

Wang Yi and Han Dynasty Classical Commentary

David Hawkes in his *The Songs of the South* wrote, “The Later Han was an age of great scholars and exegetes, but Wang Yi was emphatically not of their number.” Hawkes was not alone in his judgment.¹ The philosopher Zhu Xi began challenging Wang Yi’s work as early as the Song dynasty. By the Ming and Qing dynasties, the Chinese words for “strained”, “arbitrary”, and “mistaken” pullulated in the sub-commentaries to Wang Yi’s *Chu ci Commentary*. Those who sought to correct Wang Yi of course often disagreed with each other, but on one point virtually everyone agreed: the fourth line of the *Li sao* spoke of the birth of Qu Yuan. Below is Hawkes’ translation, reflecting the traditional interpretation, of the first four lines of the poem:

帝高陽之苗裔兮，朕皇考曰伯庸。
攝提貞於孟陬兮，惟庚寅吾以降。

Scion of the high Lord Gao Yang
Bo Yong was my father’s name
When She-Ti pointed to the first month of the year
On the day *geng-yin* I passed from the womb.²

What Hawkes translates as “I passed from the womb” in the fourth line translated literally reads simply “I descended.” The verb for “descend” is *jiang* 降. Without indication of where from or where to, *jiang* usually means to descend from the sky. A reasonable translation of the line would be “I descended from the sky on the *gengyin* day.” Wang Yi, however, gives *jiang* a *literal* meaning it never had before; according to him *jiang* in this line means “I was born.”³ Hawkes like almost everyone else has followed his gloss by translating “I passed from the womb.” He is thus following Wang Yi very closely, as we shall see.

Wang Yi equated the verb *jiang* with the verb *xia* 下, a near synonym in that it means to descend; however, it never refers to human birth. Wang Yi nevertheless says that it does, but the only example he gives of *xia* occurring in that meaning is from the *Xiao jing* 孝經 (*Classic of Filial Piety*): “*Gu qin sheng zhi xi xia* 故親生之膝下.” The standard interpretation of the line is: “Therefore the feeling of kinship is born when one is still a toddler at one’s parent’s knees.” Wang Yi, however, appears to interpret it differently, something like: “The mother gives birth to it below the knees.”⁴ But even if interpreted according to Wang Yi, the word *xia* in this passage means “below”, not “gives birth” or even “descend.” The word for “gives birth” in the line is not *xia* but the usual *sheng* 生. Wang Yi seems to believe that the proximity of the two words somehow makes them synonymous. Since *xia* does not mean to be born in this passage, it cannot be used as the synonym that justifies claiming that *jiang* means to be born. Besides, as I have said before, during the Warring States period neither *xia* nor *jiang* literally meant to be born, at least when referring to humans.

How Wang Yi’s strange gloss passed muster under the critical gaze of David Hawkes and other modern scholars is explainable either by a desire to avoid controversy or an unwillingness to look too closely at the goings on inside the sausage factory of Han commentary. The same may well be true of Zhu Xi and the *kaozheng* scholars, but they have the additional excuse of still being in the thrall of a tradition that required that Qu Yuan act as the patron saint of loyal dissent; many of these same scholars, Zhu Xi included, participated in the creation and re-creation of that saint as they drew consolation from him in times of need. Moreover, despite their railing against the Han commentarial tradition, neither Zhu Xi nor *kaozheng* scholars ever critically dissected its methods to expose its failings. They therefore never fully recovered from Han hermeneutic influence. For both the traditional scholars in the post-Song era and modern Western scholars, Wang Yi’s absurdities are the result of the misapplication of an essentially sound method, a method not very different from the one they themselves subscribe to. The Chinese scholars see it as the Han method, the foundation of all classical scholarship, whereas the Western scholars think that it has something to do with philological methods as they are generally practiced in modern times. When Hawkes passed judgment on Wang, he was using the standard of modern philological practice to distinguish Wang Yi from the “great scholars and exegetes.”

But how was Wang Yi judged by his Later Han dynasty contemporaries? It should be recalled that some of the greatest of the scholars to whom Hawkes alludes, also wrote commentaries (now mostly lost) on the *Li sao*, e.g., Ban Gu, Jia Kui 賈逵 (30–101) and Ma Rong 馬融 (79–166). Yet the commentary of Wang Yi, an obscure man from the provinces, eclipsed them all, and even launched him on a brilliant career at court.⁵ It would appear then that Wang Yi was counted a good scholar, if not a great one, by Later Han standards. This means, at the very least, that none of Wang Yi’s commentarial methods,

including that which he deployed to arrive at his gloss on *jiang*, were considered defective by the general scholarly community.

To get a better perspective on what was considered acceptable commentarial method during the Han dynasty, let us sample the work of scholars who are unequivocally ranked among the great. The best place to start is with one of Wang Yi's contemporaries, He Xiu 何休 (129–182), who was called by Jacques Gernet “the only important representative of the *jinwen* traditions in the Later Han.”⁶ He Xiu wrote a very famous subcommentary to the *Gongyang* commentary on the *Spring and Autumn Annals*. The passage in the *Annals* that would prove to be one of the most important in debates concerning the meta-physical basis of Han imperial power is its last and most mysterious entry:

十有四年。春。西狩獲麟。

Fourteenth year [of Duke Ai], Spring: In the west he went hunting and caught a unicorn.⁷

The year is 481 BCE; the place is the western part of the state of Lu. The person hunting is not made clear, though it was probably the reigning Duke Ai. Nothing in the text suggests this except the special word for hunt, *shou* 狩, which usually indicates that a royal personage is hunting. “Unicorn” is the common but inaccurate rendering of the Chinese word *lin* 麟, which is a fabulous one-horned animal whose appearance scholars of the *Gongyang* tradition thought to be the harbinger of a sage king's appearance in the world.

During the Former Han, official *Gongyang* scholars thought that the sage king “prophesied” in the *Annals* was in fact Confucius and by extension his legitimate scholarly heirs, meaning of course the *Gongyang* scholars. During the Later Han, the imperial family exerted pressure on the *Gongyang* scholars to interpret the appearance of the unicorn as presaging Liu Bang, the founder of the Han dynasty. He Xiu was one of the scholars who bowed to that pressure. The following is from his subcommentary on the passage:

The fact that it [the unicorn] was captured during a hunt in the west shows that the king who would reign over the west would come from the east. But the east is under the cyclic sign *mao* 卯. The west is ruled by *jin* 金 [metal]. To say that the unicorn was captured calls to mind a *dao* 刀 [weapon]. All of which shows that someone with the name Liu 劉, which character is made up of *mao*, *jin*, and *dao* would conquer the world.⁸

Here He Xiu tells us that the last entry of the *Annals* records an event in which is encoded a prophecy. The decoded prophecy spells out, as it were, the family name of the founder of the Han dynasty. The direction to which the hunters go is ruled by the cyclic sign *mao*, the direction from which they came

is ruled by *jin* (metal), and metal is what weapons are made of. The elements taken together compose the character for Liu, the surname of the founder of the Han dynasty. Those who have been to an astrologer, tarot reader, and certain other fortune-tellers will immediately recognize the divinatory logic of this commentary. Those who are familiar with Biblical hermeneutics will see here something very like typological allegory.

The assumption behind such exegetical practice is that whatever Confucius wrote must pertain to the fate of the empire since he, according to the *Gongyang* scholars, had received the mandate (*ming* 命) from Heaven. The *Annals*, thought to be edited or written by him, therefore, must contain a secret code just below its dull lapidary surface. In point of fact, however, the decoding method creates the code, and it was a different code depending on the method and the commentator. The oldest method that we know of was the “praise and blame (*bao-bian* 褒貶)” method, according to which Confucius revealed his judgment of a person or his reaction to an event indirectly through his choice of words or even their placement or omission. An example of this is the *Gongyang* commentary on an entry mentioning a fire that took place during the second year of the reign of Duke Ding (定公, r. 509–495 BCE):

夏、五月壬辰、雉門及兩觀災。

In the summer, in the fifth month, on the *renchen* day, the Zhi Gate and its two towers were destroyed by fire.

The *Gongyang* commentary then applies the praise-and-blame theory in its usual catechistic form, asking a question and then answering it:

其言雉門及兩觀災何? 兩觀微也。然則曷為不言雉門災及兩觀? 主災者兩觀也。主者兩觀、則曷為後言之? 不以微及大也。

Why does he [Confucius] place the words Zhi Gate first and the word for watchtowers last? The two watchtowers are unimportant [compared with the Zhi Gate]. If that is so, then why did it not say that the fire in the Zhi Gate spread to the two watchtowers? The two watchtowers caught fire first. . . . If that is the case, why were they mentioned second? One does not start with the less important and then go to the more important. . . .⁹

The phrases “less important” and “more important” in the last sentence are key, for they indicate that not only is “praise and blame” being applied to the *Annals* passage but an allegorical reading as well. This passage and another (Duke Ding, second year: winter, the tenth month) concerning the rebuilding of the watchtowers and gate were interpreted to support the belief, held by the *Gongyang* school, that the watchtowers should be read to stand for

ministers from the powerful Jisun 季孫 clan who were threatening the power of the ducal house of Lu (and, incidentally, alienating Confucius), symbolized by the gate, and that their destruction by fire was a sign from Heaven giving the duke permission to rid himself of the ministers. Interpreted thus, such passages became precedents Han scholars could use to justify their policy recommendations to the emperor. Dong Zhongshu, for example, used this particular passage to justify his suggestion that Emperor Wu rid himself of some troublesome relatives.¹⁰

Gongyang scholars in claiming that they were the only ones who could decipher the secret code of a text of quasi-numinous authority were in fact giving themselves quasi-numinous authority. The idea that the authority of the text flowed from the Heavenly Mandate that Confucius had received meant that the generation of Confucian disciples active during the Han dynasty had inherited it. The implicit doctrine was that the mandate was not the possession of the Han imperial family.

The praise-blame method was presented as a kind of verbal algebra that anyone with proper training could understand, but in fact it was never so consistent. Most of the time a word or a phrase in the text could only be judged unusual, that is, worthy of praise-blame analysis, when read against the historical background. Much of that background was provided by the *zhuan* 傳, which took the form of written commentary or oral teaching. There were three different *zhuan* for the *Spring and Autumn Annals*: *Gongyang* 公羊, *Guliang* 穀梁, and *Zuo* 左.

The oral creation of *zhuan* continued in the memorials and teachings of Han scholars; of course these were not considered creative efforts at all at the time; they were thought to be revelations of the esoteric, unwritten, aspect of the *zhuan* to which only the best students had access. The assumption that there were esoteric *zhuan* underlies the development of the *chenwei* 讖緯 or apocrypha later on. Secrecy lent authority, and authority was used to give legitimacy to a diversity of ideological positions.

The most disputed *zhuan* were those concerning the *Annals* entry about the capture of the unicorn that I quoted above. The following passage shows how the *Gongyang* school, by providing its own version of the historical background to the entry, argues its claim that Confucius and the *Gongyang* school itself were the recipients of the mandate that was being withdrawn from the Zhou dynasty. The story occurs in neither the *Guliang zhuan* nor the *Zuo zhuan*:

何以書? 記異也。何異爾? 非中國之獸也。然則孰狩之? 薪采者也。薪采者微也、曷為以狩言之? 大之也。曷為大之? 為獲麟大之。曷為為大之? 麟者仁獸也。有王者則至、無王者則不至。

Why did he [Confucius] write it [the entry about the unicorn]? To record a miraculous event. What was miraculous about it? It is not a

creature of the Central States. Well, then, who caught it? A firewood gatherer. A firewood gatherer is a person of low status. Why was the word *shou* [hunt] used to talk about it? To magnify it [the event]. Why? Because he had caught a unicorn. Why because he had caught a unicorn? Because the unicorn is the animal of humaneness; when there is a true king [in the world], then it appears. When there is no true king, then it does not appear.

Notice here that the *zhuàn* introduces quite unexpectedly a firewood gatherer. There is nothing in the *Annals* entry that reveals his presence. Yet he will play a very important role in the classical commentaries of the Later Han dynasty. The commentary continues:

有以告者曰。有麋而角者。孔子曰「孰為來哉。孰為來哉」反袂拭面涕沾袍。顏淵死、子曰“噫。天喪予。”子路死，子曰“噫。天祝予”西狩獲麟。孔子曰“吾道窮矣”... 君子曷為為春秋？撥亂世反諸正。莫近諸春秋... 未不亦樂乎堯舜之知君子也。制春秋以俟後聖。以君子之為亦有樂乎此。

Someone informed Confucius that they had caught something like a roe but with a horn. Confucius said, “For whom has it come? For whom has it come?” He turned back his sleeve and wiped his face, but the tears wet his robe. When Yan Yuan died, the Master said, “Ai! Heaven is destroying me.” When Zilu died, the Master said, “Ai! Heaven is cutting me off.” When they hunted in the west and caught a unicorn, he said, “My road has come to its end.” Why did the gentleman [Confucius] write the *Annals*? To restore order in an age of disorder. To return it to the right path, there is nothing better than the *Annals*. . . . Indeed, he took delight in the fact that Yao and Shun knew of the gentleman [in advance]. His purpose in composing the *Annals* was to anticipate [the needs of] the Sage(s) of the future. And being a man of nobility he took joy in this too.¹¹

In the above passage, Confucius asked the question: for whom has the unicorn come? The writings and pronouncements of the *Gongyang* school point to one answer only: for Confucius. Confucius is the sage king whose coming was foreseen by Yao and Shun, and whose presence in the world was heralded by the unicorn. There was no other king in Confucius’ time capable of carrying out the Mandate of Heaven; therefore, it had fallen to him. Of course Confucius ruled over no realm, but he was performing a royal duty by writing the *Spring and Autumn Annals*, for it contained teachings that anticipated the needs of a future genuine king.¹² The idea that Heaven mandated him to anticipate the needs of a future king shortly evolved into the idea that

Confucius and, therefore, his *Annals*, had prophetic powers. The idea that he prophesied the rise of the Han dynasty was a Later Han development.

It was a short step from saying that the text contained the teachings mandated by Heaven to the claim that the text was the source of all knowledge:

The *Chunqiu*, as an object of study, describes the past so as to illumine the future. Its phrases, however, embody the inscrutableness of Heaven and therefore are difficult to understand. To him who is incapable of proper examination it seems as if they contain nothing. To him, however, who is capable of examining, there is nothing they do not contain. Thus he who concerns himself with the *Chunqiu*, on finding one fact in it, links it to many others; on seeing one omission in it, broadly connects it [with others]. In this way he gains complete [understanding] of the world.¹³

The claim that the *Annals* contained all knowledge placed on the Han commentator a peculiar burden. To be recognized as truth in Han intellectual circles, the teachings of the *Annals* had to accord, or be made to accord, with the system of generating and testing knowledge that had become prevalent long after the death of Confucius—the yin-yang five elements (*yinyang wuxing* 陰陽五行) cosmology.

YIN-YANG FIVE ELEMENTS THEORY AND EXTRAGRAMMATICAL READING

The yin-yang five elements cosmology had originally been a diagnostic, or divinatory, tool used by physicians, craftsmen, fortune-tellers, etc. According to it, all things in the universe are ruled by one or another of the five elements—wood, fire, earth, metal, water—in much the same way as things, especially people, are ruled by stars according to astrology (each sign of the Western zodiac it should be remembered is ruled by one of the Western elements—earth, air, fire, and water). The first application of the yin-yang five elements cosmology to history and political ideology is attributed to Zou Yan 鄒衍 (305–240 BCE). According to him, the rise and fall of dynasties is but the reflex of the cyclic waxing and waning in dominance of each of the five elements on the cosmic level.¹⁴

The early five elements cosmologists in adapting the theory to mystico-political purposes could hedge their bets because there were two different sequences of the elements—the birth (*sheng* 生) sequence and the conquest (*sheng* 勝) sequence. Wood, fire, ashes, metal, water is the “birth” or “production” sequence because wood gives birth to fire, fire produces earth (ashes), etc. The birth sequence supported civil values and moral authority (*de* 德) as the basis of statecraft, because harmonious reproduction kept it in motion.

Fire, water, earth, wood, metal is the “conquest” sequence because water extinguishes fire, earth absorbs water, wood pounds earth, etc. The conquest sequence was meant to encourage military virtues since progress through the elements is achieved through a kind of struggle. This sequence, which the Han inherited from the Qin, metaphorically, one might even say allegorically, legitimizes force and violence, as opposed to Confucian benevolence, as a means to establish power and maintain it. Accordingly, the Qin justified its overthrow of the Zhou dynasty by claiming that it was ruled by water, whereas the Zhou was ruled by fire, and as everyone knows, water extinguishes, or conquers, fire.¹⁵

The recognition of water as patron element, and the worship of a corresponding divinity, the Black Emperor, continued under the Han until Emperor Wu, who under the influence of Confucian experts in the elements, changed the Han patron element to earth and worshipped the corresponding divinity, the Yellow Emperor. The Yellow Emperor had special significance. He was the chief divinity in the various cults of immortality patronized by the imperial family, especially the distaff side, and was thought to be the founder of the very institution of the emperorship.

For those who took Confucius as the authority in statecraft, the worship of the Yellow Emperor in the state cult was symbolic of Emperor Wu’s worst tendencies—not merely his occultism but also his tendency towards Qin-style centralism and absolutism. In addition the very fact that the Han dynasty had chosen earth as its patron element meant that the it was still subscribing to the conquest sequence of the elements, which as we have seen was itself connotive of a statecraft based on force.¹⁶

As the five elements theory was as fundamental to Han political discourse as dialectical materialism was to Marxist discourse there could be no way of advancing any ideological program without showing its cosmological basis. But the theory was not a component of classical Confucian thought, and had not managed to find its way into the omenology of the *Gongyang* and *Guliang* schools—before the founding of the imperial academy. Sometime after that, followers of the greatest of the *Gongyang* theoreticians—Dong Zhongshu, or Dong Zhongshu himself—revised the hermeneutics on the *Annals* specifically to show that Confucius was at least as great a five elements expert as Zou Yan. The most extensive exposition of this position is in the *Chunqiu fanlu* 春秋繁露.

To remake Confucius into a five elements expert, the praise-blame method was combined with yin-yang five elements cosmology and applied wantonly to the text of the *Spring and Autumn Annals*. Take for example the *Chunqiu fanlu* explication of the following:

元年春王正月。

Yuan nian chun wang zheng yue.

First year, Spring, the Royal First Month.

This is the first entry in the *Spring and Autumn Annals*. The words to be read according to the praise and blame method are translated in bold. There is nothing about the form of this date that is out of the ordinary. It could occur in any state chronology.¹⁷ But according to writings attributed to Dong Zhongshu, the word *yuan* 元 meaning here “first” can be separated from the word *nian* 年 meaning “year,” and dealt with separately as if it were being used in another, though for the context completely irrelevant, sense. Applying the praise and blame method Dong (or pseudo-Dong) concludes that the fact that *yuan* is the first word in the *Annals* means that Confucius was placing special value on it, and that it is being used not only in the sense of “first,” a modifier, but simultaneously and esoterically, in the sense of “the Origin,” a substantive and one of Dong’s favorite cosmological terms:

Why does the *Chunqiu* speak of the Origin, laying special value on it? “Origin” is the beginning. It is talking about the root, that which initiates. [It is talking about] the Way, the kingly Way. The king is the beginning [pace-setter] of the human. If the king is upright then the Original Energy (*yuan qi* 元氣) will be harmonious, the winds and rains will be seasonable, the auspicious stars will appear, and the Yellow Dragon will descend.¹⁸

Since spring is ruled by wood, and wood is the first element in the birth sequence, the presence of the word *Spring* (*chun* 春) at the beginning of the *Annals* is taken to mean that the *Annals* teaches the primacy of the birth sequence and all the civil values it represents.¹⁹

The combination of the praise and blame method with the five elements cosmology permitted the commentator not only to determine what Confucius thought about certain persons or events but to see instantiations of cosmic patterns in the text.

Both the praise and blame technique and the application of the yin-yang five elements theory to texts encourage a reading of words that is independent not only of their discursive context but their syntactic function as well—a style of reading that is merely an extension of the fortune-telling technique, mentioned above, of analyzing the graphic units of a name and reading the results. (By the Later Han, in fact, this practice itself had become so common an exegetical strategy that at least one scholar parodied it.) This style of reading, whether applied to individual characters or larger textual units such as phrases

or verses, I will term “extragrammatical reading.” Extragrammatical reading, in the instances I have considered above and throughout the Han commentarial tradition, often facilitates contextualization—i.e., interpreting a text by reference to historical background, relevant or irrelevant, real or imaginary.

Liu Xin, for example, “proved” that his ancestor Liu Bang, founder of the Han dynasty, was descended from the sage king Yao by applying the birth sequence to a certain passage in the *Zuo zhuan*. In Liu Xin’s scheme, Yao was ruled by the fire element, as was the Han dynasty. Wang Mang was one of the few people to accept the new genealogy and the supporting theory. He had a purpose in doing so, however. Using the five-elements theory in a similar way, he falsely traced his lineage back to Shun. Shun in Liu Xin’s scheme was ruled by the earth element. Thus when Wang Mang replaced the Han dynasty with his own Xin 新 dynasty, he could justify it by claiming that the cosmic element fire (the Han dynasty’s element) was merely waning and thus producing the cosmic element earth (the Xin dynasty’s element). Wang Mang also bolstered his claims with what may well be the first use of typological allegory in the interpretation of the *Spring and Autumn Annals*.²⁰ Oddly, so many intellectuals, including members of the imperial family like Liu Xin, were persuaded by this justification that Wang Mang’s was a virtually bloodless coup.²¹

The commentarial techniques under discussion continued to play an important role in ideological and political discourse throughout the Later Han dynasty. Wang Yi deploys most of them in his commentary on the *Chuci*, especially in the *Li sao* and *Nine Songs* sections. He also offers useful philological data—explication of regional usage, historical allusion, cultural background. The task of the modern reader is to make decisions about what to use or not use in his *Commentary* based on a clear understanding of the difference between explications based on arbitrary contextualization and extragrammatical readings (the possible political and ideological motivations of which we will discuss later) and interpretations that could survive the scrutiny of the modern philologist.

An example of the former is Wang Yi’s explanation of the title of the *Li sao* which in his *Commentary* appears as *Li sao jing* 離騷經 or the “*Li sao Classic*.”

離別也。騷愁也。經徑也。言己房主離別，中心愁思，猶依道徑，以風諫君也。

Li means to depart and *sao* means sad. *Jing* means path. What he [Qu Yuan] means is that being banished he departs with sad thoughts in his heart, but still relies on the path of the Dao to offer indirect criticism to his ruler.²²

This is a flagrant example of the extragrammatical reading style of the Later Han dynasty. It could have been written by He Xiu, whose work we sampled

above. The term *jing* 經 is glossed as though it were synonymous with *jing* 徑 meaning path. The rest of the title Wang Yi simply divides into component parts, reading them independently of syntactical and lexical demands, and recombining them into a little homily on Qu Yuan's melancholy virtue.

Another example of extragrammatical reading, this time combined with yin-yang five-elements theory, is Wang Yi's interpretation of the title *Jiu Bian* 九辯. This title, which can be translated as *Nine Disputes* or possibly *Nine Changes*, was originally the title of a legendary musical form. Wang Yi tells us that the real meaning is encoded mainly in the word *jiu*, the number nine.

九者，陽之數，道之綱紀也。

Nine, the [most] *yang* of numbers, is the principle of the Way.

The reasoning appears to be that since nine is the most *yang* of numbers, it stands for the ultimate, for which another word is the Way—thus nine stands for the principle of the Way. The title thus indicates that the author Song Yu is using the work to persuade his ruler to reform by adopting the principles of the Way.²³

Extragrammatical readings combined with *zhuan*-style contextualization occur most frequently in Wang Yi's explications of the *Nine Songs*. Wang Yi thought that Qu Yuan had composed them during his exile in the deep south of Chu with the ostensible purpose of replacing the crude songs addressed to the gods by the primitive indigenes with something more elevated. Moreover, though their form is religious hymn, their function, Wang Yi claims, was veiled criticism of the ruler who had banished Qu Yuan from the capital. This account of the creation of the *Nine Songs* occurs in no other source before Wang Yi; few scholars accept it today; and even fewer take the Wang Yi interpretations based on the idea that the *Nine Songs* are political remonstrance seriously. Most scholars take the songs as hymns addressed to divinities by shamans.

Wang Yi, however, puts most of the hymns in the mouth of Qu Yuan. Take for example the first quatrain from the hymn entitled "He Bo 河伯," which means River Earl, the title of the god of the Yellow River:

與女遊兮九河
衝風起兮橫波
乘水車兮舂搖荷蓋
駕兩龍兮驂螭

With you I will roam the Nine Rivers
Whirlwinds will raise waves across the flow
I will ride a water chariot with lotus canopy
Drawn by a team of two dragons between two serpents.²⁴

The mystery of the first line is the identity of the person addressed as “you.” Since the Chinese word for you, *ru* 女, is the familiar word here, the speaking *I* is generally taken to be the River Earl. Some say the River Earl is addressing the Goddess of the Luo River, his wife according to legend.²⁵ Others take *ru* as referring to a female shaman, who either welcomes the Earl or impersonates a woman to be given away in marriage, that is, sacrificed by ritual drowning. No modern scholar follows Wang Yi in thinking that the *you* refers to the River Earl and that the *I* is Qu Yuan. How does Wang Yi explain why Qu Yuan addresses the River Earl with the familiar word?

河為四瀆長，其視大夫。屈原亦楚大夫，欲以官相友，故言女也。

The Yellow River is the chief of the Four Rivers; its position is comparable to that of a great court officer. Qu Yuan, being also a great court officer in Chu, wishes to befriend him on the basis of their comparable positions; therefore he says *ru*.²⁶

In other words, Qu Yuan uses the familiar word because he considers the Earl of the Yellow River, whose destructive floods sometimes brought famines and dynasty-toppling rebellions, to be on the same hierarchical level as himself. This is the type of commentarial absurdity that David Hawkes thought “best passed over in silence.”

It does not end there. Wang Yi explains the rest of the quatrain by saying that Qu Yuan’s main motivation in seeking out the River Earl is to become his friend, but his efforts are thwarted by “high winds and waves surging up from which he has no place of refuge.” Later the hymn has the lines “fish are my bridesmaids, shoal after shoal,” clear reference to the marriage between the River Earl and the Goddess of the Luo River or some unfortunate mortal woman. Wang Yi deflects attention away from that imagery by telling us that the word *ying* 媵, meaning to accompany the main bride as secondary bride, simply means “to accompany” and that it is simply a matter of Qu Yuan requesting that the River Earl arrange an entourage of fish to accompany him back to the capital where he longs to return. (See full translation of “He Bo” in Appendix 2.)

Wang Yi extragrammatically applying *zhuān*-style contextualization reads every line of the Earl of the Yellow River, and most of the rest of the *Nine Songs*, as reflections of Qu Yuan’s life in exile. But if there is any hymn that cannot be read in that context, it is this one, for it sings of the god of the Yellow River, the main river in the northern heartland, whereas Qu Yuan, as Wang Yi himself observes, was banished to the Yangzi River region far away in the south.²⁷ Wang Yi, aware of this, gets around it by indicating, here and there, that Qu Yuan’s encounter with the River Earl takes place in his

imagination. Turning the hymn into a fantasy while reading each line as a discrete episode in that fantasy counteracts reading the lines figuratively and in relation to each other.²⁸

Wherein then resides the remonstrative point of the hymn? One of its lines is: “流澌紛兮將來下 Downstream will swarm the crackling ice shards,” on which Wang Yi comments:

言屈原願與河伯遊河之渚，而流澌紛然相隨來下，水為污濁，故欲去也。

It says that Qu Yuan would like to roam with the River Earl on the islets in the Yellow River, but the breaking ice is flowing down in abundance, and the water is getting dirty. Therefore he wishes to leave.²⁹

“Leave” here means return from exile to the capital. Little on the surface of the text supports Wang Yi’s interpretation. One wonders why, having gone to such lengths to extract such a banal message from the poem, it never occurred to Wang Yi to interpret the randy, capricious River Earl as King Huai? Or was he avoiding that obvious allegorical association on purpose? Evidence that he was is the fact that he avoids reading any of the other divinities in the *Nine Songs* as metaphors for King Huai, except in the case of Yunzhong Jun 雲中君. In that case, he avoids responsibility for the interpretation by attributing it to another, unnamed, commentator.³⁰ In the other places where he takes the divinity to stand for a ruler, it is the ideal ruler—the ruler King Huai should aspire to be.

The clearest example of this is Wang Yi’s interpretation of the god of the hymn “Donghuang Taiyi 東皇太一.” He describes the difficulties of serving such a spirit on the one hand and the blessings that descend if one is persistent and assiduous in serving him on the other. Thus Wang Yi *contrasts* the god Taiyi with King Huai, who rejects Qu Yuan no matter how much effort he expends to remain loyal.³¹

Could his hermeneutic stance vis-à-vis the *Nine Songs* shed light on why Wang Yi arbitrarily avoided reading the word *jiang* in the fourth line of the *Li sao* as it was normally read in other literary texts (as well as how he himself read it in its other occurrences in the *Li sao*)?

The peculiarity of Wang Yi’s reading of *jiang* in the *Li sao* connects it to his commentary on the *Nine Songs* in that it also discourages a coherent figurative interpretation—not only of the fourth line of the *Li sao* but much of the rest of the poem. I have shown that neither the word *jiang* nor its synonym *xia* refer *literally* to human birth. They were, however, used in certain contexts to refer *figuratively* to human birth. The following are a few examples. The first passage is from *Shi jing* 259 (“Song Gao 嵩高,” Karlgren’s version slightly modified):

嵩高維嶽
 駿極于天
 維嶽降神
 生甫及申
 維申及甫
 維周之翰
 四國于蕃
 四方于宣

Lofty is that Sacred Mountain,
 Grandly it reaches Heaven;
 The Sacred Mountain sent down (*jiang* 降) a Spirit,
 Who bore (*sheng* 生) the princes of Fu and Shen;
 Shen and Fu became the supports of Zhou;
 The states of the four quarters they went to protect,
 The states of the four quarters they went to defend.³²

This is a song of praise for the prince of Shen, presumably a historical figure. It tells us that a spirit descended from the Sacred Mountain and gave birth to him and the prince of Fu. This may have been meant merely figuratively to glorify the princes for their service to the royal house of Zhou; that it was meant literally is not entirely out of the question. Be that as it may, the idea that a spirit could descend from numinous space (this time from a sacred mountain close to Heaven rather than from Heaven itself) to intervene in mundane political affairs by being born in human form would not have been used in a formal panegyric had it been culturally alien.

The idea appears in another form in *Shi jing* 303 (“*Xuan niao* 玄鳥,” a slightly modified Karlgren version):

天命玄鳥
 降而生商
 宅殷土芒芒
 古帝命武湯
 正域彼四方

Heaven ordered the black bird,
 To descend (*jiang*) and bear (*sheng*) Shang;
 He dwelt in the land of Yin that was very vast;
 Of old Di gave the appointment to the martial Tang;
 He regulated and set boundaries for the four quarters.³³

Here Di orders the spirit bird to descend (*jiang*) and give birth to the founder of the Shang dynasty. The black bird according to the commentators dropped

an egg into the mouth of Jiandi, progenitrix of the Shang dynasty, and she miraculously gave birth to Tang the Martial. A number of other origin myths come in similar form.

In another hymn, *Shi jing* 304 (“*Chang fa* 長發”), another section of which I have already quoted, Tang 湯 is simply said to descend:

湯降不遲
 聖敬日躋
 昭假遲遲
 上帝是祇
 帝命式于九圍

Tang came down (*jiang*) in good time;
 His wisdom and reverence daily advanced;
 Brightly he advanced steadily;
 God on High, him he revered;
 God charged him to be a model to the nine circumscriptions.³⁴

The verb *jiang* in the first line is employed both metaphorically and metonymically to refer to the myth alluded to above about Tang’s being sent down in the form of an egg dropped from a black bird that descended from Heaven. Of course there is the possibility that this poem alludes to another form of the myth where Tang descends bodily from Heaven. Notice that the song also tells us that Di charged him to be a model of the nine circumscriptions, i.e., the world. That Ling Jun 靈均 in the *Li sao* is on a similar mission is suggested by his name Zhengze 正則, which can mean among other things “correct model.”

The fact that Wang Yi cites none of these examples to support his idea that *jiang* means to be born, preferring instead to support it spuriously and extragrammatically with the passage from the *Classic of Filial Piety*, suggests that not only did he want *jiang* to be redefined to literally refer to birth, but also that he wanted to use that new literal meaning to preclude classical associations with rulers or ministers who descended from the sky. This means that for some reason Wang Yi did not want Ling Jun, whom he identified with Qu Yuan, to be thought of as a divinity even figuratively—although he acts as a god, e.g., traveling in a flying chariot in a number of places in the poem.

What was the motivation behind Wang Yi’s hermeneutic maneuvers, which when applied to the *Nine Songs* later scholars would reject, but which when applied to the *Li sao* they followed—often unconsciously, rendering the poem largely incoherent? The next chapter is an attempt to answer this question.