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978-0-521-10346-6 - The Han Rhapsody: A Study of the Fu of Yang Hsiung (53 B.C.-A.D. 18)

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Excerpt

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I

Introduction

In Chinese literary history the name of the poet Yang Hsiung (53 B.C.–A.D. 18) has figured prominently, although not as prominently as one might expect considering the bulk and variety of his literary production. He is generally better known for his non-poetic writings. He is the author of two important philosophical works, *The Great Dark Classic* (*T'ai-hsüan ching*), which is constructed around eighty-one four-line figures (tetragrams) in the manner of the *Book of Changes*,¹ and the *Model Sayings* (*Fa yen*), a collection of aphorisms and short dialogues concerning miscellaneous historical and philosophical questions.² Yang is also credited with two philological studies, the *Annotations on the T'sang Chieh*, which was a recension of the most important dictionaries of the Former Han period,³ and the *Regional Words* (*Fang yen*), a collection of dialect expressions.⁴ In addition to these works, Yang has a large and respectable literary corpus.⁵ This corpus includes a group of writings called *fu* or 'rhapsodies', a poetic genre that Yang mastered at an early age and that brought him recognition and honours at the imperial court.

The rhapsody was the most popular poetic type of the Han dynasty. Among most Chinese critics, Yang generally has taken second place to an earlier poet, Ssu-ma Hsiang-ju (179–117 B.C.), who customarily is credited with shaping the genre into the florid display of verbal virtuosity that is usually associated with the Han rhapsody. Whether Ssu-ma Hsiang-ju was the originator of this type of rhapsody, which I term the epideictic rhapsody, is difficult to prove, mainly because there are few extant genuine specimens of the form that ante-date Ssu-ma Hsiang-ju. There is no denying, however, that his influence on the development of the genre was considerable. The shadow cast by Ssu-ma Hsiang-ju in Chinese literary history is so immense that it even eclipses a genuine creative genius like Yang Hsiung.

In many respects, Yang Hsiung is as important in the development of the rhapsody as Ssu-ma Hsiang-ju. Yang lived at the end of the Former Han dynasty (206 B.C.–A.D. 8), which was the period in which the conventions of the rhapsody became firmly established. These conventions, which slowly emerged throughout the Former Han, are clearly discernible in Yang Hsiung's rhapsodies, for Yang was a most tradition-conscious poet, and he

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made a concerted effort to adhere to the traditions of the genre. In addition to writing poetry, Yang wrote about poetry, and he is the first poet to espouse his own theory of the rhapsody, which is something that Ssu-ma Hsiang-ju probably never did.⁶ It is clear from Yang's theoretical writings, and even in the rhapsodies themselves, that Yang was somewhat uneasy about the way in which the rhapsody had developed since Ssu-ma Hsiang-ju. Yang believed that writing poetry was essentially a moral act, and that the proper function of all literature was to promote ethical conduct. The rhapsody, in Yang Hsiung's eyes at least, seemed to be doing just the opposite. The epideictic rhapsodies, written to eulogize the extravagance and indulgences of the imperial court, were failing in their fundamental task of conveying effective moral reprimands, and this failure led Yang Hsiung eventually to repudiate the rhapsody.

Yang Hsiung's discussion of the rhapsody is instructive, for he is no mere armchair critic, but a practicing poet who was the premier Chinese poet at the end of the Former Han. One can follow what almost appear to be experiments by Yang in attempting to make a moral statement in his rhapsodies. He is more successful in some pieces than others, but his attempts at using the genre for persuasion are always evident. Yang was constantly changing, and his later works are not the same as his earlier ones. The change in style and focus could be cited as partial evidence to belie the notion that Yang lacked a creative imagination and that he only wrote in imitation of his predecessors.

In addition to the widely held belief that Yang is a mere hack, there is a tendency to condemn him for his personal conduct. Yang Hsiung in his later life served at the court of Wang Mang (43 B.C.–A.D. 23), who is one of the few Chinese statesmen to earn the odious designation of 'usurper'. Wang Mang seized the throne and declared himself emperor of the short-lived Hsin dynasty (A.D. 8–23). Although Yang held an extremely low position in the Wang Mang regime, later Chinese scholars, particularly in the Sung (960–1279), found the act of serving a usurper tantamount to treason.⁷ Yang did have his defenders, but the charges by his detractors certainly did not enhance his reputation, and even today, one often hears the words 'traitor' and 'Yang Hsiung' uttered in the same breath.

The attacks on his personal behavior undoubtedly are partially responsible for the negative evaluation of Yang's writing. 'There is a purported scandal, ergo his poetry is worthless.' One need not elaborate on the fallacy of this type of criticism. Rimbaud is not a bad poet simply because he may have been a despicable person. Similarly, Yang Hsiung deserves to be evaluated in terms of his literary achievement, and not on the basis of non-literary criteria.

Yang Hsiung's literary career must have begun relatively early, and while he

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was still residing in his home province of Shu (modern Szechwan), which lay in the extreme southwestern reaches of the Han empire. Although Shu was considered a somewhat uncivilized place during the Han period, it produced excellent scholars and poets. Government schools established to educate the local youth in the proper moral teachings contributed greatly to the high level of learning in this isolated area.⁸ Geography can occasionally be an important influence on literary development, and in the case of the rhapsody, it is not pure coincidence that the most prominent writers prior to Yang Hsiung, Ssu-ma Hsiang-ju and Wang Pao (fl. 58 B.C.), were from Shu, and it is highly probable that young scholars, particularly in Ch'eng-tu, the provincial capital, were schooled in rhapsody composition. Yang Hsiung, in fact, is credited with a rhapsody describing this city, and if it is from his hand, most likely it was written as a practice composition.⁹

Yang Hsiung was nurtured on the rhapsodies of Ssu-ma Hsiang-ju, and it was because of his ability to write in the style of Ssu-ma Hsiang-ju that he was summoned to the imperial capital in Ch'ang-an. Unfortunately, none of these imitation pieces survives, and the only work from his early corpus still extant is the 'Contra Sao' (*Fan Sao*), a poeticized criticism of the poet Ch'ü Yüan (ca. 340–278).¹⁰ Ch'ü Yüan, a poet-statesman of the southern state of Ch'u, had become almost a saint through the legend of his reputed suicide by drowning after being maltreated by the rulers of the Ch'u house. The 'Encountering Sorrow' (*Li sao*), in which Ch'ü Yüan purportedly states his complaint and anticipates eventual suicide, was at that time one of the most respected poems in the Chinese language. The 'Contra Sao' is a direct attack on the idealization of Ch'ü Yüan. It is a poem using the meter and diction of 'Encountering Sorrow' to strongly condemn Ch'ü Yüan's suicide. Apparently Yang followed 'Contra Sao' with several other poems on the same subject, but none of these pieces survives.¹¹

Around 20 B.C. Yang left his native province to take up residence as an official at the imperial court in Ch'ang-an.¹² During the Han, it was not uncommon for distinguished poets to be given government posts on the basis of their poetical ability alone.¹³ Although poets were given regular administrative titles, one of their primary tasks was to compose poems and other pieces, including rhapsodies, on behalf of the emperor. This activity made such officials the equivalent of a 'court poet', although there was no official designation of this kind. Yang's official title was initially Candidate for Appointment (*tai-chao*), which was not an official post but a designation commonly given to those under consideration for a government position.¹⁴ It was while he was a 'candidate' during the reign of Emperor Ch'eng (reg. 32–7 B.C.) that Yang wrote his first rhapsodies for the emperor. The first of these

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pieces was the 'Sweet Springs Rhapsody' (*Kan-ch'üan fu*), which was written on the occasion of the celebration of the sacrifices to Heaven at the Sweet Springs Palace north of Ch'ang-an. Yang's poem evidently pleased the emperor, for he was asked to accompany the imperial party to Fen-yin in Ho-tung Commandery where sacrifices to Sovereign Earth (Hou-t'u), the chief earth deity, were performed. Yang was asked to produce another rhapsody on this occasion. This piece he titled 'Ho-tung Rhapsody' (*Ho-tung fu*).¹⁵ Later, perhaps in that same year, Yang was invited to view the great imperial hunt held in the Shang-lin Park. He wrote two rhapsodies about this event: 'Barricade Hunt Rhapsody' (*Chiao-lieh fu*) and 'Ch'ang-yang Rhapsody' (*Ch'ang-yang fu*).¹⁶ It was probably after presenting these poems that Yang was given his first regular appointment: Gentleman (*lang*) or Attendant Gentleman (*shih-lang*), and concurrently Servitor at the Yellow Gate (*chi-shih huang-men*).¹⁷

As a court poet, and as a candidate for an imperial appointment, Yang was expected to praise the emperor's greatness and the magnificence of the spectacles he was so privileged to attend. Thus, all of these rhapsodies are in varying degree panegyrical. Nevertheless, Yang was obviously appalled by the extravagance and waste of these activities, and one can detect in the poems subtle moral reprimands to the emperor reminding him that such indulgences are improper for the supreme sovereign. Yang shows great skill in the technique known as *feng* or 'indirect criticism', and by his use of it shows that he was intent on using the rhapsody for moral suasion.

Yang Hsiung soon found, however, that his subtle hints were going unheeded. It was at this point that he decided that the technique of indirect criticism simply did not work, and that he would have to give up writing rhapsodies. In his 'Autobiography' Yang describes what he felt were the inadequacies of the rhapsody:

I believe the rhapsody is for the purpose of criticizing by indirection, and a writer is required to speak by adducing examples, use ornate language to the extreme, grossly exaggerate, greatly amplify, and strive to make it such that another person cannot add to it. Thus, by the time he returns to the rectifying message, the reader has already erred. In former times Emperor Wu was interested in immortals. Hsiang-ju presented the 'Great Man Rhapsody' in order to criticize him by indirection. The emperor, on the contrary, had the intention of airily floating on the clouds.¹⁸ From this it is clear that the rhapsody only encourages and does not restrain. It is rather like an entertainer such as Ch'un-yü K'un or Jester Meng.¹⁹ It is nothing sustained by rules and measures, nor does it rectify behavior like the poems and rhapsodies of nobles and gentlemen. Therefore, I have stopped and will no longer write any.²⁰

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Yang's renunciation of the rhapsody seems to have been in name only, for he continued to write poems, which, although not titled 'rhapsody', clearly belonged to that tradition. One of these poems, the 'Dissolving Ridicule' (*Chieh ch'ao*), written in defense of his decision to remain aloof from court affairs, shows Yang writing more forthrightly and directly.²¹ In another piece, perhaps from this same period, Yang not too subtly compares life of a court official to the precarious position of a water pitcher that is about to topple into a well and be smashed on the bricks below.²² Yang continues to theorize about the rhapsody, and he eventually postulates what he considered to be the ideal rhapsody: a poem that stresses content over form, directness over obliqueness, plain language over floridity. Yang may have even written a rhapsody that conforms to this ideal.²³

Yang's significance thus lies in both his theory and practice, and he clearly holds an important position in the history of the Han rhapsody. His importance cannot be understood, however, unless one first understands the nature and development of the Han rhapsody. Unfortunately, the rhapsody today is held in low repute in China, both on the mainland and Taiwan. Few if any writers deign to write in this form, and except for two works published in the 1930s, virtually nothing of substance on the rhapsody has been published in recent years.²⁴ Those studies that have been done are mostly handbooks or chronicles, which are somewhat useful, but really do not attempt to provide a clear definition of the genre. Even the history of the rhapsody given in these works lacks coherence.

The most extensive research on the rhapsody has been done by the Japanese, notably Suzuki Torao and Nakashima Chiaki. Suzuki's monumental work, published in 1936, is still the most comprehensive study of the rhapsody.²⁵ Suzuki traces the genre from its beginnings in the fourth century B.C. all the way through the Ch'ing dynasty. Although his discussion of the Han rhapsody occupies only some fifty pages, it was for many years the definitive statement about the formative period of the genre. Recently, Suzuki's study of the Han has been superceded by his compatriot, Nakashima Chiaki. Nakashima has devoted a monograph of almost six hundred pages to the Han rhapsody.²⁶ Nakashima's work is important, for he is the first to document in detail the relationship of the rhapsody to the early Chinese rhetorical tradition. Early Chinese rhetoric, as in ancient Greece, was concerned primarily with persuasion, and many of the techniques used by the Chinese persuaders found their way into the rhapsody.

Work on the rhapsody in Western languages is mainly limited to translation, and in fact the rhapsody has enjoyed somewhat more popularity in translation than in the original during the past fifty years. Many of Arthur

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Waley's first translations from the Chinese were rhapsodies.²⁷ In the 1930s, Erwin von Zach, working in isolation from academia in Batavia, produced good, literal translations of rhapsodies in German.²⁸ Recently, Burton Watson has translated a modest number of rhapsodies which have appeared in a volume intended for the general reader.²⁹

Studies of the rhapsody in Western languages are not especially numerous or noteworthy. Probably the best general discussion of the genre is the succinct description given by James Robert Hightower in his survey of Chinese literature.³⁰ On the Han rhapsody, most studies provide only vague generalities. Yves Hervouet's work on Ssu-ma Hsiang-ju, which touches on the development of the rhapsody during the period prior to Ssu-ma Hsiang-ju, is encyclopedic rather than analytical.³¹ Burton Watson's account of the genre, which is given in several places, offers occasional insights but it is not thorough.³²

One of the most significant and groundbreaking studies of the rhapsody is a short article published by Hellmut Wilhelm in 1957.³³ In this article, prepared for a conference on Chinese thought and institutions, Dr Wilhelm proposed the novel idea that contrary to the commonly held notion the rhapsody did not develop from the so-called Ch'u school of literature, but 'was a legacy of the School of Politicians and of their art of conveying things by indirection'.³⁴ The main concern of the School of Politicians was political rhetoric, and if the connection between this school and the rhapsody can be established, one can easily show that the rhapsody is essentially a rhetorical genre. Following Dr Wilhelm's theory, my own studies have proceeded to investigate the rhetorical character of the rhapsody, and my research tends to corroborate Wilhelm's thesis.³⁵

On Yang Hsiung, most research has been concentrated on subjects other than his rhapsodies. Yang has no less than three *nien-p'u* or 'chronological biographies', which summarize year by year the main events of his life.³⁶ In the 1930s, the German Sinologist Alfred Forke devoted several short articles and a major part of his history of early Chinese philosophy to Yang Hsiung.³⁷ Forke's work led to further studies, including an important article by Forke's student, Fritz Jäger, on Yang Hsiung's relationship with Wang Mang.³⁸ Forke's studies unfortunately were marred by numerous errors, which Erwin von Zach was quick to point out in an article titled 'In Defense of the Philosopher Yang Hsiung'.³⁹ Zach then proceeded to translate a number of Yang's works including several rhapsodies and the long philosophical treatise *Model Sayings*.⁴⁰ The *Model Sayings* is a thirteen chapter work patterned on the *Analects* (*Lun yü*). Like the *Analects*, the *Model Sayings* consists of a series of dialogues in which an anonymous questioner poses a query to Yang Hsiung,

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which he answers in a highly terse fashion. It was written sometime during the Wang Mang period, and thus it has been one of Yang's more controversial works. Some scholars have viewed it as an apology for Wang Mang's usurpation, while others have examined it for what they claim is a veiled attack on Wang. Several Ch'ing and early Republican period scholars in particular rose to Yang Hsiung's defense, including the eminent philologist Yü Yüeh (1821–1907)⁴¹ and the diplomat Wang Jung-pao (1878–1933). Wang wrote an extensive commentary to the *Model Sayings* which is exhaustive if not always reliable.⁴²

Regardless of the political purport of the *Model Sayings*, its major focus is the defense and justification of the Confucian tradition as Yang Hsiung understood it. Yang strongly desired to see a return to classical precepts or what he called the 'teachings of the sages', of whom the Duke of Chou and Confucius were considered the leading lights. He acutely felt the apparent lack of interest in classical learning, which he considered in a state of decline. At one point in the *Model Sayings* he declares to his questioner: 'I have seldom seen people who favor the works of the remote past. They read instead contemporary literature and listen to contemporary sayings. They ignore the remote past!'⁴³

Much of the *Model Sayings* is thus directed toward disputing notions of many pre-Ch'in and Han thinkers. In addition to attacking earlier philosophers, Yang also makes critical remarks on intellectual currents of his time. Yang expresses particularly strong opposition to the prevailing interest in immortality quests and the astrological and numerological speculation that was growing in popularity during this period.⁴⁴ It was in this context that Yang Hsiung speaks about literature, and its proper function of combatting deleterious influences and pernicious doctrines. In the *Model Sayings* Yang makes a series of remarks about the rhapsody, giving his reasons for repudiating the genre as it was currently written. His statements, although formulated long after he had purportedly given up writing the rhapsody, offer an important insight into what he conceived to be the generic ideal of the rhapsody and its proper function.

Another work important for an understanding of Yang Hsiung's ideas, and these include his literary theory, is *The Great Dark*, which is commonly called *The Great Dark Classic*. Since I shall have occasion to refer to it, a short description of this difficult work is necessary. *The Great Dark* was written before the Wang Mang period, perhaps around 2 B.C. Like its prototype, the *Book of Changes*, it is based on a series of linear complexes. Instead of the hexagram (a six-line figure), Yang uses a four-line complex or tetragram, but unlike the *Changes*, each line can be divided not only once but twice. Thus, in

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Yang's system there are eighty-one (3^4) possible combinations instead of the sixty-four (2^6) possibilities of the *Changes*. Each line of the tetragram has been co-ordinated with administrative and social institutions. Thus, the lines from top to bottom are titled 'region' (*fang*), 'province' (*chou*), 'department' (*pu*), and 'family' (*chia*). This hierarchy and the various combinations of the lines represent the basic process of development in Yang's cosmography.

The number three plays an important role in this system. Yang conceives of a universe guided by the force he calls the Dark (*hsüan*), which governs a hierarchy of tri-partite divisions in the cosmos. The Dark occupies the center of the universe and embraces three 'regions'. Each of the three 'regions' is divided into three parts known as 'provinces', yielding a total of nine 'provinces'. Similarly, each 'province' divides into three 'departments' (totalling twenty-seven), and each department in turn separates into three 'families' (totalling eighty-one). The symbolic representation of this process is the tetragram. The top line represents the 'region'; the second line, the 'province'; the third line, the 'department'; and the lowest line, the 'family'.

—	Region
—	Province
—	Department
—	Family

By dividing each line once or twice in an orderly sequence the eighty-one possibilities are exhausted. Each line also is symbolic: a solid line represents Heaven; a once-divided line, Earth; and a twice divided line, Man. The individual tetragrams that are formed in this manner represent the fundamental concepts of the universe, and like the *Changes*, each has a special name.

A similar trinary process governs the production of things in the universe. Yang conceived of three stages of growth, culmination, and decline which he termed 'thought' (*ssu*), 'fortune' (*fu*), and 'disaster' (*huo*). Each of these stages is further divisible by three. In each tetragram there are nine texts called 'judgments' or 'appraisals' (*tsan*), which like the 'line texts' of the *Changes* are short verse oracles giving an interpretation of the situation represented by each stage of the tetragram. (Unlike the *Changes*, the 'judgments' are not keyed on the lines of the tetragram.) Each judgment is then followed by a 'commentary' or 'probe' (*ts'e*), which further elaborates on the significance of the oracle given in the judgment. The first through the third judgments depict the stages of progressive growth; the middle judgments (four to six) represent the apex of development; and the seventh through the ninth judgments portray the process of decline. The system is also coordinated with numbers, constella-

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tions, time, colors, animals, and other objects so that it can represent virtually everything in the universe.⁴⁵

The Great Dark has always been considered a highly perplexing book, and few scholars have had the courage to try to read it, let alone to understand it.⁴⁶ The same principle would seem to apply to Yang's rhapsodies. A common opinion of Yang Hsiung is that he contributed nothing original. Even if one granted credence to this view, this does not mean that what he wrote is dull and without interest. A major reason for the appeal of Yang Hsiung's works may be credited in large part to his skill with words, a feature that even seems to characterize his purely philosophical writings. His philosophical works are in fact so 'poetic' that a modern philosopher would probably disqualify them as philosophy. Although this book is confined to a treatment of Yang Hsiung as a writer of rhapsodies, it is proper to keep in mind that Yang was more than a good poet. He was a profound thinker, and his intellectual interests extended into widely diverse areas, including history, mathematics, philology, lexicography, music, astronomy, and politics. It would probably distress Yang to find in the twentieth century a scholar writing on the narrow subject of his rhapsodies, but the narrowness is mine and not his.

Sources. The primary source of information about Yang Hsiung is the long two-chapter biography (87A–B) in the *History of the Former Han (Han shu)*. The *History of the Former Han* was compiled by Pan Ku (A.D. 32–92) and members of his family around A.D. 70. Yang's biography follows the general pattern of most biographies (*lieh-chuan*) in the *History*. It contains a genealogy of the Yang family, a sketch of Yang Hsiung's character and personality, the texts of seven rhapsodies and essays, a description of the cosmography contained in *The Great Dark*, a brief section giving Yang's criticisms of the rhapsody, a chapter outline of the *Model Sayings*, and finally an 'Appraisal' (*Tsan*) by Pan Ku, which details Yang Hsiung's career at court, particularly under Wang Mang. The 'Appraisal' also contains remarks about Yang Hsiung by such contemporaries as the scholar Liu Hsin (?–A.D. 23) and the philosopher Huan T'an (ca. 43 B.C.–A.D. 28).⁴⁷

What is particularly valuable about this biography is that it is most probably based on an 'Autobiography' written by Yang Hsiung himself.⁴⁸ Thus, the information it contains is potentially more reliable than what one ordinarily finds in the standard dynastic history biography. Particularly useful for the literary historian are the detailed introductions to Yang Hsiung's rhapsodies, which appear to come from the 'Autobiography'. These introductions give an account of the circumstances of the composition of the poem, in several cases the date, and an explanation of the poem's purpose.

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Relatively speaking the amount of rhapsodies from the Former Han dynasty still surviving is small. At the end of the Former Han one catalogue listed around 1000 rhapsodies, while today approximately 40 pieces attributed to Former Han writers survive.⁴⁹ The best Han source for texts of rhapsodies is the *History of the Former Han*. Also useful for the early part of the Han dynasty is the *Records of the Historian (Shih chi)* compiled by Ssu-ma Ch'ien (ca. 145–90 B.C.). However, these two sources contain only about a half of the extant rhapsodies, and one must go to later, less reliable works to find texts of other pieces.

During the Six Dynasties period (A.D. 222–589) a large number of anthologies was compiled, including special collections of rhapsodies. The only extant collection containing rhapsodies is *The Literary Selections (Wen hsüan)*.⁵⁰ This work was compiled by Hsiao T'ung (501–531). Originally in thirty *chüan*, it was rearranged into sixty *chüan* by Li Shan (?–689), who also wrote an important commentary on the text. In spite of its importance in Chinese literary studies, *The Literary Selections* contains only two Former Han rhapsodies not in the *History of the Former Han*. Its main use lies in its commentary, including that by Li Shan and the later commentary known as the *Five Subjects Commentary (Wu ch'en chu)*.⁵¹

Somewhat useful, but not altogether reliable, are the T'ang dynasty compendia. The earliest of these is the *Documents of the Northern Hall (Pei-t'ang shu-ch'ao)* compiled by Yü Shih-nan (558–638).⁵² It contains only short excerpts of rhapsodies, and because it was drastically altered in the Ming dynasty, the *Documents* must be used with great care. The best of the T'ang compendia is the *Compendium of Arts and Letters (Yi-wen lei-chü)*, compiled by an imperial commission under the direction of Ou-yang Hsün (557–641) in A.D. 624.⁵³ The *Compendium* contains at least thirty-five Former Han rhapsodies, and about half of these do not occur earlier. Unfortunately, most of them are fragments, and the compilers do not indicate the provenance of the text. A smaller companion volume to the *Compendium* is the *Student's Primer (Ch'u hsüeh chi)*, another imperially sponsored compilation presented to the throne in 727.⁵⁴ The *Primer* contains fewer rhapsodies than the *Compendium*, and those it does cite are virtually identical to those in the *Compendium*.

In addition to the compendia, there are two sources of questionable reliability. The first of these is the *Western Capital Miscellany (Hsi-ching tsa chi)*, a collection of anecdotes purportedly relating events of the Former Han period. The exact date of its compilation is unknown although it most likely was compiled around the fifth century A.D.⁵⁵ The rhapsodies and remarks about the rhapsody it contains must be used with extreme care. The same warning should be heeded for the *Garden of Ancient Literature (Ku-wen yüan)*,