

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-10186-8 - 'The Lament for the South': Yu Hsin's 'Ai Chiang-Nan Fu'

William T. Graham

Excerpt

[More information](#)

INTRODUCTION

Few Chinese writers have distinguished themselves in as many genres as Yü Hsin (513–81). Yü's lyric poetry is fully equal to that of Hsieh Ling-yün (385–433), for example. His parallel-prose writings are considered models of that form, so much so, in fact, that his name has become more or less synonymous with parallel prose.¹ Finally, Yü's fifteen surviving *fu*, or poems in irregular meter, include several works of the first rank, and one of them, 'The Lament for the South' ('Ai Chiang-nan fu'), is probably the finest *fu* ever written. It is mainly with the 'Lament' that this book is concerned.

After a long period of neglect, there are signs of renewed interest in *fu*. Most of the studies have been devoted to the earlier works, but there have also been occasional forays into the Six-Dynasties period;² these later *fu*, shorter and more accessible than the great showpieces of the Han, are likely to prove more attractive to the Western reader. Chiang Yen's (444–505) 'Regret',³ one of the best Six-Dynasties *fu*, is no more difficult than Su Shih's (1037–1101) 'Red Cliff',⁴ for example, and a student in second-year literary Chinese can read either one with ease. The same cannot be said of the works of Ssu-ma Hsiang-ju (c. 179–117 B.C.).

The 'Lament' is unusually long for its period, about the same length as Ssu-ma's 'Rhapsody on the Shang-lin Hunting Park'.⁵ It is also more difficult than the 'Regret'; one would not recommend it to second-year language students. I believe, however, that its difficulties are sometimes exaggerated. It is remarkably free of the obscure vocabulary that turns the 'Shang-lin' into a dictionary exercise. There are, to be sure, a good many allusions, and the subject is an unusually complicated one for a *fu*, but it simplifies matters if we remind ourselves of the fact that, however atypical of the genre, the 'Lament' remains a *fu*.

Yü Hsin, of course, did not have a monopoly on allusions. Ssu-ma himself says at one point, in Watson's translation: 'A [coachman as clever as] Sun Shu grasps the reins; A [warrior as brave as] Lord Wei stands beside him.'⁶ These are allusions of a sort, if only on a very low level. The context tells us that Sun Shu must have been a famous charioteer, which is all we need to

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-10186-8 - 'The Lament for the South': Yu Hsin's 'Ai Chiang-Nan Fu'

William T. Graham

Excerpt

[More information](#)*'The Lament for the South'*

2

know; in the same way, unless one is compiling social notes, it matters little what contemporary figure, if any, is presented here in the guise of a Sun Shu. Ssu-ma's was not a real hunt but an ideal one, one so unreal that the legendary beasts and even the flight through space seem perfectly appropriate. Yü, on the other hand, was dealing with real historical events. Here, instead of an idealized hunt of one day, we have the events of a decade ending in the fall of the Liang dynasty (502–57), still described in allusions as in the two lines by Ssu-ma quoted above. There is a temptation in such a case to read the 'Lament' as a detailed history of the Liang, with the minutiae of recent events lurking behind every allusion.⁷ This, I think, is a grave mistake; pursued too far it makes the work unreadable, if not unintelligible. Yü was concerned only with the broad outlines of history, and he treats this history with an idealization ultimately very much like that of Ssu-ma Hsiang-ju.

If we read the work in this spirit, and ignore red herrings, it becomes much simpler and also much more interesting; Yü was not writing riddles, and he was not trying to conceal anything.⁸ If the allusions are sometimes unfamiliar, that is because fashions change in these as in other things; we could hardly expect Yü to use the same allusions as, say, T'ao Ch'ien (?365–427). The generations of commentators on the 'Lament' have identified most of them, and in case of doubt one can turn to other writings of the same period. The 'Lament' could only have been directed to an audience of such writers, and it is reassuring to find even the more obscure allusions appearing regularly in their works; one can conclude that the 'Lament', though never a simple poem, would have been quite intelligible to a writer such as Tu Fu (712–70). Most helpful, of course, are Yü's own works, the largest surviving literary corpus by a pre-T'ang writer. Yü returns again and again to the same events and the same allusions; this enables us to explain some otherwise obscure passages in the 'Lament' with near certainty, rather as in a locus problem in geometry. Much of the commentary in Chapter 4 deals with parallel passages in other works, and this book as a whole is devoted to the similar aim of fitting a masterpiece of Chinese literature back into the setting that produced it.

Chapter 1 is an account of the author's life and times, with the stress on the latter. We know little about the details of Yü's biography, except for his official titles; the same thing is true of most other early Chinese writers. There is a good deal more information available on the political history of the period, which was quite complicated; Yü himself lived under four different dynasties and nine emperors. This chapter is intended to provide the information essential for a reading of the 'Lament'.

Chapter 2 consists of notes on Six-Dynasties *fu* in general. Very little has been written about this subject; I have here stressed the aspects less familiar

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-10186-8 - 'The Lament for the South': Yu Hsin's 'Ai Chiang-Nan Fu'

William T. Graham

Excerpt

[More information](#)*Introduction*

3

to Western readers, as well as the categories of *fu* represented in Yü Hsin's own works. Some of Yü's writings fit rather neatly into a tradition; others, particularly the 'Lament', fit very badly, since Yü was a most original writer. Still, even the 'Lament' could never have been written without this long tradition behind it, and without some knowledge of the tradition we can neither understand what Yü was doing nor appreciate his originality. This chapter also includes some notes on the critical appraisals of *fu*.⁹

Chapter 3 contains a translation and a paraphrase of the 'Lament', arranged in parallel columns. A non-specialist, after reading Chapter 1, might be well advised to go directly on to Chapter 3, which he should find intelligible even without further notes. For the specialist, there is an extended commentary in Chapter 4.

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-10186-8 - 'The Lament for the South': Yu Hsin's 'Ai Chiang-Nan Fu'

William T. Graham

Excerpt

[More information](#)

1

THE HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

Much of Chinese poetry deals with current events. Partly, of course, this was a result of the traditional view that literature should serve a didactic function. Partly it reflects the social situation; until fairly recent times, most Chinese writers were officials, either successful or frustrated, and they were naturally concerned with current events. Such works cannot be understood without some knowledge of the events involved; this additional information does not make them better poems, but it at least makes them intelligible, and without that no literary judgment is possible.

This is particularly true of the 'Lament', which deals with events on a scale never before attempted in Chinese poetry and thus requires a correspondingly greater amount of background information. Much of this would have been familiar to a contemporary audience, but it will have to be supplied to a modern reader of the 'Lament', who is unlikely to know much about sixth-century Chinese history. The following is intended to enable such a reader to make his way through the poem. As usual with early Chinese writers, Yü Hsin's biographies consist almost entirely of lists of official titles. Some information of general interest can be deduced from them; that is given in this chapter. The technical details, such as arguments for dating, are given in Appendix II, which is intended for specialists.

The earliest recorded member of Yü Hsin's family is a Yü Meng, a native of Hsin-yeh *hsien* in Nan-yang *chün*, or, in modern terms, of the southwestern part of Honan.¹ Yü Meng held the second-highest of all government posts, that of Imperial Secretary (*ssu-k'ung*), at some time during the Latter Han (25–220 A.D.), but his exact dates are unknown.² Thereafter the family disappears from the records for several generations, a fact which suggests decline; the missing figures in the genealogy (Appendix VII) are not likely to have been eminent officials.

The Yü family reappears only in the early fourth century, when a series of foreign invasions led to the collapse of the Western Chin dynasty. One of the great cataclysms of Chinese history, this resulted in almost three hundred years of foreign domination of North China, ending only in 581. There was

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-10186-8 - 'The Lament for the South': Yu Hsin's 'Ai Chiang-Nan Fu'

William T. Graham

Excerpt

[More information](#)*The historical background*

5

a large-scale flight of Chinese to the South, where the native Chinese Chin dynasty was restored in a new capital at the present Nanking. Many others chose to remain in the North under foreign rulers; these included a number of important Chinese families, who managed to preserve their power in the chaos and fragmentation which followed. Despite this continued Chinese presence in the North, and even after the sinicization supported by the Turkish-speaking Northern Wei dynasty (386–534), the Southern émigrés considered the North very alien indeed.

The Yü family were divided on the question of emigration. Yü Hsin's ancestor T'ao (Yü Meng's great-great-grandson) fled to the South, where, having been instrumental in the restoration of the Chin under Emperor Yuan (*reg.* 317–322), he was rewarded with a marquisate.³ He settled his family in Chiang-ling, equivalent to the modern city of that name in Hupeh. Like other exiles, the family might continue to feel that they were really 'from' Hsin-yeh, to the north, but by Yü Hsin's time it had become possible to call them natives of Chiang-ling.⁴ This is a fact of considerable importance for the 'Lament'. Chiang-ling, under the name of Ying, had been the principal capital of the ancient state of Ch'u and would serve for a few years as the capital of Yü Hsin's own dynasty, the Liang. There were obvious parallels between the fall of the Liang and that of Ch'u, so it is hardly surprising that the 'Lament' should be filled with references to that ancient state.

It is perhaps misleading to speak of a restoration of the Chin dynasty. A member of the old ruling family had been put on the throne of a much-reduced state in the South, but the Yellow River valley, the ancient center of Chinese civilization, had been lost to foreigners. The new Emperor, and his successors, could only console themselves with the reflection that they were the guardians of Chinese culture, threatened in the North with extinction by the barbarians. They were powerless to reconquer the lost territory, or even to exercise effective control over their own states. In fact, they were often little more than puppets, retaining their precarious hold on the throne only until one strong man or another felt disposed to replace them, either with another puppet or with his own new dynasty. There were constant civil wars, in which it might make little difference to the nominal emperor whether the central government was defeated or victorious. A defeat would only mean a different dictator; a victory could be even worse, since the victorious general might feel justified at last in making himself ruler in name as well as in fact. The intervals of peace were spent in intrigues, not unknown in earlier periods but now much worse.⁵

It was not an attractive time to hold office. The bureaucracy remained, but the great families, who held the actual power in the state, also felt themselves entitled by right of birth to monopolize the higher offices.⁶ In the turbulent

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-10186-8 - 'The Lament for the South': Yu Hsin's 'Ai Chiang-Nan Fu'

William T. Graham

Excerpt

[More information](#)*'The Lament for the South'*

6

political situation, any office was potentially dangerous. Even the obscure ones did not offer enough safety to compensate for their inherent unpleasantness; one could easily become the secretary of the wrong man, for example, and end up involved in his ruin. Understandably, this was the great age of the recluse, the man remembered for his refusal to take public office.⁷ The most famous of all recluses was T'ao Ch'ien (?365–427),⁸ but even T'ao had experimented briefly with an official career; Yü Hsin's grandfather Yi (d. after 499) never held office at all.⁹ Fortunately, this was by his own choice. A generation without official position could be damaging to the prospects of a family, but Yü Yi was on record as having refused at least four positions, over a period of seventeen years (479–495). This made him rather a distinguished figure, too lofty to demean himself with a career, and it also entitled him, like T'ao Ch'ien, to the honor of a biography among the recluses.¹⁰ He seems to have been better able than T'ao to afford a life in retirement, since there is no indication of financial hardship in his case.

The political situation improved considerably in the next generation, under Emperor Wu (*reg.* 502–49), founder of the Liang dynasty. A long reign is generally a good sign; Wu's was the longest and, until its last years, the most stable of the period.¹¹ The previous dynasty, in contrast, had had six emperors in twenty-four years. Emperor Wu inherited from that dynasty, the Southern Ch'i, a policy of assigning the more important provincial offices to members of the ruling family; the system, now more successful than it had been earlier, meant relative peace within the country.¹² As a result of this, the capital at Chien-k'ang (the modern Nanking) grew larger under Emperor Wu than it had ever been before; we read that the city was forty *li* square, and the population was apparently well over a million.¹³ Chien-k'ang reflected in an extreme form the political state of the empire. At the end of the rebellion that put him on the throne, Emperor Wu had evidently found the capital largely in ruins. His long reign was spent in restoring and expanding the city, but by 555 it was again in ruins, with the population not even half what it had been fifty or a hundred years earlier.¹⁴

The situation abroad also improved temporarily under Emperor Wu. Ever since the fourth century, the native Chinese dynasties in the South had been under more or less constant threat of attack from the North. Initially Emperor Wu had been confronted with the Northern Wei (386–534), the strongest of the alien dynasties. He was able to fend off its attacks until it destroyed itself in a civil war, which led to its partitioning in 534 into Eastern and Western Wei. Each of these was nominally governed by a member of the old ruling family of the Northern Wei, but both in fact were controlled by dictators, Kao Huan (d. 547) and Yü-wen T'ai (d. 556) respectively. The Eastern Wei emerged the stronger of the two states, and probably more than a match

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-10186-8 - 'The Lament for the South': Yu Hsin's 'Ai Chiang-Nan Fu'

William T. Graham

Excerpt

[More information](#)*The historical background*

7

for the Liang. Kao Huan, however, at war with Yü-wen T'ai, had no need of a second enemy and so in 536 concluded an alliance with the Liang. The decade that followed was the high point of Emperor Wu's reign.

The changing political situation is certainly reflected in the fact that, while Yü Yi always avoided taking office, all three of his sons had successful government careers, especially Yü Hsin's father Chien-wu (487–551).¹⁵ We need not go into all the details of Chien-wu's career here; Yü Hsin himself, in lines 35–6 of the 'Lament', points out the most important feature of it, his father's relationship with two of the sons of Emperor Wu. Both were writers and patrons of literature; Chien-wu, a famous poet, naturally attracted their attention, and in turn was able to provide his son with two very useful introductions. The men were Hsiao Kang (503–51), Wu's third son, known posthumously as Emperor Chien-wen; and Hsiao Yi (508–55), the seventh son, Emperor Yüan.¹⁶ Yü Chien-wu entered the service of Hsiao Kang about the time of his own son Hsin's birth in 513, and remained with him for over twenty years.

Between 537 and 539 Chien-wu left Kang to work for Kang's brother Yi. As noted earlier, Emperor Wu had had a policy of assigning the major provincial posts to members of his own family. Hsiao Yi, the most important such figure, spent almost all his adult life in the provinces, as general, military governor, and inspector general; for much of the time he was in Chiang-ling, the Yü family home (526–39, 547–55). During this period with Yi, Yü Chien-wu was back at home again, apparently for the first extended stay since 515. His father and both his brothers had been dead for years; nothing is known of his mother, but his brothers had earlier shown a distinct preference for posts in Chiang-ling, and their families probably remained there.¹⁷ Hsiao Yi, on the other hand, was a difficult man to work for. He eventually became quite powerful, and after 549, when the central government fell under rebel control, he would be the strongest remaining member of the Liang ruling family. That, however, was far in the future. In the meantime, Hsiao Kang, who had been Crown Prince since 531, must have looked more promising; by about 539 Chien-wu was back in Chien-k'ang working again for the Crown Prince.

His son Hsin had also begun an official career by this time. Around 535–7 we find him as Acting Military Consultant to a general in the provinces. This was not very important; it ranked on the third level from the bottom of the eighteen-level Liang hierarchy.¹⁸ He spent most of the next dozen years in various offices at the capital, generally under the Crown Prince, like his father. In 542 he was temporarily back in the provinces as Adjutant to a military governor, and sometime between then and 547 he was sent as ambassador to the Eastern Wei. The mission would have been largely a ceremonial

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-10186-8 - 'The Lament for the South': Yu Hsin's 'Ai Chiang-Nan Fu'

William T. Graham

Excerpt

[More information](#)*'The Lament for the South'*

8

one. There had been cordial relations between the two states since 536, and ambassadors were chosen more for their literary distinction than for any diplomatic ability.¹⁹ Since they were intended above all to impress the foreigners, they would of course have had to possess the social graces as well as an ability to think on their feet.

The period of Yü Hsin's early career was, as I have said, the high point of Emperor Wu's reign; there is an idyllic picture of it toward the beginning of the 'Lament'. Things changed abruptly in 547, as a result of a disastrous mistake by the Emperor. He was then 83 and may have been a little senile; Yü, who speaks of him generally with reverence, occasionally hints at that possibility, for example in lines 89–90. Emperor Wu simply overestimated the strength of his own state. The most important Eastern Wei general, a non-Chinese named Hou Ching,²⁰ offered to come over to the Liang with the territory under his control, theoretically perhaps a third of that state. What this meant was not so much submission as an alliance of sorts. Hou Ching was apparently trying to find some way to save himself; he was in the position, familiar in China as elsewhere, of being too powerful for his ruler to trust him, but not powerful enough to take control for himself. This had not been a major problem under Kao Huan, the dictator; the two had been on good terms. After Kao's death, however, it became necessary to make other arrangements; Kao's heir obviously considered him a dangerous rival.

Hou had originally made the same offer to the Western Wei; when that state proved unwilling to send the reinforcements he needed, he switched to the Liang.²¹ Emperor Wu found the proposition more attractive. Though the Liang would not admit it, the Eastern Wei was probably the strongest state in China at that time. Hou Ching, who looked very impressive on paper, might possibly tip the balance in favor of the Liang. This would of course mean war, but it might be the beginning of the reconquest of the North, the heartland of ancient China, whose occupation by barbarians had always been both painful and threatening to the Chinese in the South.

Emperor Wu agreed to the alliance, the Eastern Wei attacked, and within a year Hou Ching had lost all his territory and fled south for refuge. Hou was now in an intolerable position, hated by the Eastern Wei and at best a nuisance to Emperor Wu, who, despite Hou's protests, soon renewed the old treaty with the northern state and seemed likely to hand Hou over as part of the peace agreement.²² Hou made the inevitable decision and rebelled against the Liang, attacking Chien-k'ang in December, 548. After a prolonged siege, the city fell on April 24, 549; it remained in rebel hands for the next three years.

The earlier defeat by the Eastern Wei had already demonstrated the military weakness of the Liang, but it was only during the rebellion that its

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-10186-8 - 'The Lament for the South': Yu Hsin's 'Ai Chiang-Nan Fu'

William T. Graham

Excerpt

[More information](#)*The historical background*

9

critical defect became apparent. Emperor Wu had placed his sons and nephews in powerful military positions in the provinces; by this time they were mature, experienced generals, mostly in early middle age. Most, if not all, of them now saw the rebellion as their opportunity to gain the throne.²³ Some had led armies in at least a token effort to relieve the siege, but after Chien-k'ang fell they returned to the provinces to kill off as many rival contenders as possible. The court was left at the mercy of the rebels. Emperor Wu died in captivity sometime before July 7, 549, the date when his death was announced. As Waley says, one is not likely to know the cause of death in such cases;²⁴ it might have been old age (he was 85), or perhaps starvation, as one popular theory had it.²⁵ Hou Ching put the Crown Prince, Hsiao Kang, on the throne as a puppet Emperor and set about extending his control.

Here it becomes necessary to give some account of the political and military events of the next three years. Fortunately, the 'Lament' itself does not demand of its readers a detailed knowledge of the period, and we also need not go too far into the impossible question of the motivation of certain individuals, since for our purposes it does not matter much whether a given person meant well or not.

The history of the rebellion shows an interesting geographical symmetry, with rebels in the East and the Liang forces in the West finally confronting one another along the middle Yangtze. Hou Ching had certain initial advantages. He could issue edicts in the name of his captive Emperor, thus gaining a bogus legitimacy. In addition, with most of the Liang court in his control, he had an almost unlimited supply of hostages related in one way or another to the provincial authorities. By a combination of force and diplomacy, he was able by 551 to gain control over the East and Southeast, at least temporarily.

This was possible only because of the lack of unified action against him; the same period saw the beginnings of a civil war among the Liang princes in the West. This war went on for years and finally destroyed the dynasty, but during a lull, having gained a momentary supremacy, Hsiao Yi was able to put down the rebellion with relative ease. This was Yü Chien-wu's former employer, by now back in Chiang-ling as Military Governor, with an office as Inspector General giving him authority over the others of that rank in the area. Like most of the others, he had started down the Yangtze at the beginning of the rebellion, stopped part way, and finally turned back, going upriver much faster than he had come down. He had received a letter accusing several of his relatives of plotting against him, and he was, as Yü Hsin observes, an extremely suspicious man. Conceivably the accusation was true; whatever the case, none of the plotters seems to have done anything beyond raising armies and gathering supplies, not unreasonable activities during a rebellion.

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-10186-8 - 'The Lament for the South': Yu Hsin's 'Ai Chiang-Nan Fu'

William T. Graham

Excerpt

[More information](#)*'The Lament for the South'*

10

After the fall of Chien-k'ang, Hsiao Yi claimed to have received one of those secret edicts which even the most closely guarded emperors manage somehow to send out. This one was supposed to have made him Commander-in-Chief of all Liang armies, with unlimited authority. If there were any lingering doubts among his relatives about Hsiao Yi's intentions, they were removed by his next action, the summary execution of Hsiao Tsao, one of the supposed plotters.

According to the accusation, the principal conspirator was Yi's nephew Hsiao Yü, Military Governor of ̄hsiang-chou.²⁶ Even without the secret edict, Hsiao Yi was entitled as a superior to exercise military control over Yü, and now, claiming that Yü had refused to send troops, he sent someone to Yü's capital at Changsha to assume command. Not surprisingly, Yü refused to give it up. Next came an army led by Hsiao Yi's oldest son, Fang-teng, who was killed in battle. His replacement proved incompetent, but a third general finally managed to capture and kill Yü in June of 550. In the intervening months Yü had called for help from his brother Ch'a, Military Governor of Yung-chou. Hsiao Ch'a's capital, the present Siangyang in Hupeh, was only about fifty miles from the northern frontier, and Ch'a soon concluded an ominous alliance with the Western Wei. Hsiao Yi had little reason to congratulate himself on a victory over Yü. The war had made enemies of all his relatives, and Ch'a in particular wanted revenge.

Yi's next target was his own elder brother Lun, Emperor Wu's sixth son.²⁷ Lun was the eldest surviving son, except for Hou Ching's puppet Kang, and thus the obvious claimant to the throne; the Kao family had recognized as much by allying itself with Lun, and he is supposed to have established his own imperial court. He had, however, done nothing to threaten Yi directly except to write protesting his treatment of Yü, and he seems to have been more concerned with Hou Ching. Lun had been one of the few princes to give effective help to the capital during the siege, and after the fall of the city he had continued to battle the rebels along the middle Yangtze. In September of 550 Hsiao Yi sent down a navy against his brother, commanded by Wang Seng-pien; Wang, who had been responsible earlier for the victory over Hsiao Yü, was equally successful against Lun. The latter, a fugitive, was captured and killed by the Western Wei in February of 551.

Hsiao Yi could now give his relatively undivided attention to Hou Ching. I spoke earlier of the geographical symmetry of the period; Hou by this time controlled the East and Southeast, and Hsiao Yi the West and Southwest. Both men had problems to the North. Yi had been forced to cede land to the Western Wei, allied with his nephew Ch'a. On the other hand, the death of Lun had brought him an alliance with the Kao family, dictators of the Eastern Wei, who had by now founded their own dynasty, the Northern Ch'i.