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The Topos of the World

Upside-Down Turned Rightside-Up:

Liu Xiang and Political Rhetoric in Early China

ABSTRACT:

A prominent literary theme (*topos*) in the *fu* poetry of the Han dynasty is that of the “world turned upside-down.” The *topos* encompasses a variety of imagery and expressions, all of which are used to convey a similar message: that the condition of the world is inverted, no longer in its proper order, with the lowly in high places and vice versa. This paper traces the origins of the *topos* and its full expression in the important early-Chinese poetry anthology *Chuci*. Further, it speculates on a relevant context, namely, the contemporary emergence of an important political philosophy. Finally, it examines the reversal of the *topos* in the hands of Liu Xiang 劉向 (79–8 BC), who depicts the world restored to its proper order. Evaluating the “upside-down” *topos* in terms of its historical evolution sheds light on the broader cultural significance as well as on shifting intellectual currents during the late-Warring States and Han periods.

KEYWORDS:

Han-dynasty literature, political philosophy, Xunzi 荀子, Elegies of Chu, *Chuci* 楚辭, *Liu Xiang* 劉向

INTRODUCTION

Since Lu Xun 魯迅 (1881–1936), scholars have identified the burgeoning of a new literary self-consciousness in the Jian’an 建安 reign-period (196–220), coming at the end of the Han dynasty.¹ But more recently Zhang Shaokang 張少康 has proposed that we trace this self-consciousness back much earlier, to Liu Xiang 劉向 (79–8 BC), who lived during the Western Han (202 BC–6 AD).² Zhang’s central point is the simple fact that Liu Xiang allocated one of his six major biblio-

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I AM grateful for the help of David Lebovitz, who introduced me to, and showed me his draft translation of, the *Rui Liangfu bi* 芮良夫嗾 text. (See discussion in main text, below, around nn. 31 and 32.)

¹ Western scholars may not phrase this in the same terms but tend to accept a similar periodization. For instance, Stephen Owen dates “the making of early classical Chinese poetry” to the Jian’an period rather than, say, Warring States or earlier. See his *The Making of Early Classical Chinese Poetry* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Asia Center, 2006).

² Zhang Shaokang, “Lun wenxue de duli he zijue fei zi Wei Jin shi” 論文學的獨立和自覺非

graphic categories to two genres of poetry, the *shi* 詩 and *fu* 賦, thus effectively demarcating a zone of literature *per se*.³ And yet, although both Lu Xun's original point and Zhang Shaokang's refinement certainly make an important interpretation, these theses are misleading to the extent that they seem to suggest a burgeoning consciousness of literature as independent and set apart from the other affairs of life. For the true case is the very opposite. When poetry is presented according to a conscious pedagogy in proper historical and moral context, then the poems themselves may be valuable even though they do not enunciate any articulate message. But when poetry becomes a category of its own, then poems have to assert their own claims for significance; an osprey can no longer be assumed to stand in for a prince.

Han-era poetry actually evolved not in the sense that it was liberated to describe any subject at will, but in the contrary fashion: when poetry was assigned its own place alongside the classics and philosophers, it took upon itself a burden of equal weight, to explain "All-under-Heaven." Thus it is no coincidence that it is just after the great bibliographical achievements of Liu Xiang and his son that we see the rise of increasingly ambitious *fu* poems. Moreover, there has always been debate about whether Sima Xiangru's 司馬相如 (179–117 BC) *fu* were really intended seriously, or not; but those of Ban Gu 班固 (32–92) and Zhang Heng 張衡 (78–139) leave no room for doubt. In other words, even in the sphere of literature we can see one dimension of the "intense integration" so typical of the Han.⁴ Literary compositions, rather than becoming an independent field of their own, became one new venue in which to reconstruction a vision of the cosmos.

In this paper I will examine how this phenomenon worked itself out with regard to one particular topic of literary composition. We look back to the Warring States period and can see that Chinese poets had very often found themselves living in a world the opposite of what it ought to have been. The unjust were in authority and the righteous persecuted; wise counsel was ignored, and foolish slanders believed. These poets did not accept that this was simply the way of the world, but instead made the bold claim that it was a perversion of how things ought to be, and could be, if only a sagely king returned

自魏晉始, *Beijing daxue xuebao (zhexue shehui kexue ban)* (1996.2), pp. 75–81.

³ Zhang goes on to point out the vast body of literary works in these and other genres composed during the Han, as supporting evidence for his theory, but this does not really affect the principal thesis.

⁴ Mark Csikszentmihalyi, *Readings in Han Chinese Thought* (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, 1996), p. ix.

to power. Their rhetorical depictions of an inverted world were not mere figures of speech or embellishments to heighten a mood, but they anticipated the development of Chinese political philosophy, which had outlined the contours of an ordered realm existing at least in the imagination, if not always in reality. Then, especially in the time of the Han dynasty, we see this literary topos becoming assimilated into an ordered vision of the cosmos. The inverted world was not necessarily portrayed with any more gusto than it had been before, but its portrayal was made more complete by representing the righteous world of which it was the inverse. The signal example of this transformation lies again in the work of Liu Xiang, though not in his bibliographical treatises but in his verse compositions. Thus Liu Xiang exemplifies a new self-consciousness about the relation between literature and the world, whether inverted or not.

THE RISE OF THE TOPOS

The earliest mature example of poetry on the topic of the “world turned upside-down” occurs in a surprising place, the long poem which concludes the “Fu” 賦 chapter of the influential collection *Xunzi* 荀子 (by Xun Kuang 荀况, d. perhaps ca. 238 BC).⁵ The poem comes after five riddles on specific objects (namely ritual, wisdom, clouds, the silk-worm, and the needle), though the relationship between the two parts is unclear, and it seems mostly likely that the poem was included along with the riddles only because they all belong loosely to the *fu* genre.⁶ The concluding poem is further divided into two parts: “Gui shi” 侷詩 (“Poem on Reversals”) and “Xiao ge” 小歌 (“Short Song”), but these should probably be treated as a single composition, the “Poem on Reversals,” with the “Short Song” an envoi to the main poem.⁷ The character *gui* 侷 is itself rare, but may simply be a graphic variant of *gui* 詭, which

⁵ *Xunzi jijie* 荀子集解, ed. Wang Xianqian 王先謙 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1988), *pian* 26, pp. 480–84. In light of its importance for my theme, I will be required to quote the poem at length. The two most detailed commentaries in English are those of David R. Knechtges, “Riddles as Poetry: The ‘Fu Chapter’ of the *Hsun-tzu*,” in Chow Ts’e-tung, ed., *Wen-lin*, Vol 2: *Studies in the Chinese Humanities* (Madison: Dept. of East Asian Languages and Literature, 1989), pp. 11–14; and David W. Pankenier, “‘The Scholar’s Frustration’ Reconsidered: Melancholia or Credo,” *JAO* 110.3 (1990), pp. 438–41. Below, I quote from Knechtges’ translation for consistency. Though Knechtges emphasizes literary rhetoric and Pankenier philosophical argument, the two interpretations ultimately complement one another well (thus the answer to Pankenier’s titular question ought to be “both”).

⁶ Here I follow David Knechtges’ argument in *The Han Rhapsody: A Study of the Fu of Yang Hsiung* (53 B.C.–A.D. 18) (Cambridge: Cambridge U.P., 1976), pp. 18–21.

⁷ As with e.g.’s in the “Nine Avowals” 九章 of *Chuci* 楚辭 (*Elegies of Chu*), esp. the “Untangled Yearnings” 抽思. See Nicholas Morrow Williams, “Tropes of Entanglement and Strange Loops in the ‘Nine Avowals’ of the *Chuci*,” *BSOAS* 81.2 (2018), pp. 277–300.

has a complex semantic range encompassing “anomalous, strange,” but also “contrary, refractory” and indeed “reprimand, reprove” (*ze* 責, as it is glossed in the Han-era dictionary *Shuowen*).⁸

The “Poem on Reversals” has a two-line preface that sets it up already as a response to a world in disorder: “All under heaven is not in order, so please allow me to present a poem on reversals” 天下不治，請陳儷詩。 The poem then opens with a cosmic version of the topos:⁹

“Poem on Reversals” (“*Gui shi*”)

天地易位	Heaven and earth have changed positions;
四時易鄉	The four seasons have altered directions.
列星殞墜	The constellations have fallen from the sky,
旦暮晦盲	Day and night it is dim and dark.
幽闇登昭	The benighted ascend to brightness,
日月下藏	While the sun and moon hide below.

...

天下幽險	The world is dark and dangerous;
恐失世英	I fear the prime blossoms of the age are lost.
螭龍爲蜺	The noble dragon is considered a lizard,
鴟梟爲鳳凰	The owl is taken for a phoenix.

...

The second half of the poem turns more to the frustration theme, beginning with the historical examples of Bi Gan, honest counselor to the final ruler of the Shang dynasty. But the “Short Song” envoi is entirely devoted to an elaboration of the topos:

“Short Song” (“*Xiao ge*”)

念彼遠方	I think of that distant region.
何其塞矣	What difficulties it has!
仁人紉約	The humane man is held back and restrained;

⁸ One later usage of *gui* may act as the best gloss for its usage in this title: a couplet in Ban Gu’s tetrasyllabic postface to the standard dynastic-history *Han shu* 漢書, describing the political turmoil at the end of the Western Han: “Inverted indeed were fortune and misfortune, / When the consort clans were treated as a model 詭矣禍福，刑于外戚”; *Han shu* (Beijing: Zhonghua edn., 1962) 100B, p. 4269. The second line seems to refer to *Shijing* 詩經, poem 240, stanza 2, describing king Wen of Zhou’s relations with his female relatives, specifically the line: “And his example acted on his wife 刑于寡妻.” See *Maoshi zhengyi* 毛詩正義 (Beijing: Beijing daxue chubanshe, 2000), j. 16, p. 1184; translation from James Legge, *The Chinese Classics*, Vol. 2: *The She King or the Book of Poetry* (rpt. Taipei: SMC Publishing, 1991), p. 447. The conjunction of misfortune and fortune shows that *gui* was used during Han to refer specifically to a reversal of the proper order, and, as we will see below, this reading also matches the content of the poem.

⁹ *Xunzi jijie*, *pian* 26, pp. 480–84. As mentioned above, I quote from the complete translation in Knechtges, “Riddles as Poetry,” pp. 11–14, but footnotes are my own.

暴人衍矣	The violent men flourish.
忠臣危殆	Loyal officials are in danger;
讒人服矣	Slanderers are employed.
璇玉瑤珠	Red jade, green jade, jasper, and pearl--
不知佩也	He does not know how to wear them.
雜布與帛	Coarse cloth and brocade,
不知異也	He does not know how to distinguish them.
閭媿子奢	Lü Ju and Zi Du, ¹⁰
莫之媒也	No one will arrange their marriage.
媿母力父	Mo Mu and Li Fu ¹¹
是之喜也	Are his delight.
以盲爲明	The blind he considers sharp-sighted;
以聾爲聰	The deaf he thinks acute.
以危爲安	Danger is taken for security;
以吉爲凶	Luck is considered misfortune.
嗚呼上天	Oh! High Heaven!
曷維其同	How can I consort with him? ¹²

The second line of the envoi refers to “*sai* 塞, obstructions,” the opposite of “*tong* 通, free passage, or success.”¹³ This has also been emended by one scholar to “*jian* 蹇, difficulties,” so as to improve the rhyme scheme.¹⁴ In either case, the envoi recounts the various forms of oppression in the realm: the virtuous people prevented from obtaining success, beauties prevented from finding a fitting mate. A general term for all these inversions and obstacles would also be “frustration,” as in Hellmut Wilhelm’s classic article on the “scholar’s frustration” as expressed in Han-dynasty literature.¹⁵ But the precise nature of all the

¹⁰ Knechtges follows the variant of Zi Du 子都, preserved in *Han shi waizhuan* 韓詩外傳 (Han Wei congshu edn.), j. 4, p. 13a-b. Zi Du is the name of a handsome man who deserved to be the consort of the beautiful lady Lü Ju.

¹¹ Mo Mu (“Homely Crone”) appears in *Chuci* and frequently plays a role in other iterations of the topos. Li Fu is unidentified but would seem to be the name of a woman unmarried because of her extraordinary physical strength.

¹² As Knechtges notes (“Riddles as Poetry,” p. 14, n. 70), the interpretation of this line is particularly challenging. An alternative would be, “How can one put such things back into accord?”

¹³ As in the “Image” commentary to *Changes*, hexagram #60, Jie 節, line 2: “Not going out the door into the courtyard” means understanding passage and obstruction 不出戶庭, 知通塞也.” See *Zhouyi zhengyi* 周易正義 (Beijing: Beijing daxue chubanshe, 2000), j. 6, p. 282.

¹⁴ Lu Wencao 盧文弨 (1717-1796), quoted in *Xunzi jijie*, pian 26, p. 570. But this emendation to the Old Chinese *-an rhyme further requires that one replace *fu* 服 in line 6 with the variant *pan* 般, here understood in the sense of “delight.” Knechtges accepts these emendations to the text but does not follow the second in his translation (“are employed” rather than “are delighted”).

¹⁵ Hellmut Wilhelm, “The Scholar’s Frustration: Notes on a Type of Fu,” in John K. Fairbank, ed., *Chinese Thought and Institutions* (Chicago: U. Chicago P., 1957), pp. 310-19, 398-

frustrations turns out to be inversion of the proper order, even to the extent that blindness and deafness are taken for acute perception. In other words, the problem here is not one limited to the scholars, or to the ruler, but instead we are presented with a whole political realm (“that distant region”) in which standards of value have been inverted.

Thus the “Poem on Reversals” with its envoi serve as a convenient entry point to the “topos of the world upside-down.” This term was borrowed by David R. Knechtges from the great German philologist Ernst Robert Curtius, in order to employ it in his studies of the *fu* of Han times.¹⁶ While the concept is now familiar to students of Chinese literature, the reasons behind its sudden appearance and evolution throughout the first few centuries BC have not been thoroughly investigated. In fact, though, the topos forms a link between a number of broader intellectual trends in China during the Warring States and the Han, ranging from political discourses and lyric poetry to the great bibliographer Liu Xiang.

Returning to the poetic piece by Xunzi, it is worth noting the source of his “Poem on Reversals” with envoi. Whether this poem was composed by Xun Kuang or not, it is no coincidence that they were included in the book *Xunzi*. The philosophical work surrounding them frequently employs similar tropes, for example, in the “Rectification of Names” 正名 chapter:¹⁷

Nowadays the sagely rulers have passed away; the maintenance of status distinctions has grown sloppy; strange types of writing have appeared; the difference between reputation and reality has become confused; the appearances of truth and falsity are no longer clear; and even the clerks who ought to maintain the law, and the scholars who ought to recite the proper forms, are all confused as well. 今聖王沒，名守慢，奇辭起，名實亂，是非之形不明，則雖守法之吏，誦數之儒，亦皆亂也。

In fact, one could also understand the composition of the poem as yet another example of “Xun Zi’s preeminent ability to synthesize concepts, ideas, and arguments about the analogical relationship between Heaven and man.”¹⁸ The images in the “Poem on Reversals” are

403. Wilhelm quotes the “Small Song” (on p. 317) and treats the entire chapter in *Xunzi* as a single *fu* poem in various sections.

¹⁶ Knechtges, *Han Rhapsody*, pp. 17, 20, 27, 103, etc.

¹⁷ *Xunzi jijie*, j. 22, p. 490.

¹⁸ Satō Masayuki 佐藤将之, *The Confucian Quest for Order: The Origin and Formation of the Political Thought of Xun Zi* (Leiden: Brill, 2003), p. 321.

illustrating precisely how “the difference between reputation and reality has become confused”: the owl has won the reputation of a phoenix, while actual dragons are mistaken for lowly lizards. The “Short Song” also laments people’s inability to make proper distinctions, for instance between “coarse cloth and brocade.” Supplying this range of specific examples, though, illustrates Xunzi’s message in a concrete and unmistakable way.

From a broader perspective, the literary topos with which we are concerned seems to reflect the original contributions appearing contemporaneously in Warring States political thought. One of the most prominent innovations of this period was the ideal conception of the ruler, a distinctive standard by which actual or historical rulers could then be judged. As Yuri Pines sums up, “The thinkers’ unanimous awareness of the gap between the ideal and the real eventually became a source of immense tension, which is present in most, if not all, political texts of the Zhanguo period.”¹⁹ Many of these texts present this tension by means of extreme cases, diametric opposites of scale and quality. Just to take one example, the roughly 239 BC work titled *Lüshi chunqiu* 呂氏春秋 further develops the concept of “*li* 理,” present but relatively rare in *Xunzi*.²⁰ Its chapters “Clarifying Order” 明理 and “Exceeding the Bounds of Order” 過理 both present numerous examples of deviation from an ordered state. For instance, “Clarifying Order” describes the qualities of a disordered realm:²¹

Thus in the mutations of the utmost disorder, sovereign and vassals ravage one another, the young and the old murder one another, father and son are ruthless to one another, brother and brother slander one another, friends and acquaintances repel one another, husband and wife envy each other, every day growing more perilous, and departing from the proper order of human relations. Their hearts become like birds and beasts, ever wickedly seeking temporary profit, not knowing of duty or order. 故至亂之化，君臣相賊，長少相殺，父子相忍，弟兄相誣，知交相倒，夫妻相冒，日以相危，失人之紀，心若禽獸，長邪苟利，不知義理。

¹⁹ Pines, *Envisioning Eternal Empire: Chinese Political Thought of the Warring States Era* (Honolulu: U. Hawai‘i P., 2009), p. 54, esp. his enlightening account of Xunzi’s theory of rulership, pp. 82–97.

²⁰ See discussion in Satō Masayuki, *Xunzi: lizhi sixiang de yuanyuan yu Zhanguo zhuzi zhi yanjiu* 荀子，禮治思想的淵源與戰國諸子之研究 (Taipei: Taiwan daxue chubanshe, 2013), pp. 177–235.

²¹ *Lüshi chunqiu* 呂氏春秋, ed. Xu Weiyu 許維通 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 2009), j. 6, pp. 148–49. Cf. trans. in John Knoblock and Jeffrey Riegel, *The Annals of Lü Buwei* (Stanford: Stanford U.P., 2000), p. 168.

This general account is followed by an enumeration of evil omens. “Exceeding the Bounds of Order,” meanwhile, enumerates various examples of deranged rulers from the past. As a matter of rhetoric, both chapters employ the *via negativa*, giving examples of disorder in order to indicate the characteristics of a truly ordered state.

Though political discussions from the pre-Qin period often touch on some features of a disordered realm, prose writers rarely went into as much detail as we see in the so-called “topos of the world upside-down.” *Zhuangzi* presents some creative variations on this general theme, employing bold and unparalleled choices of imagery, beginning right in the first chapter, “Free and Easy Wandering” 逍遙遊, where humble “cicada and dovelet” snicker at the mighty Peng bird and consider themselves superior.²² In *Zhuangzi*, though, terrestrial distinctions of status and power mostly fade into irrelevance from the perspective of the “ultimate man.” The following chapter, “Disquisition on Seeing Things as Equal” 齊物論, comes close to obliterating even the binary opposition of truth and falsity. Although *Zhuangzi*’s rhetoric is full of original images and stories representing human ignorance and error, these tend to differ from the topos of the upside-down world in that they fail to imply any ideal order even ironically. The frog in the well, say, is neither in the right or the wrong place; though he cannot see the ocean, it is not clear whether the view would make him any wiser.²³ Nonetheless, it seems reasonable to speculate that the hyperbolic contrasts of *Zhuangzi* may have given new energy to the rhetorical innovations of contemporary thought, even if used for different purposes.

One might also compare a passage from much earlier in the literary tradition that might be a parallel case of the topos. This is the poem “Mulberry in the Marshlands” 隰桑, *Shijing* poem no. 228. It seems to be a love song addressed to a “gentleman 君子.” But the Mao preface reads:

“Mulberry in the Marshlands” criticizes King You. The petty men are in high rank, the gentlemen are out in the wilds. The poet longs to see a gentleman and then to serve him wholeheartedly. 隰桑，刺幽王也。小人在位，君子在野。思見君子，盡心以事之。

This reading may seem fanciful, but on the other hand, it helps to make sense of the *xing* image opening the poem.²⁴ Mulberry usually grows

²² *Zhuangzi jishi* 莊子集釋, ed. Guo Qingfan 郭慶藩 (1844–1896?) (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 2016), j. 1, p. 10; see Victor Mair, *Wandering on the Way: Early Taoist Tales and Parables of Chuang Tzu* (Honolulu: U. Hawai'i P., 1994), p. 4.

²³ *Zhuangzi jishi*, j. 17, p. 598.

²⁴ I have borrowed this insight (that the Mao interpretation is more plausible than it might

in high, dry hills, so its appearance in the wet lowlands is itself an example of the world upside-down. Of course, it is harder to say whether this reversal is intended in the original poem. If not, the fact that the Mao commentary chooses this sort of interpretation only confirms how prevalent this kind of thinking had become by the Han.

It is also noteworthy that the same topos appears, somewhat more obliquely, in early excavated manuscripts. In fact, in a way these manuscripts seem to cross over between generic boundaries that tend to be demarcated more clearly in the received textual tradition. Already the Zidanku Silk Manuscript, a Warring States text excavated from Changsha in 1949, speaks of a world in disorder. Admittedly, this is probably in the context of a cosmogony used in calendrical prognostication, not a political allegory, but nonetheless the imagery employed therein corresponds to the literary topos and further confirms the ubiquity of the related tropes in Warring States times. This passage follows an introduction to the “Four Gods” 四神, the children of Fu Xi 伏羲 (here written 電戲), apparently predecessors of the Four Tutelary Deities of the four directions:²⁵

After eleven hundred years, the sun and moon appeared. But the nine regions were not level, and the hills and ridges all collapsed (?).²⁶ The Four Gods then acted to restore order. The Heaven then moved sideways,²⁷ to protect and cover it. The spirits²⁸ of the green wood, crimson wood, yellow wood, pale wood, and the black wood 千又 (有) 百歲, 日月爰 (允) 生. 九州不坪 (平), 山陵備

appear at first glance) from Fang Yurun 方玉潤 (1811–1883), *Shijing yuanshi* 詩經原始 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1986), j. 12, p. 464.

²⁵ I have mainly followed Li Ling 李零, *Changsha Zidanku Zhanguo Chu boshu yanjiu* 長沙子彈庫戰國楚帛書研究 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1985), p. 69; this was slightly revised in his updated *Chu boshu yanjiu (shiyi zhong)* 楚帛書研究 (十一種) (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 2013), p. 63, and *Zidanku boshu* (Beijing: Wenwu chubanshe, 2017), vol. 2, p. 62. I have also benefited from the meticulous translation and notes of Ikezawa Masaru 池澤優, “Shidanko So hakusho hachigyōbun yakuchū” 子彈庫楚帛書八行文譯註, in Kakuten Sokan kenkyūkai 郭店楚簡研究会, ed., *Sochi shutsudo shiryō to Chūgoku kodai bunka* 楚地出土資料と中國古代文化 (Tokyo: Kyūko shoin, 2002), pp. 503–69. See also Jao Tsung-i 饒宗頤, “Chu boshu xinzheng” 楚帛書新證, in *Rao Zongyi ershi shiji xueshu wenji* 饒宗頤二十世紀學術文集 (Taipei: Xin wenfeng, 2003), vol. 5, pp. 233–98, esp. 258–64.

²⁶ Li Ling identifies this graph as the otherwise unknown 𡗗. Ikezawa cites various scholars who interpret it as *huai* 壞, “ruined, collapsed.” See Ikezawa, “Shidanko So hakusho hachigyōbun yakuchū,” p. 547.

²⁷ See *ibid.* *Tianpang* 天旁 refers to Heaven revolving around its axis, the Northern Polestar, as in *Jin shu* 晉書 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1974), j. 11, p. 279: “The heavens rotate sideways towards the left like the turning of a millstone 天旁轉如推磨而左行.” For translation, see Ho Peng Yoke, *The Astronomical Chapters of the Chin shu* (Paris: Mouton, 1966), p. 51.

²⁸ Li Ling takes 精 as representing *zhen* 楨, “pole,” but the more obvious interpretation *jing* 精 “spirit” seems superior.

岷, 四神乃 (?) 乍 (作?) 至于 逵 (覆), 天旁童 (動), 攷 (捍) 敷 (蔽) 之. 青木、赤木、黃木、白木、黑木之精 (精).

Following this passage, Lord Yan 炎帝 commands Zhurong 祝融 to descend and rectify the world.

This whole scene belongs to the same mythological cosmos in which legendary figures like Nüwa and Gonggong feature as well. Li Ling compares the passage plausibly to the description of the world being tilted off its axis by the battle of Zhuanxu and Gonggong in *Huainanzi*: “The pillar of Heaven was broken, and the cable of Earth was sundered 天柱折, 地維絕.”²⁹ Both the Zidanku manuscript and the *Huainanzi* passage seem to imply a myth of cosmic order disturbed and then ultimately rectified.³⁰ In both cases this is presented as a historical episode, part of the mythical origin of the universe. The precedent of such a mythical history may have inspired the development of the topos. It offers a sort of model of creation, order, and chaos following one another in unison, being interrelated. The current state of the cosmos might be identified, depending on specific conditions, either with some primordial disruption or with the primordial instauration of order.

Another Warring States manuscript also offers a tantalizing hint of the same topos. This is the bamboo-strip text in the Tsinghua University collection, the writing that has been titled *Rui Liangfu bi* 芮良夫箴. The piece is essentially a long admonition to the Zhou rulers by “The Good Man of Rui,” a figure who also appears in such transmitted texts as *Yi Zhou shu* 逸周書.³¹ It is composed mainly in tetrasyllabic verse, just like the *Xunzi* poems, discussed above. Early in the piece the Good Man warns:³²

²⁹ *Huainan honglie jijie* 淮南鴻烈集解, ed. Liu Wendian 劉文典 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1989), j. 3, p. 96.

³⁰ For more on the cosmic implications of the Zidanku ms., see Ikezawa Masaru’s study of the role that the gods play in bridging Heaven and Earth, in the worldview of its authors: “Kakitomerareta tei no kotoba: Shidanko So hakusho ni miru Ten, shin, jin no kankei” 書き留められた帝の言葉, 子彈庫楚帛書に見る天, 神, 人の関係, *Shūkyō kenkyū* 宗教研究 72 (1998), pp. 53–78.

³¹ E.g., “Rui liangfu jie” 芮良夫解, a similar piece that does not employ the topos of the world upside-down. See *Yi Zhou shu huijiao jizhu* 逸周書彙校集注, ed. Huang Huaixin 黃懷信 (Shanghai: Shanghai guji chubanshe, 1995), j. 63, pp. 1069–79.

³² See Li Xueqin 李學勤, ed., *Qinghua daxue cang Zhanguo zhujian (san)* 清華大學藏戰國竹簡 (叁) (Shanghai: Zhongxi shuju, 2010–), pp. 144–55. The translation is my own, but my interpretations and text are based on David Lebovitz, “Historical Poetry, Poetical History, and the Roots of Commentary: Rui Liangfu and the Formation of Early Chinese Texts,” unpub. Ph.D. diss. (U. Chicago, 2019). Since this piece is not the focus of this article, I present only the modernized transcription rather than the original graphs.

所而弗敬	If you are not reverent,
譬之若 ³³ 重載	Then it will be as if bearing a heavy load
以行峭險	To cross a high and perilous place.
莫之扶導	If no one helps to support and guide you,
其由不顛覆	Then you will surely be upset and overturned.

This admonition anticipates the topos of the world upside-down, spelled out in some detail in the following passage correlating cosmic and political disorder:

如關板不閉	If the horizontal and vertical doorlatches are not closed,
而繩斷失樸	And the plumb-line is severed, disturbing the pattern;
五相不彊	The five ministers are not firm,
罔肯 ³⁴ 獻言	Nor are they willing to offer their counsel:
人訟扞違	Men make accusations, attack and dispute,
民乃噪囂	The populace clamor and cry;
靡所屏依	Without anything to rely on,
日月星辰	The sun and moon and constellations
用交亂進退	Advance and retreat embroiled in chaos,
而莫得其次	And none can obtain his proper place.
歲 ³⁵ 廼不度	The year star [Jupiter] does not follow the measure,
民用戾 ³⁶ 盡	And the people are harried to the limit:
咎何其如台哉	How can they endure such misfortune? ³⁷

The main subject of the piece has to do with Rui's speech, made to his ruler in his role as minister. The critique largely targeted the corrupt and ineffectual other ministers. Thus, all the essential elements of the topos of the world upside-down are present. The poet is a minister complaining of the state of the world, but with explicit reference to his own situation as well. The fact that no one is in the proper place is a problem because it implies that the righteous ministers are not being employed properly.

To sum up, the poem from *Xunzi* with which we began constitutes one of the more elaborate realizations of a topos that can be found in a range of Warring States texts from different sources. The appearance of this topos, and its elaborate renditions in *Xunzi*, correspond to new

³³ End of strip #5.

³⁴ Strip #22 ends here.

³⁵ Strip #23 ends here.

³⁶ Glossed by editors as “*ji* 疾.”

³⁷ “*Ruyi* 如台” seems simply to mean “how can it be helped?”, as pointed out in the editors’ note to a similar usage in the “*Yin zhi*” 尹至 text from the Qinghua bamboo strips. See *Qinghua daxue cang*, p. 130, n. 18.

developments in political thought, such as *Xunzi's* concern with the ritual order and its analogous relation to the cosmic order. Even though the “Fu” chapter itself is probably not one of the earlier pieces within the *Xunzi* collection, its placement there reflects at a minimum a compiler’s correct judgment of the thematic continuity between this chapter and the others. The Chinese texts use a wide variety of expressions to convey the message of the topos, but frequently return to imagery of a reversal of directions: “Heaven and Earth have changed positions,” the Four Gods are “overturned,” the cart is “upset and overturned.” Though possibly anticipated in the *Shijing* as well, these later texts all present more elaborate versions of the shared topos. What is particularly noteworthy is that our texts rarely describe general chaos, total destruction, disease and poverty, and all the calamities that one might envision. Instead, they frequently return to a vision of the world as *inverted* from its proper state. Unlike most other disruptions of order, an inversion has the special property that it preserves the forms of order.

Here it is worth considering in more detail the English term we have used to describe the Chinese topos. In identifying the topos in *Xunzi*, David Knechtges was, as mentioned, borrowing from the English translation of Ernst Robert Curtius’ landmark study of medieval literature, *Europäische Literatur und lateinisches Mittelalter*.³⁸ Curtius described the topos of “die verkehrte Welt” in medieval Europe, citing the song from *Carmina Burana* beginning, “Florebat olim studium,” and also the rhetorical device of *adynata* (impossibility) as employed by Dante’s teacher Arnaut Daniel.³⁹ Curtius’ examples generally employ a comic tone, and delight in imagining the “world upside-down” as a revolt of the young against the old, as drawn possibly from the zany experimental comedy that dealt with this topos, namely *Die verkehrte Welt* by Ludwig Tieck (1773–1853).⁴⁰ In this sense, the European usage generally is related to the medieval carnival theme elucidated in Mikhail Bakhtin’s study of Rabelais: a temporary inversion of roles in which nobility and servants

³⁸ Curtius, *Europäische Literatur und lateinisches Mittelalter* (1948; Tübingen: Francke Verlag, 1993), pp. 104–8. Willard R. Trask, the prolific translator of classics of European scholarship, completed in 1953 an influential English translation which has frequently been reprinted. For the passage on the topos, see Curtius, *European Literature and the Latin Middle Ages*, trans. Willard R. Trask, new edn. (Princeton: Princeton U.P., 2013), pp. 94–98. For a survey of Curtius’ life and work, see Arthur R. Evans, Jr., “Ernst Robert Curtius,” in idem, ed., *On Four Modern Humanists: Hofmannsthal, Gundolf, Curtius, Kantorowicz* (Princeton: Princeton U.P., 1970), pp. 85–145.

³⁹ As we will see, just below, Qian Zhongshu 錢鍾書 also pointed out the relation between the two devices.

⁴⁰ See Tieck, *The Land of Upside Down*, trans. Oscar Mandel, in collaboration with Maria Kelsen Feder (Rutherford, N.J.: Fairleigh Dickinson U.P., 1978).

change places.⁴¹ As a joyous celebration of life in which the whole community participates, it actually reaffirms the social structure at the same time that it satirizes it. Thus, in European literature the topos tends to be presented in a comic mode, and not to represent a tragic description of reality. This is an important difference from the Chinese case, where the topos is normally used with all too much sincerity.

Another inspiration for Curtius' usage might have been the philosophical oeuvre of G.W.F. Hegel, where "die verkehrte Welt" plays an important role.⁴² In Hegel's thought, the sensual world is an inversion of the world of Ideas, which are transcendent and beyond time. But the world of transcendent Ideas cannot be perceived directly, so the sensual world turns out to be the only means by which we can perceive the truth. And yet even that is not the whole story, because if the relation were only a binary one of sense versus idea, there might be a direct equivalence between the two, which would render the Ideas no more than representations of the senses. Thus it is necessary to reach a synthesis of the two, as Hegel writes in the *Phenomenology of Mind*: "Thus the supersensible world, which is the inverted world, has at the same time reached out beyond the other world and has in itself that other; it is to itself conscious of being inverted, i.e. it is the inverted form of itself; it is that world itself and its opposite in a single unity. Only thus is it distinction as internal distinction, or distinction *per se*; in other words, only thus is it the form of *Infinity*."⁴³ It is only the unity of the phenomenal world and the ultimate truth lying behind it that is fully real. So the inverted world ends up not being the opposite of the world of appearances at all, but an "Infinity" that encompasses the world of appearances within itself. The concept of the "inverted world" is not something separate from our experience but rather something that goes beyond it and ends up reaffirming our own reality.⁴⁴ As we will see

⁴¹ Mikhail Mikhailovich Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, trans. Hélène Iswolsky (Bloomington, Ind.: Indiana U.P., 1984).

⁴² For analysis, see the classic essay by Hans-Georg Gadamer, "Die verkehrte Welt" (1966), rpt. in *Gesammelte Werke* 3, pp. 29–46, and also translated as "Hegel's 'Inverted World,'" in Gadamer, *Hegel's Dialectic: Five Hermeneutical Studies*, trans. P. Christopher Smith (New Haven: Yale U.P., 1976), pp. 35–53.

⁴³ Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *The Phenomenology of Mind*, trans. J. B. Baillie, 2d edn. (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1931), p. 207. The original text is: "So hat die übersinnliche Welt, welche die verkehrte ist, über die andere zugleich übergriffen, und sie an sich selbst; sie ist für sich die verkehrte, d. h. die verkehrte ihrer selbst; sie ist sie selbst, und ihre entgegengesetzte in Einer Einheit. Nur so ist sie der Unterschied als innerer, oder Unterschied an sich selbst, oder ist als Unendlichkeit"; Hegel, *Phänomenologie des Geistes*, in *Gesammelte Werke* (Hamburg: Felix Meiner Verlag, 1968), *Band* 9, p. 99.

⁴⁴ Thus Charles Taylor points out that "The proper image of infinity for Hegel is thus not a straight line indefinitely prolonged, but a cricle. And we can see that on this conception the

below, this is suggestive for the present literary topos as well, since the inversion of the proper world contains within itself a representation of an ideal world of justice and virtue.

Though Curtius does not mention Hegel explicitly, this precedent shows that the term “verkehrte Welt” had a rich intellectual pedigree. In singling out this topos for attention, Curtius presumably had in mind its broader resonance in European culture beyond the relatively few medieval texts he cited. Moreover, the key to the topos in medieval Europe is that it is actually intended as a representation of a true world – not the world of appearances but an ideally existing alternative. The *Carmina Burana* song that opens “Florebat olim studium, / nunc vertitur in tedium” implies that there was a world once (*olim*) in which scholarship had flourished. Likewise, the topos in Warring States and Han China is never a representation of chaos and anarchy. To the contrary, the reversal of roles is an explicit affirmation of proper status distinctions. It is one way of representing the contemporary theories of a society governed by a ritual code, in which individual obligations are tied closely to particular social roles, and evolved within this distinctive context.⁴⁵

In other words, the indispensable context for the development of our literary topos was a distinct and explicit conception of “the world rightside-up,” that is, principles of social order enumerating the proper places of individuals within society. This distinct conception then allowed for the vivid deployment of imagery to substantiate poetic descriptions of the realm of the “upside-down.” This background will help to illuminate the evolution of the topos within the corpus of the *Chuci* 楚辭 (*Elegies of Chu*) anthology, where it is richly represented.

THE TOPOS IN THE *CHUCI* ANTHOLOGY

From the perspective of rhetorical structure, the works discussed above are relatively straightforward poems that have not been especially influential in the Chinese tradition. The topos of the world upside-down only achieves its full elaboration in the *Chuci* anthology, where it is practically ubiquitous.⁴⁶ Besides Knechtges, mentioned above,

finite is not something separate from the infinite; the infinite is an ordered whole.” See *Hegel* (Cambridge: Cambridge U.P., 1975), p. 115.

⁴⁵ Cf. Roger T. Ames, *Confucian Role Ethics: A Vocabulary* (Hong Kong: Chinese U.P., 2011).

⁴⁶ Lucas Bender has recently surveyed the imagery of *Chuci* poems in an innovative article, “Figure and Flight in the *Songs of Chu* (*Chuci*),” *AM* 3d ser. 32.2 (2019), pp. 1–31. His

Note that the comparison of the birds echoes the “Poem on Reversals” of *Xunzi* (not to mention the various parallels throughout *Zhuangzi*), while the mineral imagery is similar to that of the “Short Song.” On the other hand, the subject of the various misguided actions is the “clique of men” from line 31 – the shortsighted and corrupt enemies of Qu Yuan 屈原 (or the Qu Yuan-like protagonist). From that perspective these lines do not really evoke the full-blown sense of the entire “world” or cosmos being disordered, but describe only an inversion of values within the actions and beliefs of a specific set of people. In this sense the passage can be contained within both traditional and modern interpretations of *Chuci* poems as responses to specific political situations (whether Qu Yuan himself or later courtiers).

The topos of the world upside-down described in the above quotation seems typical of Qu Yuan’s complaints, but we could read it differently in light of the passage that immediately precedes it in “Embracing the Sand”:⁵⁰

內厚質正兮	To be sincere in character and proper in substance –
大人所盛	Is that most celebrated by the great man!
巧倕不斷兮	If the artful Chui had not hewn wood –
孰察其撥正	Who could perceive whether it was skew or straight? ⁵¹
玄文處幽兮	When profound patterns are placed in darkness –
矇瞍謂之不章	Blind men say they are not even visible. ⁵²
離婁微睇兮	What Lilou perceives in a minute glance –
瞽以為無明	Sightless men mistake for a lack of light. ⁵³

The repeated imagery of darkness and light, blindness and insight, again is similar to the imagery of both “Poem on Reversals” and “Short Song” from *Xunzi*. But it is also significant that both Chui and Lilou appear in the same sentence of the *Zhuangzi*, chapter 10, “Ransacking Coffers” 舛篋: “Eradicate patterned ornaments, disperse the

史記 biography of Qu Yuan, with several important variants, one of which will be noted below. See *Shiji* (rev. punct. edn., Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 2014) 84, pp. 2999–3002.

⁵⁰ *CZS*, j. 5, pp. 1503–10. Here and below I use the em-dash to represent the rhythmic particle “兮,” which is so distinctive of *Chuci* prosody.

⁵¹ The “artful Chui 巧倕” is the famous craftsman also mentioned in the *Zhuangzi* passage just below. For 撥, see Jin Kaicheng 金開誠 et al., eds., *Qu Yuan ji jiaozhu* 屈原集校注 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1996), pp. 543–44, n. 10. The editors quote Sun Yirang’s 孫詒讓 gloss as “askew 枉.”

⁵² The *Shiji* text omits “sou 瞍,” which might just be an old gloss for “meng 矇” that has migrated into the text.

⁵³ Lilou 離婁 is mentioned in *Mengzi*, 4A.1, as a man of superb vision.

five tints, glue shut the eyes of Spidersight [Lizhu], and all the people under heaven will begin to repossess their keenness of vision. Destroy bevel and ruler, abandon compass and L-square, crush the fingers of craftsman Chui, and all the people under heaven will begin to repossess their cleverness. ...”⁵⁴

These are common figures of anecdote and idiom, but the affinity with the paradoxical idiom of the *Zhuangzi* is telling. The overall rhetorical structure is similar: using two superlative figures from the past, Chui and Lilou, to pose extreme hypotheticals, describing worlds diametrically opposed to the present or ordinary one. Qu Yuan’s message is subtly different, since he aims merely to give some examples of how admirable qualities, whether inner or outer, are often overlooked: Chui’s talent could easily have been ignored if he had not had a chance to exercise it in actual craftwork. *Zhuangzi*, meanwhile, is recommending the elimination of all kinds of civilized arts, to force people to return to their natural instincts. While here again there is little commonality in the logical argument of the two texts, they share certain cultural references and also the hyperbolic rhetoric of extremes. Thus “Embracing the Sand” strengthens our sense of an affinity among Warring States texts, one that crosses the borders that separate schools of thoughts, or literary genres. The topos of the world upside-down is particularly effective here, then, because it draws from contemporary discourses of the common political order so as to evoke the personal injustice done to Qu Yuan.

The example of “Embracing the Sand” is only one of many occurrences of the world upside-down topos in the *Chuci* anthology. Already the poem “Li sao” 離騷 presents several specific images that might be considered at least anticipations of the topos. For instance, in lines 305–8:⁵⁵

時繽紛其變易兮	The times are chaotic and confused, mutated
	and devolved –
又何可以淹留	And how is there any way to make them halt?

⁵⁴ Trans. Mair, *Wandering on the Way*, p. 87 (ellipsis in original). For orig. Chinese text see *Zhuangzi jishi*, 10.353: 滅文章，散五采，膠離朱之目，而天下始人含其明矣；毀絕鉤繩而棄規矩，擲工倕之指，而天下始人有其巧矣。Victor Mair creatively renders the name “Lizhu 離朱” as the alliterative “Spidersight,” but regardless of literal meaning it is understood to be equivalent with the Lilou from the preceding note, the personification of superb vision.

⁵⁵ *CZS*, j. 1, pp. 477–79. This is my own translation. Here and below I use the em-dash to represent the rhythmic particle *xi* 兮, which is so distinctive of *Chuci* prosody. “Eupatory” is an old anglicization of *lan* 蘭, *Eupatorium chinensis*, the fragrant herb also rendered into English as “thoroughwort” or “boneset” (and occasionally mistranslated as “orchid,” whose flashy visual appeal would have seemed vulgarly sensational to the author of “Li sao”).

腥臊並御 芳不得薄兮	The rank and reeking occupy all positions, And the sweet-smelling have no chance to approach—
陰陽易位 時不當兮 懷信侘傺 忽乎吾將行兮	Yin and Yang have exchanged their places, And the time is not right – Though keeping faith I have fretted and faltered But now at last I hasten onward –

This brief envoi consists of three rhyming quatrains. The first stanza again contrasts two avian categories, while the second takes up floral imagery, and the argument is summed up with the assertion that “Yin and Yang have exchanged places” – just as the “Poem on Reversals” in *Xunzi* also opened by asserting that Heaven and Earth had “exchanged places” 易位, creating a direct textual link between the two compositions. One key difference here is that the main body of the poem is written in the first person and describes Qu Yuan’s journey away from Chu, across the Yangzi River and into the unknown. Concluding with the topos of the world upside-down relates the first-person situation of the individual back to the general situation of the courtier.

This example is particularly important because “Crossing the River Jiang” appears to be one of the earlier poems in the *Chuci*. Among the “Nine Avowals,” the poems that contain an envoi and have a distinctive title seem to belong to an earlier stratum as they are similar in structure to those in “Li sao.”⁵⁹ Its envoi is one of the more artful deployments of the topos, along with “Embracing the Sand.” Tentatively we might conclude that these early “Nine Avowals” poems were composed in a court milieu directly influenced by Warring States political discourses, in a way fundamentally unlike the pieces in “Li sao” and “Heavenly Questions,” which seem either to predate such influence or at least to have been composed by a poet less concerned with such issues.⁶⁰

data, or “cowslip creeper,” I prefer Xu Wenjing’s 徐文靖 (1667–1756?) reading of *shen* as equivalent with *shen* 神 “wither.” See Xu Wenjing, *Guancheng shuoji* 管城碩記 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1998), j. 17, pp. 295–96.

⁵⁹ Recently the trend in Chinese-language scholarship has been to contrive ingenious explanations for the sole authorship by Qu Yuan of the entire “Jiu zhang,” but this was by no means the view of traditional Chinese scholars, who questioned Qu Yuan’s authorship as early as the Song era. See the revealing discussion in Jiang Liangfu 姜亮夫, *Chuci tonggu* 楚辭通故 (Kunming: Yunnan renmin chubanshe, 1999), vol. 3. p. 649–50.

⁶⁰ Since the topic is entirely speculative I do not want to address it within the body of the argument, but my own guess would be that Qu Yuan, belonging to the ruling lineage of Chu and believing himself superior by both blood and ability, would not have fully identified with the whole discourse of the world upside-down, preferring to see the world as in decline, as suggested throughout “Li sao” and “Heavenly Questions.” By contrast, some of the “Nine

Compare “Nine Suasions” 九辯, attributed to Song Yu 宋玉 (lines 93-98):⁶¹

何時俗之工巧兮	Why do the vulgar of this age craft their deceptions –
背繩墨而改錯	Rejecting the plumb-line rule and altering the order? ⁶²
卻騏驥而不乘兮	They decline the sterling steeds and do not ride them –
策駑駘而取路	While whipping on jade and nag to take to the road.
當世豈無騏驥兮	Could it be that our age lacks a single outstanding steed? –
誠莫之能善御	No, it is only that there is no true master of riding.

Here we have only a brief recapitulation of the topos, employing the two metaphors of carpentry and of horsemanship. Moreover, it occurs within a very long poem, and suggests how after the topos had become well-established, poets could refer to it briefly without enumerating the full panoply of imagery.

There are also fuller elaborations of the topos in the *Chuci* anthology, such as a *fu*-like dialogue “Divination” 卜居. Qu Yuan concludes his plaint to the diviner with the following peroration:⁶³

世溷濁而不清	This world is turbid and troubled, and it is not pure:
蟬翼爲重	A cicada’s wings are deemed heavy,
千鈞爲輕	A thousand-ton weight to be light;
黃鐘毀棄	The golden tone-pipe is broken and discarded
瓦釜雷鳴	While terracotta trumpets resound like thunder.
讒人高張	The slanderous men rise to celebrity;
賢士無名	The worthy ones are utterly unknown.
吁嗟默默兮	Alas, alas, that all are silent –
誰知吾之廉貞	No one knows of my integrity and trust.

Though it is not much longer than the preceding passage, these lines from “Divination” pack numerous images into a short space, employing three variations on the topos. This is actually an even smoother integration of the topos into the complaint of the neglected courtier Qu Yuan, since the topos is enfolded in the complaints regarding the

Avowals” were written by courtiers distinguished more by talent than birth, who argue for an inversion of the status quo that would have made their talents recognized.

⁶¹ *CZS*, j. 2, pp. 637-41.

⁶² Cf. “Li sao,” lines 89-92 (in *CZS*, j. 1, pp. 196-203).

⁶³ *CZS*, j. 7, pp. 1885-89.

world's corruption and its obliviousness to Qu Yuan's virtue. In fact, all the cases from *Chuci* show how the topos of the world upside-down was employed explicitly in service of a personal statement – the final proof of the world's corruption is that *this author* has not been appreciated.

Though the topos occurs in various pieces attributed to Qu Yuan and seems intimately tied to the core narrative of Qu Yuan as unappreciated hero, it is not easy to relate these developments to the other occurrences of the topos we have seen, because of the special difficulty of dating the different *Chuci* poems precisely. The most detailed elaboration of the topos, beside the *Xunzi* poems, is “Crossing the River Jiang,” traditionally attributed to Qu Yuan himself. But both “Nine Suasions,” attributed to Song Yu, and “Divination,” attributed to Qu Yuan but in which he appears as a protagonist, are more problematic, so it is difficult to pose any hypothetical evolution. We may be on firmer ground with two poems attributed to Jia Yi 賈誼 (200–168 BC) – “Mourning Qu Yuan” 弔屈原賦 and “Rueful Oath” 惜誓.⁶⁴ The former is not included in *Chuci*, perhaps because *fu* were distinguished from the *Chuci* poems by some scholars,⁶⁵ or because it is written about Qu Yuan but does not adopt the Qu Yuan persona.⁶⁶ “Rueful Oath” is a poem included in *Chuci* but has obscure origins, and was perhaps not actually composed by Jia Yi. At least, however, since no one has made any claim for earlier dating, it can safely be attributed to the Western Han and can be said to reflect the viewpoint of Han scholars.

“Rueful Oath” employs the topos throughout, as in these lines (49–60):⁶⁷

或推遷而苟容	Some shift and alter by means of casual compromise –
或直言之諤諤	Others speak out directly, honest and unswerving.
傷誠是之不察兮	I grieve that sincerity and truth are not even recognized –
并紉茅絲以爲索	While floss-grass and silk are intertwined to make a rope.

⁶⁴ See Knechtges, *Han Rhapsody*, 27.

⁶⁵ On the subtle question of whether and how Qu Yuan's poems belong to the category of *fu*, see Ye Youming 葉幼明, *Cifu tonglun 辭賦通論* (Changsha: Hunan jiaoyu chubanshe, 1991), pp. 20–26. The essential problem is that, while Qu Yuan's compositions seem in many ways indistinguishable from *fu*, they are rarely identified explicitly as *fu* by early scholars (with the notable exception of “Embracing the Sand,” which is identified as a *fu* in the *Shiji* text).

⁶⁶ This is Li Zhi's 力之 groundbreaking hypothesis in “Cong *Chuci* de chengshu zhi tili kan qi ge fei Qu Yuan zuopin zhi zhi” 從楚辭成書之體例看其各非屈原作品之旨, in idem, ed., *Chuci yu zhonggu wenxian kaoshuo 楚辭與中古文獻考說* (Chengdu: Ba Shu shushe, 2005), pp. 3–15.

⁶⁷ *CZS*, j. 15, pp. 2721–25.

方世俗之幽昏兮	Thus the vulgar men are benighted and blind
眩白黑之美惡	Dazzled between white and black, fair or foul.
放山淵之龜玉兮	Neglecting tortoiseshell and jade in the hills and pools –
相與貴夫礫石	Together they esteem most ordinary pebbles.
梅伯數諫而至醢兮	Mei Bo offered frequently his advice, and his body was minced up –
來革順志而用國	Lai Ge conformed to all desires and so was employed by the state. ⁶⁸
悲仁人之盡節兮	How I lament that men of goodness exert all their integrity –
反爲小人之所賊	But in return are abused by the petty men.

This might technically be considered a variation on the topos, since the author is not content just to describe the reversed positions of the virtuous and wicked, but goes on to specify that the virtuous are directly abused by the wicked. On the other hand, it does include the same motif of misperception, with the precious substances being mistaken for ordinary pebbles.

The topos indeed became one of the essential building blocks of the Han *fu*. Though the epideictic passages of the Han *fu* are of course memorable and distinctive, the satirical element was also central to the genre throughout the Han, as passages quotes above have already illustrated.⁶⁹ Yang Xiong provides one of the best examples with his “Dissolving Ridicule” 解嘲, which employs the topos as a way of justifying its author’s isolation.⁷⁰ The topos continued to appear in Eastern Han *fu*, for instance in Zhao Yi’s 趙壹 “*Fu* Satirizing the Age, Detesting Iniquity” 刺世疾邪賦.⁷¹ Yet it is no longer as obvious a feature of the Eastern Han *fu*, nor one that is elaborated on with the same exuberance. It may be that it had grown stale, or gone out of fashion. Predicated on the tension between reality and ideal, the topos had assumed the feasibility of the ideal order implied as its opposite. For the *Chuci* poets, restoring the correct order of things was a relatively straightforward matter, essentially requiring only that talented men such as them-

⁶⁸ Lai Ge was a corrupt vassal of the last ruler of Shang, who was named Zhou.

⁶⁹ Pace Martin Kern, who argues that the satirical element was a retrospective construction of Yang Xiong; “Western Han Aesthetics and the Genesis of the *Fu*,” *HJAS* 63 (2003), pp. 383–437; writing, e.g., of the “apparent multivalence of the *fu*” (397).

⁷⁰ Knechtges, *Han Rhapsody*, p. 103.

⁷¹ See translation and discussion in Mark Asselin, *A Significant Season: Cai Yong (ca. 133–192) and His Contemporaries* (New Haven: American Oriental Society, 2010), pp. 329–37, with discussion of the topos on p. 95.

selves be placed in positions of power. As Han political and culture evolved, though, it became less clear how to describe the relation of the ideal regime to the current situation, and poets used the topos with less freedom. A comprehensive analysis of this issue would amount to an intellectual history of the Han dynasty, but in lieu of such a study, the singular case study of one poet at the end of the Western Han can be used at least to anticipate further developments.

LIU XIANG: THE TOPOS INVERTED AND RESTORED

Curtius' synoptic view of medieval European literature offers a number of methodological tools of use to any student of comparative literature. But his approach has also been criticized, in particular by Erich Auerbach, who objected that Curtius' method, used in his *Europäische Literatur und lateinisches Mittelalter*, of relating topoi from different moments of European literary history had the danger of overlooking the role of historical change.⁷² Whether this is a fair objection depends on how one evaluates, firstly, the disparate nature of the texts concerned (spanning the languages and countries of Europe), and secondly, the paucity of concrete information on how one author was influenced by another. After all, the virtue of Curtius' method lies precisely in how he limns patterns and similarities across a vast corpus of texts, providing the key to further insights for his readers, even if lacking the proper information to identify their mutual relationships. Under these circumstances, the analysis of a topos may be inherently inadequate to trace the lineaments of historical change. When a topos occurs in two works separated in time and space, it may not be possible to trace exactly how one has influenced the other. For instance, in the Chinese tradition the relationship (if any) between, say, the "Fu pian" of *Xunzi* and the "Li sao," is fundamentally difficult to specify. Comparing all the different moments when Yin and Yang are reversed may not be an efficient way to expose the historical causes of the disruptions being described. In the examination of the topos so far, although we have been able to show its importance in late-Warring States and early Handynasty literature, it has not been possible to indicate the kind of historical change that would satisfy Auerbach's requirement.

But in at least some cases in the Chinese tradition, we are able to identify historical innovations, to recognize "topoi" in flux, and provide an account of how the innovations then evolved. Such a case is the

⁷² In *Romanische Forschungen* 62 (1950), pp. 237ff, cited in Evans, "Ernst Robert Curtius," p. 142, n. 99.

overlooked suite of poems, “Nine Threnodies” 九歎, composed by Liu Xiang 劉向 (79–8 BC) and included in the *Chuci* collection.⁷³ Though its title and structure echo the “nine” of “Nine Songs” and “Nine Avowals,” the suite is closer to “Li sao” in theme and content. Even though the series elaborates on numerous images, topoi, and specific lines from the already-rich *Chuci* tradition, however, one can also distinguish its point of view from all these precedents.⁷⁴ In the case of our “topos of the world upside-down,” as I will demonstrate, below, Liu Xiang inverts it so that world returns to right-side up. The evolution of the literary form reflects both the broader intellectual and political trends of the Western Han, and also inherent features of the original topos, which inclined authors to elaborate further and further on the ideal world that was necessarily implied in the inversion.

The poems generally adopt a self-consciously intertextual mode, referring explicitly, and also alluding implicitly, to “Li sao” throughout. Rather than using the *luan* envoi, each of the nine poems ends with the eponymous *tan* 歎 “threnody,” thus creating a structural self-similarity throughout the work. At the same time, they probably reflect Liu’s own personal experience. He was removed from office in 56 BC as punishment for offering to the emperor the book of alchemical prescriptions *Huainan zhenzhong hongbaoyuan mishu* 淮南枕中鴻寶苑秘書 (*Secret Text of the Garden of Vast Treasures, from the Pillow of the Prince of Huainan*). Again, in 47 BC, Liu Xiang was imprisoned and his friend forced to commit suicide after attempting to warn emperor Yuan about the eunuchs’ excessive power. He might have composed the “Nine Threnodies” after either of these frustrations; or alternatively, when he was assigned to organize the imperial archives after 26 BC.

It is no coincidence that the “Nine Threnodies” achieve such a sophisticated assimilation and adaptation of *Chuci* elements while also departing from their content. Liu Xiang played a key role in establishing the *Chuci* corpus that we have today.⁷⁵ This was of course part of

⁷³ Presumably Wang Yi’s 王逸 2d c. AD *Chuci zhangju*, if not in an earlier version, but we do not really know. On Liu Xiang in general, see Qian Mu 錢穆, *Liu Xiang Xin fuzi nianpu* 劉向歎父子年譜 (Taipei: Shangwu yinshuguan, 1980); Xu Xingwu 徐興無, *Liu Xiang ping-zhuan* 劉向評傳 (Nanjing: Nanjing daxue chubanshe, 2005). The best survey of Liu Xiang’s life in English is in Michael Loewe, “Liu Xiang and Liu Xin,” in Michael Nylan, Griet Vankeerberghen, and Michael Loewe, eds., *Chang’an 26 BCE: An Augustan Age in China* (Seattle: U. Washington P., 2015), pp. 369–90.

⁷⁴ Another example is discussed in Williams, “‘Roaming the Infinite’: Liu Xiang as *Chuci* Reader and Would-be Transcendent,” *Ising Hua Journal of Chinese Literature* 20 (2018), pp. 49–112.

⁷⁵ It is broadly understood today that he may have compiled an early version of the anthology. See, e.g., Lin Weichun 林維純, “Liu Xiang bianji *Chuci* chutan” 劉向編集楚辭初探,

his broader project of organizing and classifying the texts of the imperial library. While Michael Loewe distinguishes his son Liu Xin as the more innovative of the pair, Liu Xiang's sheer commitment to classical texts resulted in an originality of yet another kind.⁷⁶ Liu Xiang's interests throughout his life would have directed him towards *Chuci*, considering his family background, the inheritance of books and Daoist interests from Liu An; his personal encounters with the fickle judgments of despotism; and his literary prowess and creativity. The "Nine Threnodies" seem to have originated in Liu's very close study of the "Li sao"; and deserve our close attention in part for their value as a kind of commentary to "Li sao," being thus substantially earlier than Wang Yi's 王逸 second-century AD commentary. At the same time, though, as we will see, below, they are also full of original elements that contrast sharply with the earlier models included in *Chuci*. Only a true master of the genre, with Liu Xiang's deep familiarity with the "Li sao" poem and its tradition, would be able to recreate the poetry in a new voice and imbue it with new significance for his own time. In this regard, they are a distinctive exception to the generalization, which has prevailed since the Song dynasty, that the Han-era poems in the anthology are sterile imitations of Qu Yuan's genius.

One feature of Liu's "Nine Threnodies" that bridges the gap between "Li sao" and much of the Han-era *fu* is its use of the topos of the world upside-down, which, as we have seen above, is prevalent in both corpora. So, for instance, the eighth Threnody centers around a long passage describing the "world turned upside-down," while asserting that certain models of antiquity are what is need to restore it. This passage opens with Liu's explicit reference to "Li sao" as his model, further emphasizing his desire to restore ancient models:

興離騷之微文兮 冀靈修之壹悟	The subtle words of the 'Li sao' my stimulus – I hope that Spirit Paragon will once become aware;
還余車於南郢兮 復往軌於初古	Returning my carriage back to Southern Ying – I'll redirect my carriage-gauge to its original state.
道脩遠其難遷兮 傷余心之不能已	The road is long and far, and hard to travel on – It grieves my heart so I cannot bear it.

in Huang Zhongmo 黃中模, ed., *Zhong Ri xuezheng Qu Yuan wenti lunzheng* 中日學者屈原問題論爭 (Ji'nan: Shandong jiaoyu chubanshe, 1990), pp. 219–31.

⁷⁶ See Loewe, "Liu Xin, Creator and Critic," *Bulletin of the Jao Tsung-I Academy of Sinology* 1 (2014), pp. 297–323.

背三五之典刑兮	He has rejected the canons and disciplines of the Three and Five –
絕洪範之辟紀	Destroyed the exemplary record of the “Great Plan.” ⁷⁷
播規矩以背度兮	Casting off the compass and square, rejecting the measure –
錯權衡而任意	He mistakes the balanced judgment and acts at will.
操繩墨而放棄兮	Those who wield the rope and ink are discarded –
傾容幸而侍側	While the stooping and servile win favor and attend at his side.

Liu Xiang’s poem follows the traditional representation of the “world upside-down” topos, but is considerably more detailed about the political errors of the sovereign. Liu identifies specific policies that the sovereign has neglected, and is quite precise about the failure to employ proper officials. Still, the overall gist is consistent with that of the topos in the other works we have examined above.

Yet, as we look further, Liu was apparently more deeply concerned with the topos than this one passage might indicate. To place this in a broader context, we might note that Liu Xiang’s writings generally were deeply concerned with the survival of the political order.⁷⁸ He had a complex vision of cosmology that related imperial legitimacy, the Five Phases, and individual virtue.⁷⁹ Michael Loewe observes that he was particularly attentive to the issue of justifying the concept of dynastic legitimacy with, specifically, the Mandate of Heaven “possibly . . . more than any earlier official of Former Han.”⁸⁰ Although Liu’s own influence at court was generally overshadowed by that of the consort clans and eunuchs, not to mention some powerful contemporary scholar-elites, nonetheless he did put forth his own systematic views,

⁷⁷ The “Great Plan” (“Hong fan” 洪範) is a chapter of the *Book of Documents* that enumerates the Five Phases 五行 and the Three Virtues 三德, among other concepts. The “Three and Five” could also refer to various legendary rulers and historical sages of the remote past. The “Great Plan” became one of the blueprints for much of Han cosmological and political thought and was of particular interest to Liu Xiang; see discussion, below.

⁷⁸ One might also compare Liu Xiang’s thoughts on the survival of the individual: Charles Sanft has drawn attention to the careful focus on the “moment of dying” in two of Liu’s anthologies. Charles Sanft, “The Moment of Dying: Representations in Liu Xiang’s Anthologies *Xin xu* and *Shuo yuan*,” *AM 3d ser.* 24.1 (2011), pp. 127–58.

⁷⁹ See Xu, *Liu Xiang pingzhuan*, pp. 283–355, which discusses innovations in Liu’s vision of both the Five Phases and musical theory. Another survey is Wu Jinlan 吳金蘭, *Liu Xiang zhexue sixiang yanjiu* 劉向哲學思想研究 (Beijing: Zhongguo shehui kexue chubanshe, 2007).

⁸⁰ Loewe, *The Men Who Governed Han China: Companion to a Biographical Dictionary of the Qin, Former Han and Xin periods* (Leiden: Brill, 2004), p. 444.

particularly on omenology and divination.⁸¹ In spite of the importance of his editing work, relatively few of Liu's own compositions survive. One work lost in the late part of Tang or during the Five Dynasties was "Hong fan wuxing zhuanlun" 洪範五行傳論, compiled sometime between 26 and 22 BC.⁸² In this work, Liu examined how the "records of portents and disastrous events from the remote past until Han times" illustrated the principles of *wuxing* (that is, the notion of, literally, the Five Phases that imbued time and change with a repeating cycle of controlling natural elements).⁸³ Cheng Sudong has recently shown that portions of this work can be recovered from later quotations, many of which had been ignored because of inconsistencies in medieval citation practices, but it is a major work of Han thought. Although it takes as its inspiration the "Hong fan" section of the ancient classic *Documents*, it elaborates and develops the concept of the Five Phases vis-à-vis the heavenly mandate notion in political thought.

A good example of Liu Xiang's reliance on the topos of the world upside-down within his treatise may be found in the following passage of his work, which is quoted in the seventh-century *Suishu* 隋書, specifically in its "Treatise on the Five Phases":⁸⁴

Fire belongs to the South, where Yang's light forms its brilliance. The sovereign of men faces south, and so obtains the phenomena. In the past the sagely emperor and illustrious king turned his back to the screen and shook his robes, faced south to oversee and govern all under heaven. Selecting the superb and worthy from all within the oceans, and assembling them at court, in order to extend his percipience and insight, he expelled the wicked and fawning, and cast them out into the wilds, in order to open up the blockages, and to expedite the energy of fire. But the unwise sovereigns were muddled by voices of slander, let white and black be confused and mixed up, truth and falsity replaced one another, countless vices advanced at once, and the sovereign of men was

⁸¹ See Xu Xingwu's remarks, *Liu Xiang pingzhuan*, pp. 140-41, 148, 153.

⁸² Cheng Sudong 程蘇東, "Liudong de wenben: Liu Xiang 'Hongfan wuxing zhuanlun' yiwen kaobian" 流動的文本, 劉向 '洪範五行傳論' 佚文考辨, *Zhonghua wenshi luncong* 中華文史論叢 (2017.1), pp. 261-314, at 263.

⁸³ Loewe, *Men Who Governed Han China*, p. 479.

⁸⁴ *Suishu* (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1982) 22, p. 620. Cheng Sudong discusses it in "Liudong de wenben," p. 277, and p. 273 in regard to quotations of "Hong fan wuxing zhuanlun" 洪範五行傳 in *Sui shu* that refer to Liu Xiang's essay but quote a different title. See also Michael Nylan, "The 'Treatise on the Wuxing' (*Wuxing zhi*)," in Daniel Patrick Morgan and Damien Chaussende, eds., *Monographs in Tang Official Historiography: Perspectives from the Technical Treatises of the History of Sui (Sui shu)* (Cham: Springer Nature Switzerland, 2019), pp. 181-233.

doubtful and perplexed. Discarding the law and the statutes, dividing flesh and bone, murdering the royal heir, driving out the meritorious officials, usurpers taking the place of the lineage, thus fire loses its own very nature.

火者南方，陽光爲明也。人君向南，蓋取象也。昔者聖帝明王，負宸攝袂，南面而聽斷天下。攬海內之雄俊，積之於朝，以續聰明，推邪佞之僞臣，投之于野，以通壅塞，以順火氣。夫不明之君，惑於讒口，白黑雜揉，代相是非，眾邪並進，人君疑惑。棄法律，間骨肉，殺太子，逐功臣，以孽代宗，則火失其性。

This passage starts off from the correlation of fire, the south, and the southern-facing orientation of the ruler, but continues to present another iteration of the topos of the world upside-down. As soon as the ruler loses illumination, he sets asunder the proper relations of the realm. Political usurpation causes fire itself to be deprived of its own inherent nature. In other words, as Han political thought, as exemplified here, evolved to incorporate cosmological correlations of greater detail, the topos of the world upside-down remained a powerful way to convey the qualities of the idealized order by describing their inversions.

Even Liu Xiang's memorials to the throne employed the topos in this way. In January of 46 BC (the twelfth lunar month of Chuyuan 初元 2), Liu's friend Xiao Wangzhi 蕭望之 was slandered by eunuchs and committed suicide by poison. Emperor Yuan repented for the mistake and raised Zhang Meng 張猛 and Zhou Kan 周堪 to the high positions of grandee of illustrious reward (*guanglu dafu* 光祿大夫) and chamberlain of illustrious reward (*guanglu xun* 光祿勳), respectively. Seeing an opportunity for his own advancement, and also concerned that the consort clans Xu 許 and Wang 王 and the eunuchs might regain their sway over emperor Yuan, Liu composed a long letter of remonstrance, as carried in *Han shu's* biography of Liu's family.⁸⁵ Though a major literary composition in its own right, the letter has not received much attention. Liu first describes the harmonious rule of the sage-kings Yao and Shun, king Wen of Zhou, and the duke of Zhou; but he then turns to the reigns of kings You and Li, and cites *The Book of Odes*, poem number 193, which opens with an eclipse and goes on to describe the following disasters (in stanza 3):⁸⁶

⁸⁵ *Han shu* 36, pp. 1932–47. For the context of the memorial see Xu, *Liu Xiang pingzhuan*, pp. 119–20; Loewe, "Liu Xiang and Liu Xin," pp. 371–72.

⁸⁶ My translation is based on Legge's, but I have modified the last line. See Legge, *The King*, p. 322.

百川沸騰 The streams all bubble up and overflow.
 山冢卒崩 The crags on the hill-tops fall down.
 高岸爲谷 High banks become valleys;
 深谷爲陵 Deep valleys become hills.
 哀今之人 Alas for the men of this time!
 胡慚莫懲 How I regret these things are not corrected!

Liu Xiang thus identifies this poem as yet another precedent of the *topos* of the world upside-down, for he goes on to identify the cause of political disharmony as being specifically an inversion of status:

[The poem] says that the people regarded what was so as not so, and truly it was very grievous. For all of this is describing the disharmony of the time, caused when the worthy and the inferior switched places. 言民以是爲非，甚衆大也。此皆不和，賢不肖易位之所致也。

After another passage of extensive historical reflection, Liu Xiang turns to the present moment:⁸⁷

Today the worthy and the base are mingled and conflated, white and black are not distinguished, the wicked and the righteous are mixed together, loyal men and slanderers advance in tandem. Petitions are transmitted by official carriage, and [the petitioners] fill the Northern Garrison.⁸⁸ The court officials are all at odds, and in their quarrels make use of accusations, further leading to slander and calumny, and reversing truth and falsity. Transmissions and appointments increase, documents grow numerous and chaotic, what is before and behind become confused and mistaken, praise and blame are conflated and distorted (*luan*) ... I have been fortunate enough to be entrusted with as close an attachment [to the emperor] as the very lungs. But truthfully, I have perceived that Yin and Yang are not in proper balance, and do not dare not to relate what I have heard.

今賢不肖渾殽，白黑不分，邪正雜糅，忠讒並進。章交公車，人滿北軍。朝臣舛午，膠戾乘刺，更相讒愬，轉相是非。傳授增加，文書紛糾，前後錯繆，毀譽渾亂。... 臣幸得託肺腑，誠見陰陽不調，不敢不通所聞。

Liu Xiang's political advice typically went unheeded by those in command, so the historical weight of this letter is perhaps not so significant; but it is important for our subject matter here, again, because

⁸⁷ *Han shu* 36, p. 1935.

⁸⁸ Where those who had submitted inappropriate petitions were detained. Ru Chun 如淳 (Cao-Wei dynasty) cites the specific case of Yang Yun 楊惲 (d. 54 BC). See Loewe, *Biographical Dictionary of the Qin, Former Han and Xin Periods, 221 BC-AD 24* (Leiden: Brill, 2000), pp. 640-41.

it shows how the rhetoric of the “world upside-down” pervaded not just the verse but also the prose expression of the Han. In other words, the opposition of the well-ordered state and its inversion for Liu Xiang was not just a rhetorical device borrowed from certain *Chuci* poems, but a key structuring element of his worldview.⁸⁹

The importance of the topos is demonstrated most clearly by how Liu was able to deploy it in a new way, indeed in a way that might seem contradictory to its original intention. In an extended passage of his seventh threnody, “Lamenting My Destiny” 愍命, Liu inverts the topos of a world upside-down in order to describe a world right-side-up. This threnody opens by praising Liu’s ancestors and their achievements, and describing the world of proper governance that pertained then, when qualified people were employed in the proper offices:⁹⁰

昔皇考之嘉志兮	Long ago my Resplendent Begetter had an admirable resolve—
喜登能而亮賢	He enjoyed raising talent and illuminating worth. ⁹¹
情純潔而罔蕘兮	His inner feelings were refined, and pure, and immaculate —
姿盛質而無愆	And his demeanour superb, and true, and without blemish.
放佞人與諂諛兮	He exiled flatterers and servile slanderers —
斥讒夫與便嬖	Dismissed the gossipmongers and the toadying lackeys;
親忠正之惓誠兮	Cultivated loyal and just, the upright and sincere —
招貞良與明智	Summoned the honourable and good, the perspicacious and wise.
心溶溶其不可量兮	His heart’s capaciousness ⁹² could not be measured —
情澹澹其若淵	His passions were as placid as a tranquil pool.

⁸⁹ In light of Liu Xiang’s well-known interest in alchemy, it is also fascinating to observe that the inverted world was, at least by the Tang dynasty, an important feature of Daoist alchemy. See Isabelle Robinet, *Introduction à l’alchimie intérieure taoïste: De l’unité et de la multiplicité, avec une traduction commentée des Versets de l’éveil à la Vérité* (Paris: Les Édition du Cerf, 1995), pp. 131–45.

⁹⁰ *CZS*, j. 13, pp. 2562–66 (poem 7 within the series/lines 1–12).

⁹¹ This of course references the opening of the “Li sao,” but then turns in a different direction to describe the period when the poet’s father (or ancestor?) ruled.

⁹² The reduplicative *rongrong*, here rendered “capaciousness,” also occurs in “Facing Anarchy,” line 54, describing the body, where it must have a different import. Placidness of emotion is a virtue much admired particularly in Daoist thought.

回邪辟而不能入兮 The wayward and wicked were expelled and
not admitted –
誠願藏而不可遷 While the honest and willing were kept
safe and not banished.

So far Liu Xiang is simply describing his virtuous ancestor, as in the opening of “Li sao,” with his first line’ referencing “Li sao” directly. It is interesting to note here that Liu Xiang seems to disagree with the commentary *Chuci zhangju* 楚辭章句, compiled around 120 AD, about the identity of *huangkao* 皇考. The commentary, where it treats “Li sao,” identifies this phrase as meaning “deceased father.”⁹³ But in Liu Xiang’s poem, the *huangkao* is a ruler from the past, namely, a distinguished ancestor, which is how many modern scholars interpret it as well.⁹⁴

Rather than representing historical events directly, Liu inverts the familiar images, so that indication of the righteous order of things becomes the *absence* of any recluses on the riverbanks. The poem continues:⁹⁵

逐下秩於後堂兮 He chased the lowly stratum to the rear of
the court –
迎宓妃於伊雒 And welcomed Fu Fei at the Yi
and Luo rivers.⁹⁶
荆讒賊於中廂兮 He absconded the slanderous knaves from the
inner palace –
選呂管於榛蕪 Culled the ilk of Lü and Guan from
out in the underbrush.⁹⁷
叢林之下無怨士兮 In the forest groves there were no resentful men –
江河之畔無隱夫 On the banks of the rivers there were
no recluses.

⁹³ The *Zhangju* commentary maintains that interpretation both with respect to the “Li sao” (*CZS*, j. 1, pp. 24–25) and here with respect to the “Jiu tan.” In my view, the *Zhangju* commentary may well be correct in the case of “Li sao,” where the *huangkao* is also responsible for naming the protagonist, but seems to be off base here.

⁹⁴ For instance, Huang Linggeng 黃靈庚 understands “*huangkao*” as “*taizu* 太祖” in the case of “Li sao.” But this debate goes back to the Song dynasty; see Jin et al., eds., *Qu Yuan ji jiaozhu*, j. 1, pp. 6–7, citing the opinion of Ye Mengde 葉孟得 in *Shilin yanyu* 石林燕語.

⁹⁵ *CZS*, j. 13, pp. 2566–71; *Chuci buzhu*, j. 16, pp. 302–3 (“Jiu tan” poem 7/lines 13–20).

⁹⁶ Qu Yuan seeks to meet the goddess Fu Fei; see “Li sao,” line 222. The conjunction of the Yi and Luo rivers was next to Luoyang. According to one legend, Fu Fei, daughter of Fu Xi, was said to have drowned in the Luo River. *Zhi* 秩, previous line, is a *hapax legomenon*. *Zhangju* glosses it as the palace ladies; alternatively, it refers to rank. It could be a graphic variant for 秩, glossed as *cheng* 程, “rank” or “order” in *Guangya* 廣雅 (Wang Niansun 王念孫, *Guangya shuzheng* 廣雅疏證 [Nanjing: Fenghuang chubanshe, 2000]), j. 5B, p. 3a.

⁹⁷ Lü Shang and Guan Zhong were frequently discussed in early letters as models of ministerial excellence.

蔡女黜而出帷兮	The lady of Cai is dismissed and cast from behind the curtain –
戎婦入而綵繡服	A savage lady is admitted to court bedecked in satin and brocade. ¹⁰¹
慶忌囚於阱室兮	Righteous Qing Ji is imprisoned in an underground cell –
陳不占戰而赴圍	Craven Chen Buzhan sent to the front lines of battle; ¹⁰²
破伯牙之號鍾兮	Our lord smashes the Sounding Bell of Bo Ya –
挾人箏而彈緯	Takes up the common cither and plays its strands instead. ¹⁰³
藏璿石於金匱兮	He guards jadelike pebbles in a golden casket –
捐赤瑾於中庭	But discards crimson jadestones in the very courtyard. ¹⁰⁴
韓信蒙於介冑兮	Han Xin is left defending in an infantry man's breastplate and helmet –
行夫將而攻城	While the cadets are made generals and sent to storm cities.
莞芎棄於澤洲兮	Angelica and river lovage are discarded on the islets –
爬蠹蠹於筐篋	Gourd-carved ladles rot in bamboo baskets. ¹⁰⁵

¹⁰¹ The “lady of Cai” was faithful to her husband and refused to remarry even after he contracted a serious illness. She is praised in Liu Xiang’s own *Biographies of Exemplary Women*, j. 4. The savage lady may refer to the second wife of duke Xian of Jin, lady Li, who slandered her stepson Shensheng. She was originally from a foreign tribe (the Rong 戎). Her biography is in Anne Behnke Kinney, *Exemplary Women of Early China: The Lienü zhuan of Liu Xiang* (New York: Columbia U.P., 2014), p. 71.

¹⁰² Qing Ji was the half-brother of king Helu of Wu who objected to the king’s immorality, saying, “The king of Wu is thoroughly unprincipled.” King Helu sought persistently to have him killed but failed each time. Even the king’s clever servant Yao Li failed. See *Annals of Lü Buwei*, book 11, 248–49. Chen Buzhan was a Qi nobleman who attempted to save his lord, duke Zhuang of Qi, from an assassin, but was so terrified he dropped his spoon while eating, and fell off the carriage. It is said he possessed a humane sort of bravery (but not a martial one). See Liu Xiang, *Xin xu (Xin xu jiaoshi 新序校釋)*, ed. Shi Guangying 石光瑛 [Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 2001], j. 8, pp. 1048–53.

¹⁰³ For Bo Ya’s musical instrument “Sounding Bell,” see Wang Bao’s “Eulogy on the Supreme Ruler Obtaining a Worthy Vassal,” *Han shu* 64B, p. 2826. It might be one of the traditional sets of chimes, or alternatively the name of a zither, an instrument with which Bo Ya was usually associated.

¹⁰⁴ Cf. “Embracing the Sand,” line 29: “Blending indiscriminately jade and pebbles.”

¹⁰⁵ *Guan* 莞 is a variant name for *baizhi* 白芷, *Angelica lucida*, a variety of angelica that tends to grow in marshy or seaside areas, and is also known as “seawatch.”

- 麒麟奔於九皋兮 The unicorn is fugitive in the ninefold
marsh¹⁰⁶ –
熊羆群而逸囿 A sloth of bears cavort in the imperial park.
- 折芳枝與瓊華兮 He plucks blossoming boughs and amethyst
flowers –
樹枳棘與薪柴 Plants thorny limebush, nettles, and
brushwood in their place;¹⁰⁷
掘荃蕙與射干兮 He uproots the calamus, sweet clover, and the
blackberry lily –
耘藜藿與藁荷 But cultivates pigweed, betonica, and
ginger.¹⁰⁸
- 惜今世其何殊兮 I regret how different this era is from that one –
遠近思而不同 Men's thinking past and present is not
alike.
或沈淪其無所達兮 Some sink in the current and never reach
their goal –
或清激其無所通 Others righteously impassioned never
make their virtue known.
- 哀余生之不當兮 I lament that I was born at this inopportune
moment –
獨蒙毒而逢尤 Only to suffer slander and submit to
blame.
雖謇謇以申志兮 Though I am forthright and honest in
presenting my resolve –
君乖差而屏之 My lord misprizes, wrongs, and finally
discards me.
- 誠惜芳之菲菲兮 Truly I prize the rich scent of flowering blossoms –
反以茲爲腐也 But now these are regarded as putrid;
懷椒聊之葭葭兮 Though I treasure fagara for its fair fragrance –
乃逢紛以罹詬也 Now it must endure disorder and suffer
revilement.

¹⁰⁶ *Shijing*, poem no. 184, describes a crane crunkling in this “ninefold marsh,” a place of exile for the virtuous. In the first stanza: “When a crane cries at the Nine Swamps / Its voice is heard in the wild. / A fish can plunge deep into the pool / Or rest upon the shoals” 鶴鳴于九皋，聲聞于野。魚潛于淵，或在于渚。 See Arthur Waley, *The Book of Songs: The Ancient Chinese Classic of Poetry*, ed. Joseph R. Allen (New York: Grove P., 1996), p. 158; *Maoshi zhengyi*, j. 11, pp. 781–82.

¹⁰⁷ Thorny limebush (*Citrus trifoliata*) and wild jujube (*Zizyphus jujuba*) are frequently used to represent petty or corrupt men.

¹⁰⁸ “Blackberry lily” (*Belamcanda chinensis*) is a fragrant plant unusual in the texts of the *Ellegies*. “Ranghe 藁荷” is also called “*poju* 蓴苳” and refers to *Zanziber mioga*, the myoga ginger, which is frequently used in East Asian cuisines today, but for Liu Xiang was a vulgar weed.

Thus the poem concludes, with a sonorous recapitulation of the “Li sao” theme. In spite of the many similarities between the various poems, though, Liu Xiang goes further in some respects. Throughout the “Nine Threnodies” he employs a variety of historical allusions, complementing and extending the earlier poems, and elaborating on the topos of the world upside-down in particular. In the seventh Threnody he elaborates on it by presenting both surface and reverse, both interior and exterior, reframing the world turned upside-down in terms of its inverse. In this sense Liu imbues the old topos with an additional layer of significance to depict order and disorder as complementary features of the universe.

The envoi to the poem (here itself titled *tan* 歎 “threnody” in an act of self-similarity, rather than *luan* 亂 as more customary in the early *Chuci*) reflects further on reversals of fortune:

The Threnody 歎曰

嘉皇既歿	Now that his superb majesty has perished,
終不返兮	Gone and never to return –
山中幽險	In the hills it is dark and perilous,
郢路遠兮	The road back to Ying is far indeed –
讒人譏譏	Slanderers are vitriolic in accusation,
孰可愬兮	But to whom may I offer a plaint? –
征夫罔極	This traveller will never arrive at his destination,
誰可語兮	And who is there to tell? – ¹⁰⁹
行噏累歎	Chanting in the journey, multiplying sighs,
聲喟喟兮	Calling out alas, alas –
懷憂含戚	Embracing my grief, enduring this woe,
何侘傺兮	How hapless and hindered am I –

The *huangkao*, the sage-ruler (and ancestor of the speaker) of the past, is gone “never to return”; that is, there is no way to restore the situation to its original and proper configuration. Thus, the main content of the poem has explained the political context and historical background (succinctly described by the topos of the world upside-down), and this envoi to the poem simply describes how the situation has left our hero, the Qu Yuan-like protagonist.

There are a number of factors behind Liu Xiang’s original treatment of the topos. One is that, in spite of the vicissitudes of his career,

¹⁰⁹ Cf. “Nine Threnodies,” poem 3, line 55 (*CZS*, j. 13, p. 2478): “The traveller hastens anxiously along, / With no place to abide –” 征夫皇皇，其孰依兮。

on the whole he maintained a position of some power and influence; for the last two-and-a-half decades of his life, under emperor Cheng, he was grandee of illustrious reward and colonel of the Central Ramparts (*Zhonglei xiaowei* 中壘校尉), and continued to submit frequent memorials to the throne.¹¹⁰ He did not encounter the frustrations of a Qu Yuan or Wu Zixu that he might complain about, and so in his “Nine Threnodies” he is willing to depict a more harmonious world. Second, in light of his erudition and historical bent, it is natural for him to see current problems in the broader perspective of history. His long letter to emperor Yuan, mentioned above, is another example of this intellectual characteristic. Third, Liu Xiang was long interested in alchemy and other techniques for pursuing longevity, and his “Nine Threnodies” in parts also bears resemblance to “Far Roaming,” a poem in which the Qu Yuan protagonist departs his country only to attain unity with the cosmic Dao.¹¹¹ If nothing else, these Daoist interests might have allowed Liu to see the “scholar’s frustration” in another light, potentially having means of consolation and fulfillment outside of court service.

Although we can identify various historical forces underlying Liu Xiang’s achievement, these by no means fully explain the “Nine Threnodies.” The forms and patterns of literary rhetoric evolve in response to historical circumstances, but are explicable only in terms of how they are in turn applied creatively so as to transform the predicaments of their authors. Just as Liu Xiang’s inversion of the topos of the world upside-down is not a rejection of it but rather its fullest realization, his “Nine Threnodies” as a whole does not simply imitate Qu Yuan or borrow the topos of the world upside-down; Liu quotes Qu Yuan while also transforming “Li sao” poetry, and explains the genesis of the topos while also revivifying it. Han poetry at its best advances beyond the expression of outrage, sorrow, or dissent that Liu Xiang had pointed out in the poets of late Western Zhou, or that is familiar from the poems of Qu Yuan himself, towards a more self-conscious reflection on the very significance of poetry and scholarship in relation to their historical context. In various ways the more familiar *fu* masterpieces of the Eastern Han, such as Ban Gu’s “Two Capitals Rhapsody” or Zhang Heng’s “Rhapsody on Pondering the Mystery,” are also transhistori-

¹¹⁰ For more on Liu’s appointments, see Loewe, *Biographical Dictionary*, p. 373. For the latter sinecure in particular, see Hans Bielenstein, *The Bureaucracy of Han Times* (Cambridge: Cambridge U.P., 1980), p. 115.

¹¹¹ For more on this element of Liu Xiang’s life and work, see Nicholas Morrow Williams, “‘Roaming the Infinite’: Liu Xiang as *Chuci* Reader and Would-be Transcendent,” *Tsing Hua Journal of Chinese Literature* 20 (2018), pp. 49–112.

cal reflections in which the author explicitly reflects on the place of his works within the literary tradition.¹¹² Similarly, a key tendency of Eastern Han *fu* writers was the eristic attempt to outdo their predecessors by redoing their works on a grander scale. Thus Liu Xiang's poetic compositions may be said to anticipate an important new phase in Chinese literature, and should be accorded some importance alongside his better-known bibliographical achievements.

Between roughly the third and first centuries BC, then, the topos of the world upside-down gradually evolved, reflecting developments in both the literary and political realms. From its first appearance as the inverse of contemporary visions of ideal order, it was never solely negative in intention, but affirmed positive values. Throughout the *Chuci* anthology of early poems, it appears in myriad guises, and is applied as the justification for more personal concerns; but the background of political debates from the Warring States remains visible. Finally, towards the end of the Western Han, Liu Xiang presents us with the fullest treatment of the topos to date, including not just the reversals of order but adding a description of the ideal order that had been implicit in the topos from the beginning. This confirms the interpretation of the original topos that we had proposed, and also suggests a principle for the analysis of literary "topology" more generally: tracing the historical development of a topos is necessary not just for the sake of historical completeness but even for a proper recognition of the meaning of the original topos, since this can be realized most vividly in its cultural evolution beyond its initial occurrence. The topos of the world right-side up is simply the original topos seen whole.

LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

CZS Huang Linggeng 黃靈庚, ed., *Chuci zhangju shuzheng* 楚辭章句疏證

¹¹² For the various ways that these pieces both extend the literary tradition while reflecting on their predecessors, see discussion in David R. Knechtges, "To Praise the Han: The Eastern Capital *Fu* of Pan Ku and His Contemporaries," in Wilt Idema and Erik Zürcher, eds., *Thought and Law in Qin and Han China: Studies Dedicated to Anthony Hulsewé on the Occasion of His Eightieth Birthday* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1990), pp. 118–39, esp. 120–21, on how Ban Gu explicitly identifies the place of his composition within the history of the genre; and idem, "A Journey to Morality: Chang Heng's *The Rhapsody on Pondering the Mystery*," in Chan Ping-leung 陳炳良, ed., *Essays in Commemoration of the Golden Jubilee of the Fung Ping Shan Library* (Hong Kong: Fung Ping Shan Library, 1982), pp. 162–82, e.g., "Chang Heng repudiates the despair and melancholy of the *sao* tradition" (178).