, another edition appeared under a different title and, it seems, with different content in several places. This second edition was the work of Su Hsi, who had replaced the scholar Wei Heng as an editorial director (*chu-tso lang* 著作郎) of the Palace Library when the latter was killed in A.D. 291.<sup>37</sup> As we noted above, according to Wang Yin's biography of Su Hsi, the latter edited a text called *The Travels of a Chou King* (*Chou-wang yu-hsing*), which "relates King Mu's travels to the four seas and his visits to Ti T'ai 帝臺 and Hsi-wang-mu."<sup>38</sup> The edition of the *Mu T'ien-tzu chuan* that has survived until the present contains no mention of a visit to Ti T'ai, however; nor does the edition that had been annotated by Kuo P'u 郭璞 (276-324) in the latter part of the Chin dynasty. This is adduced by Chu Hsi-tsu from the fact that Kuo P'u did not cite the *Mu T'ien-tzu chuan* as a reference in his annotation to the "Central Mountain Classic" (*chung-shan ching* 中山經) chapter of the *Classic of Mountains and Oceans* (*Shan-hai-ching* 山海經), where Ti T'ai is mentioned.<sup>39</sup> Since Kuo cites the *Mu T'ien-tzu chuan* in many other annotations to the *Shan-hai-ching*, his failure to do so here indicates that he was not aware of any visit by King Mu to Ti T'ai.<sup>40</sup>

Obviously, however, there were readers familiar with Su Hsi's edition; as Chu Hsi-tsu points out, the visit to Ti T'ai is referred to in a rhyme-prose (*fu* 賦) written by Yen Yen-chih 顏延之.<sup>41</sup> Although we will never know the exact nature of Su Hsi's text, Chu Hsi-tsu makes the case that Su Hsi's text more accurately reflected the composition of the original text than did Hsün Hsü's. Hsün Hsü's edition had six *chüan* and included the story of King Mu's concubine Sheng Chi, whereas Su Hsi's edition had only five *chüan* because he considered the Sheng Chi story to be one of the "miscellaneous" texts of the corpus. And indeed, while the story exhibits some connection with the themes and style of the text of King Mu's travels, it seems to be more of a self-contained unit. Chu Hsi-tsu thus concludes that Su Hsi's edition was the more accurate representation of the original text.<sup>42</sup>

Second, Su Hsi's title, which represents a deliberate alteration of the title given to the text by Hsün Hsü, better reflects the content of the text. Indeed, even the description of the content of the *Mu T'ien-tzu chuan* given by Hsün Hsü in his preface employs the expression "the travels of King Mu" (*Chou Mu-wang yu-hsing* 周穆王遊行). This description is very similar to the title of Su Hsi's

edition. Chu points out that this phrase, like the titles of all of the other texts found in the vault, refers to the content of the text.<sup>43</sup> Hsün Hsü's addition of the term *chuan* 傳, which I have loosely translated as "narrative," designates the style and form of the text, rather than the content, and thus is not in keeping with the other examples. Su Hsi, Chu argues, did nothing more than substitute a more appropriate title for Hsün Hsü's misleading one; he changed the title because the text deals only with a few events in King Mu's life, whereas the term *chuan*—the same term used for biographies, especially in the official dynastic histories—has connotations that do not really reflect the true content of the text.<sup>44</sup>

Kuo P'u's ignorance of Su Hsi's edition attests to its short-lived transmission. There is no record of any text by that name in any bibliographic treatises from the Sui dynasty onward. With the disappearance of Su Hsi's text, Hsün Hsü's text was the only one in circulation, which had ramifications for how the *Mu T'ien-tzu chuan* was read and appreciated in subsequent centuries: in particular, Hsün Hsü's perhaps inadvertent use of the term *chuan* established for the *Mu T'ien-tzu chuan* a historical premise that greatly informed the way the text was categorized in bibliographies.

Citations of the *Mu T'ien-tzu chuan* in bibliographies of the dynastic histories and in private collections from the Sui dynasty through the Ch'ing dynasty will reinforce this point. The work is classified as a history, under the subcategory of "Diaries of Activity and Repose" (*ch'i-chü chu* 起居注) in seven bibliographies;<sup>45</sup> as a "nonofficial history" (*pieh-shih* 別史) or a "miscellaneous history" (*tsa-shih* 雜史) in three bibliographies; and as a biography in five bibliographies; finally, only in the Ch'ing dynasty is the text classified as fiction (*hsiao-shuo* 小說).<sup>46</sup> As these statistics indicate, for more than a thousand years the text was taken to be a historical work, although the shift to "miscellaneous history" suggests at least some reevaluation of the classification.

The establishment of the historical identification is, however, based on more than the use of the term *chuan* by Hsün Hsü in his title. The large number of bibliographies that list the *Mu T'ien-tzu chuan* under the subcategory of "Diaries of Activity and Repose" suggests that the very annalistic form used in the text, whereby the king's activities are recorded according to days of the sexagenary cycle and seasons (although never according to the reign year) was also a factor.<sup>47</sup> This annalistic mode, a form that predominates in early Chinese histories, was taken by many bibliophiles as proof of the text's historicity. This assumption held sway until the great

bibliophile Chi Yün 紀韻 compiled his *Ssu-k'u ch'üan shu tsung-mu* 四庫全書總目 and relegated the *Mu T'ien-tzu chuan* to the category of fiction. He advanced the following for his decision:

The *Mu T'ien-tzu chuan* was traditionally listed under the category of "Diaries of Activity and Repose" only because it employed the method of using years and dates to narrate [King Mu's] travels to the west. In fact [this premise] is absurd and without substance; [the text] is also not comparable with texts such as the *I Chou-shu* 逸周書. To consider [the *Mu T'ien-tzu chuan*] as an ancient text and thus preserve it is permissible. But to consider and record it as a veritable history [is not, for] the form is motley and the historical examples (i.e., the events of the narrative that might constitute history) are exposed [as invalid]. Today my intent in categorizing the text as fiction is to conform with what is appropriate, and not reward those who transform what is ancient into [something worthy of] suspicion.<sup>48</sup>

Chi Yün's comments touch upon issues that eventually became central to the scholarly work on the *Mu T'ien-tzu chuan* and then evolved into a polemical dispute. This polemic in part grew out of pan-Sumerian diffusionist theories of the origin of civilization.<sup>49</sup> These theories stimulated Chinese and Japanese scholars to reexamine ancient texts such as the *Mu T'ien-tzu chuan*, which contain information pertaining to early Chinese contact with the West.<sup>50</sup> To support the pan-Sumerian theories, two scholars, Liu Shih-p'ei (1884–1919) and Ting Ch'ien (1843–1919), produced extensive commentaries and annotations of the narrative of King Mu's westward journey, especially the references to geographical locations.<sup>51</sup>

Liu Shih-p'ei's and Ting Ch'ien's use of the *Mu T'ien-tzu chuan* to argue for the Western origins of Chinese civilization in turn stimulated a renewed interest in the question of whether the text was in fact history. At stake was not only the historical reputation of an ancient text but also the antiquity and uniqueness of Chinese civilization itself.<sup>52</sup> Even with the development of more sophisticated theories of the emergence of civilizations, which eventually vitiated the theories of pan-Sumerian diffusionism and in turn reaffirmed the uniqueness of Chinese civilization, the scholarly division over the true nature of the *Mu T'ien-tzu chuan* did not abate.

Despite the text's annalistic mode, which was taken as the sign of its historicity, there were scholars who questioned this judgment because of the fantastic nature of some of the narration or because of apparent anachronistic references.<sup>53</sup> They concluded that the text was a "forged" rendition of historical events (*wei-shu* 偽書).<sup>54</sup> The debate over the "historicity" of the text, then, was in fact a debate over the date of composition of the text.<sup>55</sup>

Advocates of the text's historicity based their arguments on evidence derived mainly from calendrical and geographical considerations. Some scholars including the Ming dynasty bibliophile Hu Ying-lin 胡應麟 (1551–1602) and two modern experts, Wei T'ing-sheng and Ku Shih,<sup>56</sup> argue that the use of the Chou calendrical system supports a Western Chou dynasty date of composition. Both scholars contend that the use of the seasonal divisions "first month of" (*meng* 孟), "second month of" (*chung* 仲), and "third month of" (*chi* 季), which appear frequently in the text, reflects adjustments made to the Hsia calendar by the Chou court.<sup>57</sup> Others argue the opposite, however, that references to the seasonal divisions in fact suggest a late date of composition. Huang P'ei-jung, for example, has argued that these divisions appear to be a late (Warring States) invention.<sup>58</sup> Indeed, recent scholarship on the dating system used in Western Chou bronze inscriptions has documented the use of the Hsia calendrical system, one that begins the year at the spring equinox, that is, on the second month after the month of the winter solstice, as a basis for the civil calendar.<sup>59</sup> Finally, it is clear from Chin and Wei bronze inscriptions, as well as from the *Bamboo Annals*, that the Hsia calendar was used by these states. It is thus likely that the calendrical system used in the *Mu T'ien-tzu chuan* also accords with the Hsia system.<sup>60</sup>

King Mu's travel itinerary itself has also been taken by some as an affirmation of the "authenticity" of the *Mu T'ien-tzu chuan*. By identifying all of the place-names in the narrative with real locations, scholars offer what they believe to be geographical evidence supporting a Western Chou date of composition.<sup>61</sup> Wei T'ing-sheng, for example, argues that the reference to Tsung-chou 宗周 indicates that the text could only have been written during the Western Chou, for this was the appellation used by the Chou to refer to their capital, where the king resided and conducted governmental affairs.<sup>62</sup> Nonetheless, Ku Chieh-kang and Wang Kuo-wei cite the same reference to Tsung-chou to argue that the text was written later than the Western Chou.<sup>63</sup> As Ku argues, a geographical reading of the text indicates that Tsung-chou refers to the Eastern Chou

capital Lo-yang 洛陽, and thus must be read as an anachronistic reference to the Chou capital. Wei T'ing-sheng acknowledges that the geography of King Mu's itinerary in the *Mu T'ien-tzu chuan* makes it impossible to locate Tsung-chou in any place other than Lo-yang, but he postulates a relocation of the capital to Lo-yang in the first year of King Mu's reign. The appellation Tsung-chou was then used, in Wei's reckoning, to refer to Lo-yang (originally called Ch'eng-chou 成周), while the appellation of the former capital was changed to Fang 芳.<sup>64</sup> He cites several bronze inscriptions that speak of King Mu engaging in recreational activities at Fang to argue that Fang was not a governmental center during King Mu's reign, but only a place for leisure.<sup>65</sup>

Wei is unconvincing. His interpretation of several inscriptions is problematic, and these problems are compounded by the imprecise criteria used to date the bronzes. For example, he dates the *Shih shang ho* 土上盃 and *Shih shang yu* 卣 vessels to King Mu's reign, even though the inscriptions on these vessels connect them to that of the Ling 令 vessels, which are dated by most specialists (including Wei himself) to the reign of King Chao 昭王.<sup>66</sup> Moreover, he misreads the sacrificial term 饗 for a word meaning "to reside in" (*kuan* 館) and thus reads the first line of the inscription as, "It was in the year when King [Mu] performed the Yüeh sacrifice at Tsung chou and then went to reside [to escape the heat] in Fang."<sup>67</sup> Wei's thesis is further compromised by his failure to deal adequately with the indisputable absence of textual evidence pointing to a possible eastern relocation of capitals by King Mu. He argues only that this merely reveals a negative bias against King Mu.<sup>68</sup>

Besides the aforementioned geographical considerations, other evidence based more on content was also adduced to prove a late date of composition. In his extensive study of the *Mu T'ien-tzu chuan*, for example, Wei Chü-hsien cites Wang Kuo-wei's study on the continual attacks made by the western "barbarian tribes," the K'un-yi 昆夷 and the Hsien-yün 玁狁, which sparked quite a bit of unrest within the Western Chou court.<sup>69</sup> Wei argues that given this historical context, the premise underlying the *Mu T'ien-tzu chuan* is unrealistic: King Mu could not have been presented repeatedly with grand tribute by the various tribes he met on his trip across the western steppes of China.<sup>70</sup> This view is corroborated by recent studies indicating that the nature of the political and cultural control exerted by the Chou court over the inhabitants of the Yellow River basin and beyond was not as far-reaching or stable as had been traditionally believed. King Mu's own father, King Chao, was killed

along with his entire army in a battle with the southern Ch'u, a catastrophe that had disastrous and enduring political ramifications for the Chou court and for King Mu.<sup>71</sup> Thus, the image of the revered and benevolent monarch presented in the *Mu T'ien-tzu chuan* may not reflect the reality of King Mu's reign.

The apparent influence of other texts, most notably the *Book of Odes* (*Shih ching* 詩經) and the "Tributaries of Yü" ("Yü kung" 禹貢) chapter of the *Shang shu* has also been adduced as proof of the late date of composition of the text.<sup>72</sup> Not only is the poem "Nan shan yu t'ai" 南山有臺, poem 171 of the "Lesser Elegies" ("Hsiao ya" 小雅) section of the *Shih ching* referred to in the *Mu T'ien-tzu chuan*,<sup>73</sup> but in at least one instance a strophe of another poem is identical to that of poem 161, "Lu ming" 鹿鳴, also of the "Hsiao ya".<sup>74</sup> Rémi Mathieu also sees a connection between an anecdote about the capture of a tiger in the *Mu T'ien-tzu chuan* and poem 195 "Hsiao min" 小旻.<sup>75</sup> As for the relationship between the "Yü kung" and the *Mu T'ien-tzu chuan*, the obvious textual overlap of the places visited by both King Mu and Yü and the emphasis on receiving tribute from natives of these places suggests that the latter text was influenced, if not written in imitation of, the former text. Since most scholars agree on a Warring States date of composition for the "Yü kung," the composition of the *Mu T'ien-tzu chuan* must also have occurred during or after this time.<sup>76</sup>

In addition to issues of content, linguistic factors are also brought to bear on dating the composition of the text. Wei Chü-hsien argues that the prevalence of the prepositions *yü* 於 (Wei counts thirty occurrences within the text) and *yi* 以, especially the use of the latter in constructions denoting the arrival of a subject at a place, bespeaks a late Warring States date of composition because that is when these constructions were first used consistently and frequently.<sup>77</sup> The same can be said for the way the final particle *yeh* 也 and the referential *shih* 是 (this) are used in the text.<sup>78</sup> Bernhard Karlgren's conclusion regarding the date of composition of the *Tso chuan* was also based in part on the use of the particle *yü*.<sup>79</sup> His Warring States date of composition corroborates Wei's findings.

Finally, Rémi Mathieu brings another interesting issue, that of the unique literary nature of the *Mu T'ien-tzu chuan*, to bear on the question of the date of its composition. He points out that the *Mu T'ien-tzu chuan* is the earliest extant narrative that recounts the adventures of a man rather than those of a demiurge, and in this way it differs from the "Yü kung."<sup>80</sup> He adds that the human element of the text is what marks it as "fiction" (albeit historical fiction) as



opposed to "mythology," and that this most likely reflects a late stage in the development of Chinese narrative modes. While Mathieu's definitions of fiction and mythology are too amorphous to be critically useful, his insight vis-à-vis the relevance of the literary mode to the problem of dating the text is important. One might add that the incorporation of a series of forms or styles, such as poetry and the *ch'i-chü* annalistic form, to create a hybrid medium, is also especially significant, for this eventually becomes a generic feature of (vernacular) fiction.

Before examining issues of textual filiation and transmission, a word should be said about the seemingly oral provenance of much of the content of the *Mu T'ien-tzu chuan*. The consistent use of the phrase "it is said" (*yüeh* 曰) suggests an oral dimension; it signals information provided by the implied narrator to illuminate the significance of King Mu's actions or even just to impart narrative information concerning the voyage. This is not to say that the *Mu T'ien-tzu chuan* was exclusively an oral composition, but merely that elements of the text derive from the "storehouse of cultural information" that is preserved orally by a society.<sup>81</sup> I suggest below that these elements are the product of a specific form of symbolic production and that their incorporation into a written text was to a large part determined by certain social and cultural trends prominent during the Warring States period.

Thus, I believe that historical, linguistic, and stylistic factors rule out the possibility that *Mu T'ien-tzu chuan* is an accurate detailing of the daily actions of King Mu as he traveled to the western sphere of his domain. In this I concur with the conclusions of Wei Chü-hsien, Rémi Mathieu, and other Western scholars<sup>82</sup> that the text is the product of the Warring States era. But what does this mean for our understanding of the text? The absence of any Chinese studies that address this question reveals the scholarly ramifications of the polemical debate over the text's date of composition: they set the parameters for the way the text was read and appreciated. Scholars who believed the text was composed during King Mu's reign, directed their study toward substantiating the historicity of the events narrated; those who believed that the text was composed later than King Mu's reign and thus constituted only a rendition of events that (may have) occurred, deemed it unworthy of vigorous analysis. Thus while scholars such as Wei Chü-hsien negated the historicity of the text by arguing for a Warring States date of composition, they never troubled to examine the significance of the text from other (that is, literary, religious) perspectives.<sup>83</sup>

Several Western scholars had intimated at the rich possibilities of such studies, but never seriously pursued them.<sup>84</sup> Only with Rémi Mathieu was the text analyzed from literary, sociological, and mythological perspectives. While Mathieu's study, as one reviewer has observed, is "by far the best study of this book in a Western language, Mathieu's efforts fail in three areas: (1) establishment of the text, (2) scholarly methodology, and (3) bibliography."<sup>85</sup> Regrettably, many of the commentaries that address issues surrounding textual variants were neither consulted nor mentioned by Mathieu. Nor does he establish a "definitive text" upon which to base an in-depth literary analysis. These are issues of great significance to a literary appreciation of the text, and bear some discussion of them here.

Both Ku Shih and Wei T'ing-sheng list over thirty different editions of the *Mu T'ien-tzu chuan* including two Yüan 元 dynasty printed editions (*k'an-pen* 刊本), ten printed editions, five hand-copied editions (*ch'ao-pen* 抄本), and two collated and revised editions (*chiao-pen* 校本) from the Ming 明 dynasty; two hand-copied, and six collated and revised editions from the Ch'ing 清 dynasty.<sup>86</sup> Of the last type of edition, Hung I-hsüan's 洪頤宣 (1765-1837) collated and revised edition is by far the most famous for it is the one preserved in the *Ssu-pu pei-yao* collection.<sup>87</sup> Based on the *Han-wei ts'ung-shu* edition of the text, Hung compared this edition with the editions of Ch'eng Jung, Wu Kuan, Wang Ming-chi, as well as the *Cheng-t'ung Taoist Canon* editions. He also incorporated annotations of the *Shih chi* and the *Han shu* 漢書 that cite the *Mu T'ien-tzu chuan*, as well as citations preserved in T'ang and Sung encyclopedias.<sup>88</sup>

In addition to the aforementioned collated editions there are several others that have extensive comments and annotations. Ch'en Feng-heng's 陳逢衡 *Mu T'ien-tzu chuan-chu pu-cheng* 穆天子傳注補正<sup>89</sup> incorporates several texts that were not considered by Hung I-hsüan and the outstanding precision of his annotations, to quote Ku Shih, "goes far beyond those of Hung [I-hsüan] and Ti [Yün-sheng]."<sup>90</sup> T'an Ts'ui's 檀萃 voluminous *Mu T'ien-tzu chuan chu-shu* 穆天子傳注疏, although often criticized for containing far-fetched interpretations of the text, nonetheless is valuable for the sometimes more literary tenor of his comments.<sup>91</sup> T'an also provides appendices that contain a wealth of information on traditions surrounding Hsi-wang-mu and K'un-lun 崑崙 mountain.

While variants of specific Chinese characters distinguish many of the editions of the texts, the major distinction derives from differences in the content and placement of the third poem of a

sequence of exchanges between King Mu and Hsi-wang-mu in the third *chüan* of the text. In the recension preserved in the *Han-wei ts'ung-shu* (which served as the basis for the Ch'ing scholar Hung I-hsüan's collated and revised edition), the poems are presented in the context of a dialogue initiated by Hsi-wang-mu. King Mu responds and the third poem is then cast in the voice of Hsi-wang-mu responding once again to the king. In the recension preserved in the *Taoist Canon* and in Fan Ch'in's edition, however, the third poem is not in the voice of Hsi-wang-mu but in the voice of King Mu as he leaves Hsi-wang-mu and laments his neglect of his subjects.<sup>92</sup> Furthermore, the latter recension includes four lines that do not appear in the former, while the former text contains two lines that do not appear in the latter. In establishing a text upon which to base my own literary analysis, it was necessary to examine the reasons adduced by commentators and editors to support the authority of one recension over another.

The poems as they appear in both recensions are as follows:

*Tao tsang* Recension

*Han-wei ts'ung-shu* Recension

He thought of the people  
distressed and created a  
poem:

Hsi-wang-mu responded again  
with a poem:

Toward that western land [I  
traveled];  
To reside in its wilds.

To the western lands [you  
came]  
And resided [with me] in the  
wilds.

[With] tigers and leopards [I  
formed a pack;  
[With] the black magpies [I  
interacted.

[With] tigers and leopards  
[you] formed a pack  
[With] black magpies [you]  
interacted.

The glorious mandate cannot  
be changed;

The glorious mandate cannot  
be changed

I am God on High's Son of  
Heaven.

I am the daughter of God on  
High.

There is a great mandate but I  
do not measure up.

What are those people of the  
world,

When I consider the favor  
[given me by] the people

That you should prepare to  
leave me again?<sup>93</sup>

My tears fall profusely.

I blow the flutes and vibrate  
the reeds

[Although] flutes pipe and  
 reeds vibrate;  
 The depths of my heart  
 flutters [with anxiety]  
 A child of the people of the  
 world,  
 [In me] Heaven places its  
 hopes.

其念世民作憂以吟曰  
 徂彼西土  
 爰居其野  
 虎豹為羣  
 於鵠與處  
 嘉命不遷  
 我惟帝天子  
 大命而不可稱  
 顧世民之恩  
 流涕崑隕  
 吹笙鼓簧  
 中心翔翔  
 世民之子  
 惟天之望

The depths of my heart  
 flutters;  
 A child of the people of the  
 world,  
 [In you] Heaven places its  
 hopes.

西王母又為天子作吟曰  
 徂彼西土  
 爰居其野  
 虎豹為羣  
 於鵠與處  
 嘉命不遷  
 我惟帝女  
 彼何世民  
 又將去予  
 吹笙鼓簧  
 中心翔翔  
 世民之子  
 惟天之望

Both versions of the poem were known to most commentators. Hung I-hsüan, for example, notes that in another "contemporary edition" of the *Mu T'ien-tzu chuan* the poem appears later in the text, but he argues that the text is corrupt.<sup>94</sup> His decision to disregard this alternative reading was informed by his belief in the authority of an excerpt of the *Mu T'ien-tzu chuan*, cited by Kuo P'u in an annotation of the *Shan-hai-ching*, which attributes authorship of the third poem to Hsi-wang-mu.<sup>95</sup> Hung argues that Kuo's annotation must have been based on one of the earliest editions of the text and thus represents a text devoid of the corruptions that accrued as the text was transmitted over the centuries. Hung also believes that Kuo's rendition preserves a narrative logic that is lacking in the alternative recension.<sup>96</sup> Notwithstanding Hung's considerable accomplishment in providing a collated and well-informed annotated edition of the *Mu T'ien-tzu chuan*, his reasoning for rejecting the alternative recension is not convincing. As for Kuo P'u's "authoritative" annotation upon which Hung's recension is based, it does not preclude the possibility of an equally early but different textual tradition. As we noted above, Kuo P'u was not even familiar with Su