

# I

## Han Epideictic Rhapsody

### *The Prototype of Panegyric Poetry*



In the Chinese tradition, no study of panegyric poetry can proceed without first examining the *fu* 賦, or “rhapsody,” of the Former Han dynasty (206 BCE–8 CE). Although *fu* had its distinct generic conventions,<sup>1</sup> the Han epideictic rhapsody (*dafu* 大賦),<sup>2</sup> as panegyric literature par excellence, had great influence, in both style and content, on the panegyric poetry of later periods.

One of the most famous and representative works of epideictic rhapsody, “Rhapsody on an Imperial Excursion and Hunt” 天子遊獵賦,<sup>3</sup> illustrates the major features of the genre. Sima Xiangru 司馬相如 (179–118 BCE), the greatest writer in this genre, wrote it for Emperor Wu. This work, like the other epideictic rhapsodies of the Han dynasty, was primarily a product of imperial patronage. The relationship between Emperor Wu and his court officials-writers had a direct effect on its characteristics.

By all accounts, Emperor Wu’s half-century reign was fateful for Chinese history and culture. He consolidated the power of the central government by carving up the feudal kingdoms among the princes and among their relatives in order to weaken them.<sup>4</sup> He limited their authority to that of collecting taxes for essential needs, and he forbade them to participate in state affairs.<sup>5</sup> In an event of special significance for this study, he executed Liu An 劉安 (179–122 BCE), the Prince of Huainan 淮南王, for allegedly plotting against the central government. Liu An was well-known for his patronage of learning and literature. His death, together with the executions of “tens of thousands” in his court, marked the eradication of the feudal system established during the Western Zhou period (eleventh century to 771 BCE).<sup>6</sup> The intellectual

freedom enjoyed by writers and persuaders during the Warring States era, which had already been severely limited and threatened since the Qin reunification in 221 BCE, came to an end.

Emperor Wu's measures to maintain control and to repress dissent were unprecedentedly harsh. He reinstated the crime of defamation, which had been removed from the penal code in the early Han dynasty. He furthermore set up a law regarding the "crime of inner dissent" (*fufei zui* 腹非罪, literally, the "crime of criticizing [the government] in the stomach"),<sup>7</sup> which allowed the government to prosecute and execute people who were only presumed to disagree with its policies. The result was that during Emperor Wu's reign, outspoken criticism of the government, which had been treasured in antiquity as an important part of intellectuals' responsibility and identity, was rarely heard. The *Hanshu* 漢書 (*History of the Han Dynasty*) notes that at that time "ministers and government officials all aimed to flatter [the monarch] in order to secure their safety."<sup>8</sup>

The severity of such laws was fully matched by Emperor Wu's own cruelty and vanity. He was a reasonably good poet and liked to show off his literary ability whenever he could.<sup>9</sup> But above all he was an unpredictable and cruel tyrant. During his reign he executed four "counselors-in-chief" (*chengxiang* 丞相) and four "censors-in-chief" (*yushi dafu* 御史大夫). Those positions, together with that of "defender-in-chief" (*taiwei* 太尉), made up the revered "three dukes" (*sangong* 三公), the highest government officials during the Han dynasty.<sup>10</sup> He ordered Sima Qian castrated for defending a defeated general, Li Ling 李陵.<sup>11</sup> The *Zizhi tongjian* 資治通鑑 (*Comprehensive Mirror for Aid in Governance*) by Sima Guang (1019–86) notes an occasion that might best illustrate Emperor Wu's attitude toward intellectuals. It states that despite his repeated orders that intellectuals be recruited to court positions, he often executed them for insignificant offenses. When one minister, Ji An 汲黯 (d. 112 BCE), tried to persuade His Majesty to stop this, Emperor Wu

laughed and derided him: "In every generation there are talented people. I am only concerned that one may not be able to recognize them. If one is able to recognize them, why should he be concerned that there won't be enough of them? The so-called 'talented people' are like useful tools. If they refuse to dedicate their use, they are no different from people without talent. What do I do with them if I do not execute them?"<sup>12</sup>

Small wonder that later in his life, Sima Xiangru "showed no interest in affairs of state and often stayed home under the pretext of illness."<sup>13</sup> He must have been acutely aware of the dangers awaiting an official at Emperor Wu's

court and deliberately distanced himself from it in order to protect himself and his family.<sup>14</sup>

This effort to centralize political power was paralleled on the intellectual front by Emperor Wu's cultural policy. He adopted the advice of Dong Zhongshu "to abolish the hundred schools and enshrine Confucianism alone" (廢黜百家, 獨尊儒術). Dong Zhongshu's memorial to the emperor on this issue sheds light on the intellectual atmosphere at Emperor Wu's court:

The grand union embodied in the *Chunqiu* 春秋 (*Annals of Spring and Autumn*) is a constant of heaven and earth, an eternal principle of past and present. Nowadays, however, teachers pursue different ways, people have different theories, and the hundred schools adopt different methods and promote different arguments. This makes it impossible for Your Majesty to have unity. Laws and regulations often change, so people below do not know what to abide by. I, your humble subject, believe that anything that is not included in the Six Classics and contradicts the theory of Confucius should be eliminated, so that it will not compete [with Confucius' theory]. Only when those vile and misguided theories are eliminated can principles be unified and laws clarified; only after this can people know what to follow.<sup>15</sup>

The "grand union" (*dayitong* 大一統) that Dong Zhongshu envisioned was evidently the theoretical equivalent of an authoritarian monarchy. It placed the monarch at the center of the universe and society because he was seen as the only means whereby all elements, natural and social, were unified. Emperor Wu was reportedly so pleased with this memorial that he immediately assigned Dong Zhongshu a position in the court of his brother, Prince Yi.<sup>16</sup>

The canonization of Confucianism entailed embracing the Confucian view of literature, which was manifested in Confucius' remarks about the *Shijing*. This view can best be characterized as moral, political, and pragmatic, as summarized in Confucius' famous comment that the poems in the *Shijing* could teach people to "stimulate [will], observe [social customs], hold together [members of a community], and voice grievance [about social injustice] (興觀群怨)."<sup>17</sup> Dong Zhongshu thus wrote in his *Chunqiu fanlu*: "Gentlemen know that those in power cannot convince people by evil, so they have put together the Six Classics to nourish them. The books of *Poetry* and *History* express their will, *Rites* and *Music* purify their cultivation, *The Book of Changes* and *Annals of Spring and Autumn* clarify their wisdom. Grand indeed are the entire Six Disciplines, but each has its own strength."<sup>18</sup>

Poetry was viewed as an integral part of a political and social agenda. During the early Han this concept was also applied to rhapsody.<sup>19</sup> This created a

tension that was to profoundly affect the production and interpretation of this genre. On the one hand, as a form of court literature, epideictic rhapsody was written to entertain imperial rulers, but on the other hand, according to the Confucian tradition it had to have a moral and political function. These two demands often clashed, producing a great deal of tension and discordance in the texts.

Emperor Wu enjoyed patronizing rhapsody writers. The *Hanshu* records that he often commissioned them to write on occasions ranging from solemn state ceremonies to lighthearted recreational activities.<sup>20</sup> This encouragement led to the flourishing of epideictic rhapsodies, but it also severely limited their scope and content. During the reign of Emperor Wu, the phrase *changyou* 倡優, “entertainer” (also written *paiyou* 俳優) came to be associated with court poets. Mei Gao 枚皋 (fl. 128 BCE), a well-known rhapsody writer,<sup>21</sup> lamented that at Emperor Wu’s court “writing rhapsody was nothing but to entertain, like a jester. [The poet] was treated as an entertainer.”<sup>22</sup> In the court of Emperor Wu, where the “grand unity” ruled, epideictic rhapsodies could at most serve as “decoration of the grand cause” of the empire, as Ban Gu 班固 (32–92) noted later.<sup>23</sup> Glorification of the empire and its ruler became the only legitimate topic for epideictic rhapsody during this time.

This was the milieu that produced Sima Xiangru’s epideictic rhapsodies, including “Rhapsody on an Imperial Excursion and Hunt.” The *Shiji* 史記 (*Record of the Grand Historian*) by Sima Qian 司馬遷 (ca. 145–86 BCE) notes that Emperor Wu summoned Sima Xiangru after reading and being greatly impressed by his “Rhapsody of Sir Vacuous” 子虛賦, which Sima Xiangru had composed earlier at the court of the Filial Prince of Liang 梁孝王. Sima Xiangru told Emperor Wu that the “Rhapsody of Sir Vacuous” was unremarkable because it dealt with the “matters of feudal lords.” To delight His Majesty even more, he proposed to compose a rhapsody about an “imperial excursion and hunt.”<sup>24</sup>

“Rhapsody on an Imperial Excursion and Hunt” is cast in the form of a dialogue. It takes place in the kingdom of Qi, among three personae, Sir Vacuous 子虛, an envoy sent to Qi by the king of Chu, Master Improbable 烏有先生, a resident of Qi, and Lord No-such 亡是公, a spokesman for the Son of Heaven. The first part of the rhapsody, “Rhapsody of Sir Vacuous,” consists mainly of Sir Vacuous’s boastful description of the Chu king’s hunt at Yunmeng. It aims to provide a panoramic view of the place and of the activities carried out there, in order to impress and overwhelm his audience.<sup>25</sup> One passage reads:

其石則	Of stones there are:	
赤玉玫瑰	Red jade, rose stone,	

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琳璿昆吾	Orbed jades, vulcan stone	
璣玳玄厲	Aculith, dark polishing stone.	
礪石礪礪	Quartz, and the warrior rock.	64
其東則有蕙圃	To the east there is Basil Garden,	
衡蘭芷若	With wild ginger, thoroughwort, angelica, pollia,	
芎藭菖蒲	Hemlock parsley, sweet flag,	
苕藜蘼蕪	Lovage, selinum,	68
諸柘巴苴	Sugar cane, and mioga. <sup>26</sup>	

This passage enumerates some stones and plants at Yunmeng. As the enumerative word *qi* 其 (“of”) suggests, the text lists objects in every direction. This rhetorical device was modeled after the usage of the persuaders of the Warring States period, who aimed to dazzle their audience with their rhetorical sweep.<sup>27</sup> The rhapsody then goes on to describe in extravagant terms and minute detail the Chu king’s hunting excursion at Yunmeng and the entertainment that accompanied it.

Master Improbable, however, is unimpressed. He gives another, shorter description of the vastness and abundance of Qi, claiming hyperbolically that Qi “could swallow eight or nine parks like Yunmeng, / And they would not even be a splinter or straw in its throat” (吞若雲夢者八九，於其胸中曾不蒂芥). He accuses Sir Vacuous of “extravagantly speaking of dissolute pleasures and vaunting wasteful ostentation” (奢言淫樂而顯侈糜).<sup>28</sup> In addition to refusing to admit that Qi’s territory is less vast and majestic than Chu’s, Master Improbable wants to claim moral superiority for his Qi. It is at this moment in the tug-of-war between Sir Vacuous and Master Improbable, the representatives of two feudal kingdoms, that Lord No-such, the spokesman for the Son of Heaven, joins the debate.

The second part of the rhapsody, “Rhapsody on the Imperial Park,” opens with a contemptuous grin by Lord No-such. In the voice of an authoritative judge, he dismisses the words of both Sir Vacuous and Master Improbable and accuses them of “wishing to overwhelm each other with wasteful ostentation and surpass one another in wild excesses” (欲以奢侈相勝，荒淫相越). He warns them that “these things cannot serve to spread fame or enhance a reputation, but are enough to defame your rulers and do injury to yourselves” (此不可以揚名發譽，而適足以貶君自損也).<sup>29</sup> Having passed such judgment on his two opponents and thereby proclaimed his moral authority over them, Lord No-such, in a remarkably ironic turn, derides them for being provincial but goes on to give a much more extravagant description of what is “truly great and beautiful” (*juli* 巨麗), the Shanglin or Imperial Park of the Son of Heaven. This description is clearly designed to “overwhelm” his opponents with precisely the same “wasteful ostentation” and “wild excess” of which he

has just accused them. It constitutes the bulk of the much lengthier “Rhapsody on the Imperial Park” and is written in a language that in its elaboration, sophistication, magnificence, and abstruseness surpasses by far that of “Rhapsody of Sir Vacuous.” Indeed, this rhapsody has become the locus classicus of many conventional features of the genre, including the tendency to use “excessively ornate words and amplify them to the extent that it is impossible to add more to them.”<sup>30</sup> The following description of birds in the Imperial Park provides a taste of this extravagance:

鴻鷓鵒鵠	Geese, kingfishers, swans, bustards,	
鴛鴦屬玉	Wild honkers, white egrets,	96
交精旋目	Squacco herons, revolving eyes,	
煩鶩庸渠	Hornbills, dike ducks,	
箴疵鷓盧	Needle beaks, and cormorants,	
群浮乎其	Swim in flocks on the surface,	100
汎淫泛濫	Freely floating, wandering at will,	
隨風澹淡	Tossed and tumbled with the wind. <sup>31</sup>	

In this passage we see the characteristic deployment of enumeration and cataloging in the naming of birds.<sup>32</sup> About a dozen different birds are enumerated in this short passage, some directly and others via synecdoches. In portraying their movements, the poet adopts numerous alliterative and binomial phrases such as *phienjiem phienlam*, *ziwapiəm damdam* 汎淫泛濫, 隨風澹淡 (“freely floating, wandering at will / Tossed and tumbled with the wind”),<sup>33</sup> to enhance the musical quality of his language. Because this rhetorical device is deployed consistently to cover many categories, it creates a dazzling effect. The audience only gets a general and overwhelming impression; the details become blurred as the senses are flooded with data in quick succession. The result is the near elimination of the referential quality of language as the audience is forced to focus its attention on the material aspects of the poet’s medium.<sup>34</sup> Yves Hervouet has used the term *impressifs* to characterize the diction in this and others of Sima Xiangru’s rhapsodies. They aim to create a general effect rather than provide accurate, specific descriptions of objects.<sup>35</sup>

The following description of the movements of rivers in the Imperial Park provides further illustration of this rhetorical style:

洶湧澎湃	Soaring and leaping, surging and swelling,	
湍弗必汨	Spurting and spouting, rushing and racing	52
偪側泌瀨	Pressing and pushing, clashing and colliding,	
橫流逆折	Flowing uncontrolled, bending back,	
轉騰激洑	Wheeling and rearing, beating and battering,	

滂溥沆漑	Swelling and surging, troublous and turbulent.	56
穹隆雲橈	Loftily arching, billowing like clouds,	
宛潭膠盤	Sinuously snaking, curling and coiling,	
逾波趨湓	Outracing their own waves, rushing to the chasms,	
蒞蒞下瀨	Lap, lap, they descend to the shoals.	60
批巖衝擁	Striking the bluffs, hurtling against the dikes,	
奔揚滯沛	Racing and swelling, spraying and spuming.	
臨坻注壑	Nearing the sandbars, they pour into gullies,	
灑灑震墜	Plashing and splashing as they tumble downward.	64

In most parts of the “Rhapsody on an Imperial Excursion and Hunt,” the Son of Heaven is a mute observer. At its end, however, His Majesty is given the chance to make the final judgment. But this is done only indirectly. The emperor is not presented as participating in person in the dialogue among these three personae; rather, his speech is reported by his spokesman, Lord No-such. Immediately after a passage describing dancing women performing at a banquet (lines 405–24), just as the audience’s “spirit” (*hun* 魂) and “heart” (*xin* 心) are becoming enthralled by the poet’s portrayal of the dancers’ beauty and charm, the emperor, in an abrupt revelation, declares that what he has seen “is too extravagant.” He “dissolves the feast, ends the hunt,” and decrees: “Let all land that can be reclaimed and opened up: / Be made into farmland / In order to provide for the common people!” (地可墾闢，悉為農郊，以贍萌隸).<sup>36</sup> He then issues numerous policies of the sort that one expects only from the most enlightened rulers in antiquity. After this, the text switches back to Lord No-such, who describes in considerable detail how the emperor is *already* engaged in carrying out these policies. Finally, Lord No-such gives yet another lecture to Sir Vacuous and Master Improbable. This time he stresses the hubristic nature of their lords’ behavior: “If someone of the insignificance of a vassal lord enjoys the extravagance fit only for an Emperor, I fear the common people will suffer the ill effects” (夫以諸侯之細，而樂萬乘之侈，僕恐百姓被其尤也). The rhapsody ends with a portrayal of the utterly dazed and humbled Sir Vacuous and Master Improbable:

Thereupon, the two gentlemen paled, changed expressions, and seemed dispirited and lost in thought. As they retreated and backed away from the mat, they said, “Your humble servants have been stubborn and uncouth, and ignorant of the prohibitions. Now this day we have received your instruction. We respectfully accept your command.

於是二子愀然改容，超若自失，逡巡避席，曰：鄙人固陋，不知忌諱，乃今日見教，謹受命矣。<sup>37</sup>

The political character of this ending is blatantly apparent. Lord No-such's victory over his opponents is symbolic of the central government's triumph over the feudal kingdoms, and his grandiose description of the Imperial Park can be seen as a glorification of the empire and its monarch. Many critics have pointed out the discrepancy between this section of the text and its main body. In comparison with the magnificent rhetoric in the bulk of the rhapsody, the political message at the end seems so jejune and abrupt that it is both unconvincing and awkward. But however abrupt and incongruent it might be on the textual and structural levels, it is in fact most appropriate when we consider this rhapsody as a product of imperial patronage. Emperor Wu's love of "refined words" (*wenci* 文詞) was well-known. The *Shiji* records that he once summoned Master Shen 申公, a famous scholar of the *Shijing*, to his court. When the emperor asked him how to govern the nation, Master Shen, who was already in his eighties, merely replied that "to govern a nation one does not need a great deal of words. One just tries hard to do it, that is all." Emperor Wu, who was expecting to hear "refined words" from him, was very disappointed.<sup>38</sup> This episode suggests that there were occasions when Emperor Wu was interested only in beautiful rhetoric, and Sima Xiangru knew this well. But he was also aware of Emperor Wu's policies to encourage Confucian learning, which mandated that literature be assigned a political function. Sima Xiangru did what was expected of him, providing both "refined words" and a perfunctory nod at Confucianism. Because it is nearly impossible to harmonize these two aspects, tensions and incongruities are the inevitable results.

This seemingly incongruent part of the text nevertheless represents an enduring feature of epideictic rhapsody, namely, its *feng*, or "indirect criticism." Because it was dangerous to directly admonish the Son of Heaven, Sima Xiangru put his political advice in the mouth of His Majesty to create the impression that it came spontaneously from Emperor Wu himself. He turned his political vision into actual practices of the emperor. In Aristotelian terms, Sima Xiangru purposefully conflated deliberative and demonstrative rhetoric. This strategy might have failed to convince readers of later generations, but it certainly pleased Emperor Wu, for he immediately appointed Sima Xiangru a court attendant.

In reality, Sima Xiangru's strategy exerted no positive influence on Emperor Wu, who went on to expand the Imperial Park.<sup>39</sup> But this did not stop Sima Qian and others from believing that the strategy served a didactic purpose. Sima Qian was the first critic to use the term *fengjian* 諷諫, "indirect criticism/admonishment," to characterize the didactic function of this rhapsody. According to him, even though the poem lavishly portrayed the parks of feudal lords and the emperor, "at its end it returns to frugality."<sup>40</sup>



Other critics, however, have tended to regard the criticism embedded in the rhapsody as perfunctory. Burton Watson, for example, considered the gesture to be “merely a bow to the didactic convention.”<sup>41</sup> But however ineffective and perfunctory it might be as moral persuasion, this strategy nonetheless provided Sima Xiangru with an effective pretext to pursue his literary interest and to obtain patronage from an emperor enamored with “refined words.”

Hervouet observed that Sima Xiangru was the first Chinese writer to regard literary production as a matter of primary importance in his life.<sup>42</sup> Given the milieu at Emperor Wu’s court, epideictic rhapsody, with its emphasis on artistry and grandeur, seemed to be the best literary form with which to pursue his goal. On the surface such writing glorified a powerful empire and its monarch, but in doing so it also celebrated the literary creativity of the poet, because the former could be done only through his writing. In his study of poetic subjectivity in Shakespeare’s sonnets, *Shakespeare’s Perjured Eye*, Joel Fineman examined in detail the panegyric conventions in Renaissance lyric. He demonstrated convincingly that because of its deployment of epideictic rhetoric, which by nature and function aims at self-display, the discourse of praise poetry is always reflexive, pointing back to itself and its producer. “Such poetry is thereby involved in the circular dynamics by means of which the poetry of praise becomes a praise of poetry itself.”<sup>43</sup> The same can be said of Sima Xiangru’s epideictic rhapsody and to some extent of the poems to be considered later in this book.

“Rhapsody on an Imperial Excursion and Hunt” is cast in a tripartite format. The first part is the introduction of the occasion, and the last part is the poet’s indirect admonishment to the emperor. The main body of the rhapsody is the detailed presentation of the occasion, and it is in this part that we find the most poetic section of the entire piece. As we shall see, the writers of panegyric poetry in later periods adopted this structure. The other most noticeable formal influence of this rhapsody and of other Han rhapsodies on later panegyric poetry is their epideictic rhetoric. In praising their imperial patrons, later poets frequently resorted to hyperbolic expressions intended to please and impress. Like the greater odes and hymns of the *Shijing*, the Han epideictic rhapsody was a major source of convention for later panegyric poetry.