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Lisao : The poem and its author as a composite text : The fusion of poetry and biography

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How to Read Chinese Poetry Podcast

Topic 5 *Lisao*: The Poem and Its Author as a Composite Text

Guest Host: Martin Kern (Princeton University)

Episode 14 The Fusion of Poetry and Biography

I. Text

Lisao 離騷

Distant descendant of the God Gao Yang am I,

My august father's name was Bo Yong.

The *sheti* constellation pointed to the first month of the year,

It was the cyclical day *gengyin* when I descended.

The august one surveyed me and took my original measure,

Rising to bestow on me auspicious names:

He named me “Correct Standard,”

Styled me “Numinous Balance.”

Lush am I, possessed of this inner beauty,

Further doubled in fine appearance:

Shrouded in lovage and iris,

Weaving the autumn orchid as my girdle.

dì gāoyáng zhī miào yì xī
帝高陽之苗裔兮

zhèn huáng kǎo yuē bó yōng
朕皇考曰伯庸

shè tí zhēn yú mèng zōu xī
攝提貞于孟陬兮

wéi gēng yīn wú yǐ hóng
惟庚寅吾以降

huáng lǎn kuī yú chū dù xī
皇覽揆余初度兮

zhào cì yú yǐ jiā míng
肇錫余以嘉名

míng yú yuē zhèng zé xī
名余曰正則兮

zì yú yuē líng jūn
字余曰靈均

fēn wú jì yǒu cǐ nèi měi xī
紛吾既有此內美兮

yòu chóng zhī yǐ xiū nài
又重之以脩能

hù jiāng lí yǔ pì zhǐ xī
扈江離與辟芷兮

rèn qiū lán yǐ wéi pèi
紉秋蘭以為佩

[Translated by Martin Kern]

The poem read in Mandarin by Fusheng Wu

II. Episode Notes

- *Diao Qu Yuan* 弔屈原 (“Mourning Qu Yuan”)
- *Xi shi* 惜誓 (“Regretting the Oath”)
- *Bu ju* 卜居 (“Divining Where to Reside”)
- *Yufu* 漁父 (“The Fisherman”)
- *Chuci zhangju* 楚辭章句 (Chapter and Verse Commentary to the *Chuci*)
- *Chuci buzhu* 楚辭補注 (Supplementary Annotations to the *Chuci*)
- “this inner beauty” (*ci neimei* 此內美)
- *Huai sha* 懷沙 (“Embracing Sand”)
- Qu Ping 屈平 (as the putative author of the *Lisao*)
- “made” (*zuo* 作)
- *bilou* 鄙陋 (vulgar and base)
- A rhymed passage in the Qu Yuan biography:
“Qu Ping was distressed that:
The king’s listening was undiscerning, 屈平疾王聽之不聰也
Slander and slur obscured insight, 讒諂之蔽明也
The twisted and the crooked harmed the common good, 邪曲之害公也
The square and the straight were no longer given a place. 方正之不容也
Thus, [he] worried and grieved in dark thoughts and created *Encountering Sorrow*. 故
憂愁幽思而作離騷
- A passage from the Qu Yuan biography:
“I shall better throw myself into the ever-flowing stream and bury myself in the bowels of the river fish! How could I take my brilliant clarity and have it obscured by the confused blur of the world!” 寧赴常流而葬乎江魚腹中耳，又安能以皓皓之白而蒙世俗之溫蠖乎！
- A passage from the Qu Yuan biography:
“Then [he] made the poetic exposition of *Huai sha*.” 乃作懷沙之賦。
- A passage from the Qu Yuan biography:
“Thereupon [he] embraced a stone and drowned himself in the Miluo River.” 於是懷石遂自投汨羅以死。
- Wang Yi 王逸 (d. ca. 158 CE)
- Wang Yi on *Jiu zhang*:
“The people of Chu grieved and mourned him; generation after generation appraised his phrases and transmitted his verses from one to the next.” 楚人惜而哀之，世論其詞，以相傳焉。

- Wang Yi on *Tian wen*:
“The people of Chu mourned and grieved over Qu Yuan; they collectively appraised and transmitted [the poem], and this is why it is said not to be in a meaningful order.” 楚人哀惜屈原，因共論述，故其文義不次序云爾。
- Wang Yi on *Yufu*:
“The people of Chu longed and yearned for Qu Yuan and for this reason arranged his phrases so as to transmit them onward.” 楚人思念屈原，因敘其詞以相傳焉。
- Wang Yi on *Jiu ge*:
“Their textual sense is incoherent, their stanzas and lines are mixed up, and they broadly diverge in their principal meaning.” 故其文意不同，章句雜錯，而廣異義焉。
- *Lisao zhuan* 離騷傳 (“Commentary on the *Lisao*”)
- *Jiu tan* 九歎 (“Nine Laments”)

III. Textual Source

“Cultural Memory and the Epic in Early Chinese Literature: The Case of Qu Yuan 屈原 and the *Lisao* 離騷.” This paper will appear in the 2022 spring issue of the *Journal of Chinese Literature and Culture*.