

# Han Rhapsodists

## Hànfù 汉赋

The *fu* 賦 (rhapsody or prose-poem) developed during the Han era as the dominant literary genre, and it continued to be composed by many later major writers. *Fu* initially meant a presentation, usually at court, of narrative compositions. Such compositions later included more personal literary expressions that served as vehicles of Confucian, Daoist, and Buddhist ideas.

**A**lthough the *fu* (rhapsody) is principally associated with the Han era (206 BCE–220 CE), when it developed as the dominant literary genre, it was occasionally composed, often in sophisticated and new ways, by many later major writers, including Li Bai 李白 (701–762 CE), Bai Juyi 白居易 (772–846 CE), Ouyang Xiu 歐陽修 (1007–1072), and Su Su 蘇軾 (1037–1101). Although it rarely attained literary significance after the thirteenth century, it was still occasionally used as a vehicle to commemorate court, official, and private ritual occasions.

### Originators

The earliest range of meaning of *fu* suggests how it became the name for a literary genre: first it was the word used for *tax* or *levy* (as both verb and noun); then, *pay tax* or *provide levy*; next, more generally, *provide*, *present*, *submit*, and specifically *create* or *present* a poem or song at a royal

banquet; and later to designate one of the three rhetorical figures, or modes, of expression in the odes of the *Classic of Poetry* (*Shijing* 詩經): *xing* 興 (evocative image), *bi* 比 (simile), and *fu* 賦 (straightforward description / narration). During the early Han, the term *fu* thus came to mean a presentation, usually at court, of descriptive and narrative compositions. Such compositions later included more personal literary expressions.

The *fu* seems to have originated from three sources: (1) chapter 26 of the *Xunzi* 荀子 (Sayings of Master Xun) of Xun Qing 荀卿 (c. 335 –c. 238 BCE), which contains five riddles together with answers, parts of which are in rhymed four-syllable lines called *fu*; (2) formal and expressive features of the *Lisao* 離騷 (Encountering Sorrow) of Qu Yuan 屈原 (c. 340–c. 278 BCE) and the *Chuci* 楚辭 (Elegies of Chu), traditionally attributed mostly to Qu and his literary disciple Song Yu 宋玉 (c. 290–c. 223 BCE) but likely in some cases to be as late as the early Han and thus contemporary with the rise of the *fu*; and (3) literary materials called *fu* presented in various official, court, and ritual contexts, characterized by elaborate diction, florid exposition, and ornate description. These elements appear in early works such as the *Zuozhuan* 左傳 (Zuo's commentary to the *Chunqiu* 春秋 [Spring and Autumn Annals]), of uncertain date but likely no later than the third century BCE, and in the *Zhanguo ce* 戰國策 (Intrigues of the Warring States), which contains texts that date from 454 to 209 BCE. The core of such addresses and presentations likewise consists of four-syllable rhymed lines.

But 174 BCE is the earliest date for any Han *fu*: the *Funiaio fu* 鵬鳥賦 (Rhapsody on the Owl) by Jia Yi 賈誼 (200–168 BCE). Jia's is a transitional composition that

contains elements from both the *Chuci* (Elegies of Chu), the so-called *sao* 騷 style—with its flexible form and most syllables ending with the exclamatory syllable *xi*—and new elements that characterize the Han *fu*. Although it contains four-syllable lines with one or more end rhymes per stanza, the exclamatory interjection syllable *xi* 兮 (Han pronunciation, *ghei*) often occurs between two four-syllable quasi-lines to make nine beat lines, or occasionally as six syllables + *xi* + four syllables to make eleven syllable lines, or to set off topics at the beginnings of individual lines. Some lines, either four or six syllables, as in the mature Han *fu*, lack a *xi* entirely. In tone and theme, it also shows more affiliation with the *Chuci* than the majority of early Han *fu*. Instead of presenting lengthy objective description and public-oriented rhetoric, it explores a personal state of mind and emotional outlook. When an owl, harbinger of ill fortune, flies into Jia's studio (like Edgar Allan Poe's raven), it sets him to pondering the uncertainty and impermanence of life. Jia is saved from hopeless pessimism by recourse to the transcendent philosophy of the *Zhuangzi*, whose texts he reworked to affirm the equality of fortune and misfortune, life and death.

## Early Composers

By the time of Emperor Wu (141–87 BCE), the *fu* reached maturity, largely through the efforts of Sima Xiangru 司馬相如 (c. 145–c. 86 BCE), whose compositions set the standard for form and content. They were elaborate and exhaustive descriptions of real or imagined places and things conveyed by an encyclopedic vocabulary, often couched in rhetoric designed to persuade and admonish. Although Sima is known to have written at least twenty-nine *fu*, of those surviving, only four are considered genuine. The first two are *Zi Xu fu* 子虛賦 (Master Fictitious Rhapsody) and *Shanglin fu* 上林賦 (Rhapsody on the Shanglin Park). They originally were two halves of one *fu*, the *Zi Xu fu*, but were later divided and given separate titles. They recount in the voices of Master Fictitious and two other imaginary figures the glories of Emperor Wu's great hunting park. The third is the *Ai Qin ershi fu* 哀秦二世賦 (Lament for the Second Qin Emperor Rhapsody), which warns of the dangers of misrule. And the fourth is the *Daren fu* 大人賦 (Great Man Rhapsody), which recounts the virtues of the true sovereign in terms of the perfect sage, or great man, of Confucian and Daoist lore.

Several other Former Han *fu* writers are considered among the best of the entire Han era. Mei Cheng's 枚乘 (d. 140 BCE) best known rhapsodies are the *Qifu* 七發 (Seven Stimuli), composed to admonish the world-weary and ill Han crown prince that he should recover health and spirit so he could again engage with the world, with all its sensual, aesthetic, and intellectual delights, described in great and loving detail. Mei also composed the *Liang Wang Tuyuan fu* 梁王菟園賦 (Rhapsody on the Dodder Park of the King of Liang), which describes the scenic beauty and recreational pleasures found in the Liang princely domain hunting park. Wang Bao 王褒, who served at the court of Emperor Xuan (reigned 73–49 BCE), is best known for his *Dongxiao fu* 洞簫賦 (Rhapsody on the Panpipes), which relates the source of the instrument—beginning in gorgeous forests where bamboos from which it is made lushly grow, through noble craftsmen who make it with great skill and ingenuity, to musicians who play it across a wide spectrum of rhythms and modes and conjure up visions rich in moral effect and full of intellectual and aesthetic value, and concluding by likening the sound of panpipes to the sounds of nature, especially the movement of water and the breath of wind, with their cosmic implications for moral transformation. Yang Xiong 楊雄 (53 BCE–18 CE), active at the court of Emperor Cheng (reigned 32–7 BCE), among other duties, accompanied the emperor and his entourage to sacrificial ceremonies and imperial hunts, which resulted in two ceremonial *fu*: *Ganquan fu* 甘泉賦 (Rhapsody on Sweet Springs Palace) and *Hedong fu* 河東賦 (East of the River Rhapsody), and two hunting *fu*: *Yulie fu* 羽獵賦 (Rhapsody on the Feathered Arrows Hunt) and *Changyang fu* 長楊賦 (Rhapsody on the Wide Stretch of Weeping Willows Palace). Although full of praise for the grandeur of the events and the emperor's demonstrated virtue, all four contain subtle warnings against extravagance and thus function also as a teachable moment.

## Classical Composers

An even greater number of excellent *fu* writers appeared during the Later Han, of which four deserve especial attention. The historian Ban Gu 班固 (32–92 CE) as a literary writer is best known for his *Liangdu fu* 兩都賦 (Two Capitals Rhapsody), which describes the two Han capitals,

Chang'an 長安, the western, which served as capital for the Former Han, and Luoyang 洛陽, the eastern, which served as the capital for the Later Han. Both parts provide detailed accounts of historical events, with loving depictions of the natural and manufactured sights of the two cities as well as their larger geographical settings, accounts of the doings at court, and the virtue of successive emperors. It concludes with confirmation of the eternal political and cultural significance of the two capitals. Ban's earlier *Youtong fu* 幽通賦 (Rhapsody on Communicating with the Hidden), in the archaic *sao* style, is quite different. It explores the realm of hidden gods, sagely spirits, divine maidens, and other members of the spirit world, through which Ban, then perhaps twenty-two years of age, roams in imagination, consciously copying the quest theme of the *Lisao* (Encountering Sorrow) in which Qu Yuan undertakes a journey in search of a virtuous sovereign to serve. Ban by contrast seeks advice from the spirit world on how he should conduct a successful life, now that his father has just died and he wishes to continue his family's good name. Another long quest *fu* is by Zhang Heng 張衡 (78–139 CE), the *Si xuan fu* 思玄賦 (Rhapsody on Contemplating the Arcane), also in *sao* style and with Qu Yuan clearly in mind. Inspired by the sad conclusion that the good man rarely finds the world a congenial place, Zhang imaginatively wanders through the mysterious spirit world in search of the Heavenly Way, seeking advice on how to cope with the hostility and suspicion he meets in official life. Although his quest ends in frustration, he resolves to retire and lead a quiet life in the country, cultivating himself and studying the teachings of the ancient sages. Zhang wrote a short sequel, *Guitian fu* 歸田賦 (Rhapsody on Returning to the Fields), not in *sao* style but in standard *fu* six and four syllable lines, which rejoices in his release from the snares and delusions of official life and in his new-found simple joys of country living.

## Late Composers

Closing the Han era is Wang Can 王粲 (177–217 CE), an original writer who excelled in all forms of literature, including the new short lyric poem, the *shi* 詩, as well as the *fu*. Wang's *fu* tend to be short, full of direct and intimate description and intense feeling. It is likely that this late Han development of the *fu*, as seen in the works

of Wang Can and his contemporaries, into much shorter and more lyrical compositions is due to influence from the *shi*, which was then rapidly becoming the new dominant literary form. Wang's *Denglou fu* 登樓賦 (Rhapsody on Climbing the Tower) was composed sometime after 193 CE while he was living in Jiangling 江陵 (present-day Jingzhou 荊州, Hubei), where he escaped to avoid the chaos caused by the imminent collapse of the Han. In it Wang describes and praises the marvelous scenery viewed from atop a wall tower, probably on the Maicheng 麥城 city wall not far from Jiangling. But it is not his home, and, although he strains his eyes toward the northwest, his view is blocked by mountains, reminding him of the vast distance involved. Overwhelmed with sadness and worry, he realizes that only the recovery of political and military stability, which he fears is unlikely to come soon, will allow his return home,

To round out this account of the Han *fu*, it is necessary mention the following age of disunity, the Three Kingdoms era, and the *fu* of Cao Zhi 曹植 (192–232 CE), third son of Cao Cao 曹操 (155–220), military strongman and usurper of Han rule and younger brother of Cao Pi 曹丕 (187–226), Emperor Wen, first emperor of the Wei dynasty. Cao Zhi's most famous *fu*, widely appreciated throughout the tradition, is his *Luoshen fu* 洛神賦 (Rhapsody on the Luo River Goddess). No evidence exists to indicate why Cao composed this work, but speculation over the centuries has proposed several theories. The Luo River goddess represents Empress Zhen 甄, his brother's wife, whom he supposedly loved. Because the goddess was beyond human reach, so too was this forbidden earthly love for him, so he wrote the *Luoshen fu* to express allegorically his love and longing. Another theory claims that this rhapsody should be understood as an expression of Cao Zhi's frustration at not being given high office at the Wei court by his brother but instead often kept at a distance in politically insignificant "cushy" jobs. The goddess allegorically represents his brother, whose attentions and affections are denied him. Yet another theory says the rhapsody was inspired by legends of the Luo River goddess, supposedly the daughter of the ancient sage ruler Fu Xi 伏羲, who drowned in the Luo and was subsequently worshiped as its protector deity. Cao Zhi draws on this legend when on a journey he halts above the Luo, looks down, and supposedly has a vision of the goddess in all her beauty and glory. There is no way of knowing if the resulting composition was the articulation

of a vision in the psychological or spiritual sense, a playful but erudite literary invention, a voluptuous description and expression of passionate love for some unidentified woman, or perhaps, simply, a clever verbal concoction designed to enrich lore surrounding the local goddess. Nevertheless, with Cao Zhi the *fu* was becoming more infused with complexity, expressive subtlety, and layers of meaning, characteristics of many *fu* composed during the centuries that followed by such masters as Ji Kang 嵇康 (223–262 CE), Pan Yue 潘岳 (247–300 CE), Lu Ji 陸機 (261–303 CE), Tao Qian 陶潛 (365–427 CE), and Yu Xin 庾信 (513–581 CE), whose works in this genre have always been regarded as among the great masterpieces of Chinese literary art.

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