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Tang Dynasty Rhapsodies on Puppetry: Literary Representations of Artifice, Gender, and Sexuality

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Abstract

The earliest extant rhapsodies about puppetry were produced in China during the Tang dynasty (618-907). This paper examines two short texts – the "Han yi munü jie Pingcheng wei fu" (A rhapsody on the Han dynasty use of a wooden woman to relieve the siege of Pingcheng) by Xie Guan (d. 865; *jinshi* 837) and the "Muren fu" (Rhapsody on a wooden man) by Lin Zi (*jinshi* 843) – which explore the interactions between puppets and people. In these writings, the puppets are figures of fantasy, life-sized, moving autonomously, and so realistic in movements and appearance that they are indistinguishable to the human eye from living people. Accordingly, this is an opportunity for the writers of these rhapsodies to explore ideas of nature versus artifice, as well as gender and sexuality. The first of these rhapsodies features a female puppet, whose beauty provokes lust in the men who see her and jealousy from women; while the second describes a handsome male puppet, who appears at the court of King Mu of Zhou only to flirt with his consorts, provoking royal anger. These writings problematize the way in which emotions and gender norms define social relationships because their subjects are automata, which appear human but are not.

Keywords

puppets – Tang dynasty – gender – sexuality – jealousy – rhapsodies

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Introduction

Although puppetry is an extremely ancient art in China, the earliest surviving literature on the subject dates to the early medieval period, with poetry and rhapsodies being produced from the Tang dynasty (618-907) onwards.[1] Before the medieval period, Chinese puppetry seems to have been entirely religious in nature, and performances were held only in ceremonial contexts.[2] In addition, there is some evidence suggesting that funeral rites in ancient China could involve the presence of large (even life-sized) articulated wooden figures, which may also have influenced the subsequent development of puppetry and automata.[3] However, prior to the Tang dynasty, very few writings seem to have been produced on this subject. Once the literati elite turned their attention to the topic, they quickly came to focus on the contrast between what is human and what merely appears to be lifelike, the real and the artificial, as well as exploring issues of gender and sexuality through the device of describing people (more or less unwittingly) interacting with female and male puppets. Accordingly, this paper will focus on a pair of Tang rhapsodies in which socially and culturally imposed gender norms and attitudes towards sexuality are critiqued and problematized specifically because they are being imposed upon wooden figures, which look like living human beings but are in fact puppets.

This paper begins by considering the "Han yi munü jie Pingcheng wei fu" 漢以木女解平城圍賦 (A rhapsody on the Han dynasty use of a wooden woman to relieve the siege of Pingcheng) by Xie Guan 謝觀 (d. 865; *jinshi* 837).[4] This

1 For a magisterial history of the development of all kinds of puppet arts in China, including glove puppets, marionettes, automata, water puppets, shadow puppets and so on, see Ye Mingsheng 葉明生, *Zhongguo kuileixi shi: Gudai, jinxiandai juan* 中國傀儡戲史: 古代近現代卷 (Beijing: Zhongguo xiju chubanshe, 2017). For an overview of sources on the early history of Chinese puppetry, see for example Sun Kaidi 孫楷第, *Kuileixi kao yuan* 傀儡戲考原 (Shanghai: Shangza chubanshe, 1952); William Dolby, "The Origins of Chinese Puppetry," *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies* 41.1 (1978): 97-120; and Wang Yongping 王永平, "Jianlun Han-Tang kuileixi" 簡論漢唐傀儡戲, *Shanxi shifan daxue bao* (*Shehui kexue ban*) 山西師範大學學報 (社會科學版), 1 (1992): 71-4.

2 The ceremonial nature of early puppetry is stressed in studies such as Qiu Yafen 邱雅芬, "Shengzhan wushu yu Zhong Ri kuileixi qiyuan chuanshuo" 勝戰巫術與中日傀儡戲起源傳說, *Minzu yishu* 民族藝術 2 (2010): 59-63. The expressions of popular faith intrinsic to puppetry in China resulted in frequent bans through the imperial era; see Ding Shumei 丁淑梅, "Zhongguo gudai de kuilei yanju yu jinxi" 中國古代的傀儡演劇與禁戲, *Wenhua yichan* 文化遺產, 2 (2009): 76-84.

3 For a truly remarkable find of this nature, see Wang Mingfang 王明芳, "Shandong Laixixian Daishu Xi-Han muguomu" 山東萊西縣岱墅西漢木槨墓, *Wenwu* 文物 12 (1980): 7-16.

4 A biography of Xie Guan, an eighteenth-generation descendant of Xie An 謝安 (320-85), focusing on his successful administrative career, is given in his epitaph; see Zhou Shaoliang

rhapsody was inspired by an incident in the life of the founder of the Han dynasty. In 200 BCE, Emperor Gaozu 漢高祖 (r. 202-195 BCE) was besieged by the *Chanyu* Modu 冒頓單于 (r. 209-174 BCE), supreme ruler of the Xiongnu 匈奴 people, not far from the modern day city of Datong 大同 in Shanxi province. According to Han dynasty historical records, the siege was lifted after seven days when representations were made to the *Chanyu*'s wife, the *Yanshi* 閼氏, who brokered a peace deal.[5] This near disaster for the nascent Han dynasty is here represented (as in other roughly contemporaneous Tang dynasty prose accounts) as a legendary feat of military puppet-work: a triumph of sophisticated Chinese artifice over simple Xiongnu eyes.[6] Military puppetry usually involved creating life-sized decoy figures in order to deceive the enemy as to the location of key officers and their troops.[7] In this instance, however, artisans are supposed to have created a marionette in the shape of a beautiful

周紹良, comp., *Tangdai muzhi huibian* 唐代墓志匯編 (Shanghai: Shanghai guji chubanshe, 1992), 2428-29. The catalogue of the Tang imperial library records the existence of a volume entitled *Xie Guan fu* 謝觀賦 (Xie Guan's Rhapsodies) in eight *juan*; see Ouyang Xiu 歐陽修 et al., comp., *Xin Tangshu* 新唐書 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1975), 60:1615. Dong Gao 董誥 et al., comp., *Quan Tangwen* 全唐文 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1983), 758:7865-77 provides twenty-three of his rhapsodies, including this one, almost exclusively on historical themes.

5 For complimentary accounts of these events, including Lou Jing's 婁敬 opposition to the first Han emperor's campaign, Chen Ping's 陳平 (d. 178 BCE) role in lifting the siege, and the bribing of the *Yanshi*, see Sima Qian 司馬遷 et al., *Shiji* 史記 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1959), 56:2057; 99:2718; and 110:2894; and Ban Gu 班固 et al., *Hanshu* 漢書 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1962), 40:2045; 43:2121; and 94A:3753-54. For translations of the *Shiji* material on these events, see William H. Nienhauser Jr., ed., *The Grand Scribe's Records* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994).

6 For a Tang dynasty prose version of this tale, see for example Duan Anjie 段安節, *Yuefu zalu* 樂府雜錄 (Beijing: Zhongguo xiju chubanshe, 1982), 62 ["Kuileizi" 傀儡子]. The belief that a puppet was used to lift the siege of Pingcheng seems to have been widely held in the Tang; see for example Xie Baocheng 謝保成, *Zhenguan zhengyao jijiao* 貞觀政要集校 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 2009), 8:449.

7 There appears to have been little modern academic research of this practice, but there is extensive documentation from at least the time of the Tang dynasty of military puppetry; see for example Wei Zhiyi 韋執誼, "Hanlin gushi" 翰林故事, quoted in Pan Zimu 潘自牧, *Jizuan yuanhai* 記纂淵海 (Shanghai: Shanghai guji chubanshe, 2003), 89:642; Liu Xu 劉昫 et al., *Jiu Tangshu* 舊唐書 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1975), 177:4581-82; *Xin Tangshu*, 114:4200-201; and Yuan Shu 袁樞, *Tongjian jishi benmo* 通鑒紀事本末 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1964), 10:36.3325-44. Today, this kind of military puppetry is best known from the incident in the *Sanguo yanyi* 三國演義 (Romance of the Three Kingdoms) where Sima Yi 司馬懿 (179-251) was deceived by a wooden figure of Zhuge Liang 諸葛亮 (181-234) into believing that his nemesis was still alive; see Luo Guanzhong 羅貫中, *Sanguo yanyi* 三國演義 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 2009), 104:781-82. For a translation of this section of the text; see Moss Roberts, *Romance of the Three Kingdoms* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2020), 1127-35.

woman. The *Yanshi* was informed that she was a Chinese lady who would be presented to the *Chanyu* as his consort; this inflamed her jealousy (a stereotypical female failing in Chinese culture), and she persuaded the Xiongnu leader to let Emperor Gaozu go free.

The second rhapsody that will be considered in this paper, of approximately the same date, is attributed to Lin Zi 林滋 (*jinshi* 843), about whom virtually nothing is known, except that he was much admired by his contemporaries as the finest Fujianese composer of rhapsodies of his time.[8] The "Muren fu" 木人賦 (Rhapsody on a wooden man), is based on a legend preserved in the *Liezi* 列子 (Master Lie).[9] According to this text, King Mu of Zhou 周穆王 (r. 976/956-922/918 BCE) met a master craftsman named Yan 偃 who was accompanied by a life-sized puppet. The king was deeply impressed by the theatrical performance given by the puppet, though he did not realize that it was not an actor. When at the end of the show, the puppet "ogled" the king's concubines, King Mu became very offended and was only reassured by Master Yan disassembling his creation to demonstrate that it was indeed made of wood. Lin Zi's rhapsody on this theme is a virtuoso description of a marionette, filled with punning lines and double meanings, which explores ideas of what it means to be human, the interface between nature and artifice, and the tensions of sexual jealousy that can become inflamed when the actions of a puppet are read by human eyes.

Xie Guan and the "Han yi munü jie Pingcheng wei fu"

Xie Guan's rhapsody takes as its subject the events of 200 BCE, when Emperor Gaozu of the Han dynasty was surrounded by the enemy army and pinned down at Mount Baideng 白登山, just outside the city of Pingcheng. A significant body of accounts of this important campaign has survived, which

8 Scant biographical details can be found in Wang Zhongyong 王仲鏞, *Tangshi jishi jiaojian* 唐詩紀事校箋 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 2007), 55:1866; and Tao Shaoqing 陶紹清, *Tang zhi yan jiaozheng* 唐摭言校證 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 2021), 3:115.

9 Yang Bojun 楊伯峻, *Liezi jishi* 列子集釋 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1985), 179-181 ["Tang wen" 湯問]. This is translated in A.C. Graham, *The Book of Lieh-tzŭ: A Classic of the Tao* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1990), 110-11. A later, simpler version of this story is given in Chen Zhiping 陳志平 and Xiong Qingyuan 熊清元, *Jinlouzi shuzheng jiaozhu* 金樓子疏證校注 (Shanghai: Shanghai guji chubanshe, 2014), 927 ["Zhiguai" 志怪], which some scholars believe to be closer to Lin Zi's text. Qin Xueren 秦學人, "Buke hushi de ouxi shiliao: Gudai yongou xishi huishi" 不可忽視的偶戲史料: 古代詠偶戲詩匯釋, *Xiju* 戲劇 3 (1997): 88-104, argues that Lin Zi's rhapsody actually describes multiple puppets, male and female, old and young; but the original story only has one male puppet, and the wording of the rhapsody is sufficiently ambiguous that it could all refer to the same figure.

allows for an understanding of the actions of many individual participants in these occurrences, at least on the Han side. The main sequence of events is relatively clear: Emperor Gaozu was locked in conflict with Xin, King of Han 韓王信 (d. 196 BCE), whom he feared would prove disloyal.[10] Whether or not this had originally been this person's intention, he felt sufficiently threatened that he defected to the Xiongnu. Emperor Gaozu then determined on an attack on the Xiongnu, and arrived at Pingcheng with a large body of men (usually said to number three hundred and twenty thousand soldiers) who had advanced northwards in the face of truly appalling cold.[11] The *Shiji* 史記 (Records of the grand historian) speaks of two or three soldiers out of every ten losing digits to frostbite.[12] His precipitate advance with such a huge army turned out to be a strategic miscalculation, as supply lines stretched thin, and reinforcements failed to arrive. The Xiongnu surrounded the emperor in his camp at Mount Baideng, and he was in a truly perilous situation for seven days. At this juncture, Emperor Gaozu sent his subordinate Chen Ping 陳平 to speak to the *Yanshi*, and she persuaded the *Chanyu* Modu to accept some kind of peace agreement. The precise nature of Chen Ping's plan, and what exactly was promised to the Xiongnu leader and his wife, is nowhere made clear, but has been conventionally tied by historians to the development of the *heqin* 和親 (peace through matrimony) policy, which saw Han princesses married off to a succession of Xiongnu *Chanyu* over the course of many generations.[13]

10 The founding of the Han dynasty was achieved with the support of two men, both named Han Xin, both of whom defected to the Xiongnu and died in the same year. This is extremely confusing. The Han Xin concerned in these events was a descendant of the former ruling house of Han, whose official biography is given in *Shiji*, 93:2631-36; and *Hanshu*, 33:1852-58.

11 This figure is given in both the *Shiji*, 110:2894; and *Hanshu*, 94A:3753. Whether literally correct or not, the Han emperor clearly invaded Xiongnu territory at the head of an enormous army.

12 *Shiji*, 110:2894.

13 The *heqin* alliances between the Han imperial house and the Xiongnu (as well as other northern tribal peoples) are explored in Cui Mingde 崔明德, *Han Tang heqin shigao* 漢唐和親史稿 (Qingdao: Qingdao Haiyang daxue chubanshe, 1992); and Hu Ren 胡刃, *Heqin dadao* 和親大道 (Beijing: Minzu chubanshe, 2006); see also Cao Miaomiao 曹苗苗, "Lüelun Xi Han yu Xiongnu de heqin zhengce" 略論西漢與匈奴的和親政策, *Jiamusi daxue shehui kexue xuebao* 佳木斯大學社會科學學報 39.3 (2021): 141-44. Wang Zijin 王子今, "Xiongnu Xiyu heqin shishi" 匈奴西域和親史事, *Xianyang shifan xueyuan xuebao* 咸陽師範學院學報 27.5 (2012): 1-6, notes the importance of the *heqin* model for defining not only Han-Xiongnu relations, but also relations between the Xiongnu and other tribal peoples, suggesting that this form of marriage diplomacy was integral to their diplomatic practices. For further studies of this important form of international diplomacy in the Han; see for example Tamara Chin, "Defamiliarizing the Foreigner: Sima Qian's Ethnography and Han-Xiongnu Marriage Diplomacy," *Harvard Journal of Asiatic*

The events of 200 BCE should be understood as almost cataclysmic for the nascent Han dynasty. Those who lived through it remained highly sensitive to the dangers Emperor Gaozu had faced at Pingcheng and were fully cognizant of just how close they came to disaster. What exactly happened is not known to us, but the Xiongnu were certainly in a position to impose humiliating terms upon the Han imperial house. The precise role played by the *Yanshi* is also not clear; however, the *Shiji* reports her saying to the *Chanyu* Modu: *Liangzhu bu xiang kun. Jin de Handi, er Chanyu zhong feineng ju zhi ye. Qie Hanwang yi you shen, Chanyu cha zhi* 兩主不相困。今得漢地, 而單于終非能居之也. 且漢王亦有神, 單于察之 (Two monarchs should not place each other under restraint. Were you now to obtain the lands of Han, you would never be able to occupy them. Furthermore the Han King also has divine support, so your highness should consider this).[14] While these historical events form the backdrop to Xie Guan's rhapsody, this text provides an entirely different explanation of what occurred at Mount Baideng. In this literary reimagining, a nearly regime-ending disaster for the Han becomes a triumph of Chinese ingenuity and craftsmanship, while the victorious Xiongnu are reframed as the gullible victims of a cunning ploy. Chen Ping's *qiji* 奇計 (which perhaps here might best be translated as "outrageous plan") that extracted Emperor Gaozu from trouble and was subsequently treated as absolutely top secret for the entire duration of the dynasty turns out to have revolved around the construction of a life-sized puppet of a woman.[15] The strange beauty of this extraordinary creation served to arouse the jealousy of the *Yanshi*, and she then used her feminine wiles to make *Chanyu* Modu abandon the siege.

As mentioned above, Xie Guan was not the only Tang dynasty author to write of the role of a puppet in lifting the siege of Pingyang. This seems to have been a widely held belief at the time, the origins of which are extremely obscure. However, Xie Guan goes much further than other writers on this theme in exploring underlying tensions between what is real and what is unreal, and how this story links ideas about gender, sexuality, ethnicity, and artifice. The importance of these topics to Xie Guan's rhapsody is made explicit in the prose sentence that serves as its introduction, which states: *Yi guo'e dizhi fanzi guji wei yun* 以國娥地止蕃姿固忌爲韻 (Using the rhymes of a national beauty found at the ends of the earth, causing jealousy amongst foreign women).[16]

Studies 70.2 (2010): 311-54; and Sophia-Karin Psarras, "Han and Xiongnu: A Reexamination of Cultural and Political Relations (1)," *Monumenta Serica* 51 (2003):132-42.

14 *Shiji*, 110:2894.

15 As a result of this legend, which credits Chen Ping with the creation of this puppet, he was subsequently worshipped in the Fujian region as the god of puppetry; see Robin Ruizendaal, *Marionette Theatre in Quanzhou* (Leiden: Brill, 2006), 16-17.

16 *Quan Tangwen*, 758:7870.

Accordingly, his rhapsody should be read as a narrative of ethnic division and difference, in which what is Chinese (*guo* 國; literally "national") is pitted against the foreign (*fan* 蕃), and shown to be superior. Furthermore, this is a gendered comparison, which contrasts Chinese feminine beauty with the jealousy (and by implication, ugliness) of Xiongnu women. However, as this rhapsody repeatedly reminds the reader, there is also a comparison being made here between Chinese artifice and Xiongnu honesty. Since the lovely Chinese lady is in fact a wooden simulacrum, everything about her is fake. The simple, unsophisticated Xiongnu – male and female – trust the evidence of their own eyes, not realizing that what they are seeing is effectively an instrument of psychological warfare. The opening half of this rhapsody reads as follows:

In the seventh year of the Han, all within the seas was already pacified,[17]	漢七年兮海内已清
Confident in the strength of his army, [the emperor] penetrated deeply into Pingcheng.	恃兵強兮深入平城
He was going to make a show of strength in this remote region at the edge of the known world,	將耀武於窮邊絕域
He wanted to demonstrate his bravery to the four barbarians in the remote borderlands.[18]	欲用壯於四夷八紘
He mobilized the country and raised an army:	舉國興師
Lou Jing's advice went completely unheeded.[19]	婁敬之言莫聽
For seven days they did not eat:	七日不食
Chen Ping's plan was only then put into action.	陳平之計方行
Thereupon	於时
He ordered that a woodcarver	命雕木之工
Create a most lovely lady.	狀佳人之美
He availed himself of chisel and gouge in this work of artistic creation,	假剞劂於繢事
He painted her an entrancing visage.	寫嬋娟之容止
Following the blade in his hand, a bewitching smile was suddenly born,	逐手刃兮巧笑俄生

17 The events at Pingcheng took place in the second year after the conventional beginning of the Han dynasty, but seven years after the future Emperor Gaozu assumed the title of King of Han, hence the dating given here.

18 The locus classicus of the term *bahong* 八紘 appears to be the *Huainanzi* 淮南子, where it denotes the remotest regions of the realm; see He Ning 何寧, *Huainanzi jishi* 淮南子集釋 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1998), 334-35 ["Dixing xun" 墜形訓].

19 Lou Jing advised the first Han emperor not to attack the Xiongnu only to be greeted with a torrent of abuse; see *Shiji*, 99:2718; and *Hanshu*, 43:2121. For his timely (if unheeded) warning, he was rewarded a marquisate when Emperor Gaozu returned to the capital alive.

Responding to a tug on the strings, the heart of the mechanism secretly stirs.[20]	從索[綯]而機心暗起
When she moved, her eyes wandered around;	動則流盼
When she sat still, her fingers were held straight.	靜而直指
It seemed as though she wanted to sweep away her monarch's troubles:	似欲排君之難
Without fear of besmirching herself.	匪憚陋容
It looked like she was going to avenge her lord's humiliations:	如將報主之仇
Wordlessly she displayed her self-control.[21]	無辭克己
First he painted her peach-like face,	既拂桃臉
Then he drew on her willow-fine eyebrows.	旋妝柳眉
Her eyes finished, she could see	目成可望
To the human eye, she was flawless.	肉視無遺
He put on her make-up with an unerring sense of style,	摛粉藻而標格有度
He arranged her clothes and jewelry so that humble materials took on elegance.	傅簪裾而樸略生姿
A modest and pure maiden:	節操堅貞
Unafraid of the flaying torture that had created her.	狀刳剔之刑無懼
A beautiful and innocent girl:[22]	穠華窈窕
Those who saw her chiseled shoulders had no inkling of the truth.[23]	見削成之肩不疑

In the first half of his rhapsody Xie Guan considers a number of important themes in the legend of the wooden female puppet that saved the emperor

20 Not all editions of this text have the word *tao* 綯 (strings); for example, it is absent from recension given in the *Quan Tangwen*, 758:7870. However, it is included in the version of this rhapsody published in Li Fang 李昉 et al. comp., *Wenyuan yinghua* 文苑英華 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1966), 66:301.

21 This very loaded term for self-control has significant Confucian implications, having been used as a key term in the *Lunyu* 論語 (Analects); see Yang Bojun 楊伯峻, *Lunyu yizhu* 論語譯注 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1980), 123 [12.1 "Yan Yuan" 顏淵].

22 The wording of this line draws upon the *Shijing* 詩經 (Book of songs) and thus carries great canonical weight; see Kong Yingda 孔穎達, *Mao Shi zhengyi* 毛詩正義 (Beijing: Beijing daxue chubanshe, 1999), 103 [Mao 24: "Hebi nongyi" 何彼襛矣]; and 22 [Mao 1: "Guanju" 關雎]. The Mao commentary on the *Shijing* is of particular relevance for understanding the allusion, explaining that *nonghua* 穠華 referred to the loveliness of princesses, married off to men of inferior rank and living far away from the civilized pleasures of the royal court.

23 *Quan Tangwen*, 758:7870.

at Pingcheng. The first is the technical skill of the extraordinary (and anonymous) craftsman who produced such a superlatively fine puppet out of the unpromising materials available at a mountaintop army camp. However, this female puppet also functions as a metonym for all the women who would be sent to the Xiongnu over subsequent generations as part of the *heqin* policy. At the heart of this story, there is significant sexual exploitation, in which unhappy and unwilling women were handed over to powerful men in foreign countries in the hope that this would strengthen political alliances. This was a very powerful trope, judging by the enormous body of literature about the *heqin* women, and the fact that their names – starting with Liu Xijun 劉細君 (d. 101 BCE), sent north to marry the king of Wusun 烏孫 – remained part of popular discourse throughout the imperial period and continue to be well known to the general public right up to the present day.[24] The wooden puppet is at no risk of rape or physical assault by the men who lust after her, because she is an inanimate object. However, Xie Guan points to the underlying threat by suggesting that the puppet agrees to her exploitation, explicitly stating that she felt the need to sweep away her monarch's troubles and avenge her lord's humiliations. An imagined consent is attributed to the puppet, which raises uncomfortable questions about the level of projection involved. This discomfort becomes even more marked in the second half of the rhapsody, where Xie Guan turns to the subject of Xiongnu men's reaction to seeing the female figure so cunningly prepared for them to lust over. This is a work of literature that explores the theme of the male gaze and probes the disconnection between men's desires and sense of entitlement, and what it is actually feasible for them to obtain. Xiongnu men's determination to sexually exploit an exceptionally beautiful Chinese woman, and their belief they have the right to do so, is mocked because in this case, she is an artificial creation. However, as readers would have been well aware, in other cases the lovely Chinese lady handed over to foreign men was very much flesh and blood. These lines read:

24 Liu Xijun is the first *heqin* woman whose name was noted, and her biography in the dynastic history records her unhappiness with a husband much older that herself that she could not talk to because they did not speak the same language. The same source provides the famous poem attributed to her: "My family have married me off to the edge of the world,/ Sending me far away to a foreign country and the Wusun king./ Yurts are houses, felt is walls,/ Meat is food and kumiss is drink./ Living here I miss my land and my heart is wounded,/ If only I were a yellow swan that could return to my hometown" (吾家嫁我兮天一方, 遠託異國兮烏孫王。穹廬為室兮旃為牆, 以肉為食兮酪為漿。居常土思兮心內傷, 願為黃鵠兮歸故鄉). *Hanshu*, 96B:3903.

Afterwards	然後
She was taken out to a distant part of town,	迴出孤域
To walk alone, free and easy.	逍遥獨步
Unconcerned at the swords and spears pointed towards her,	向鋒刃之形稿高
As firm in her resolve as the cypress or the pine.[25]	秉松柏之心堅固
Just then	既而
Moving slowly, with a natural refinement;	踟躕素質
Lovely and gentle, with a celestial beauty,	婉娩靈娥
The sunshine illuminated her gorgeous face,	日照顔色
And the wind pulled at her gauzy silk robes.	風牽綺羅
With those regular features: how charming she looked	睹從繩之容楚楚
With her mallet-shaped hairdo piled high on top of her head.[26]	混如椎之髻峨峨
So lifelike, and yet designed to deceive;	有貌而自爲飾詐
Bereft of emotion, without even batting an eyelid.	無情而不轉横波
At this time –	時也
Xiongnu tribes were jointly encircling [the encampment],	匈奴合圍
And a favorite was in charge.	嬖人興事
Thus they manipulated this image of a lovely lady,	故持娉婷之淑態
Using her to provoke the jealousy of the *Yanshi*.	用撓閼氏之所忌
Sure enough she alarmed those sword-sharp eyes;	果驚如劍之眸
Though she had no idea that this was but a whittled nose.[27]	不識運斤之鼻

25 The proverbial staunchness of the cypress and pine is referenced in classical texts; see for example Kong Yingda 孔穎達, *Liji zhengyi* 禮記正義 (Beijing: Beijing daxue chubanshe, 1999), 716 ["Liqi" 禮器].

26 The mallet-shaped bun is often associated with non-Chinese ethnic groups, however, as early imperial era art works make clear, it was in fact widely worn by Chinese women as well; see Wang Xinya 王欣亞, "Qinren fushi wenhua zai tanxi: Cong Jingwei Qinmu chutu de taoyong chufa" 秦人服飾文化再探析: 從涇渭秦墓出土的陶俑出發, *Yan'an daxue xuebao* (*Shehui kexueban*) 延安大學學報 (社會科學版) 44.5 (2022): 99-104; and Sun Liangyu 孫良玉, "Nanyang Han huaxiangshi zhong suojian de nüxing fashi he fashi" 南陽漢畫像石中所見的女性髮式和髮飾, *Zhongyuan wenhua* 中原文化 3 (2015): 52-55.

27 Literally, the *Yanshi* had no idea this was an "axe-whirling" nose; the locus classicus of this expression being the "Xu Wugui" 徐無鬼 chapter of the *Zhuangzi* 莊子, which describes the Master passing by the funerary wooden figure and asking an artisan to remove a speck of mud on its nose. The artisan did so by whirling his axe, but in spite of his violent act, he did not injure the figure in any way; see Guo Qingfan 郭慶藩, *Zhuangzi jishi* 莊子集釋 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1985), 843. This entire story is translated in Victor H.

She observed her:	觀其
Standing gracefully on the Han fortifications,	玉立漢壘
A flower growing amidst the battlements.	花生女垣
Her perfume drifted out into the Great Desert	香飛大漠
Her name resounded among the frontiersmen.	名動雄蕃
Each ignored how brutish and ugly they were:	各揣蕞陋之姿
These barbarian faces expected to be favored [by her].[28]	胡顏恃寵
Finally, they remembered their rank and filthy qualities,	競念腥膻之質
Their lack of proper norms and their paucity of virtue.	苟且孤恩
Then her ladyship offered the strongest remonstrance fired by her resentments,	乃儲仇以極諫
She behaved with ritual propriety when she offered her advice.	並懷禮而獻言
She claimed:	以爲
The relationship between the Han and these savages,	漢之與蕃
Had always been that of different countries.	本爲殊國
She hoped that both sides would not suffer harm,	冀兩地之無患
"Why did two lords need to kill each other?"	曷二主之相殛
As the sun set and the drums sounded, he bewailed his past mistake,	落日而鳴鼙自怨
And as the night drew on, the siege was secretly lifted.[29]	中夜之重圍暗失

In the second half of this rhapsody tension builds as the Xiongnu men experience desire for the lovely Chinese automaton presented for them to drool over. She is a figure of fantasy – life-sized and apparently capable of moving all by herself in such a natural way that she deceives all who see her into believing that she is indeed human, and available to provide sexual services for Xiongnu men. At the same time, this female puppet reflects increasingly hostile attitudes towards the *heqin* policy in the late Tang dynasty, as she stirs up profound gender divisions within an alien society through mimicking the high-status Chinese women sent north to become consorts to tribal leaders and foreign kings. In this rhapsody, the issue of human versus automaton comes to be irrelevant, since fundamentally, the life of Emperor Gaozu and the fate of the empire comes to rest in the hands of women, Chinese and Xiongnu. In the short term, it is the sage advice of the *Yanshi*, here supposedly motivated

Mair, *Wanderings on the Way: Early Taoist Tales and Parables of Chuang Tzu* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 1994), 244.

28 Hu 胡 here is translated as "barbarian." However, it could also mean "bearded."

29 *Quan Tangwen*, 758:7871.

purely by jealousy, that saves the day.[30] In the longer term, it is the real sacrifice of the *heqin* women that followed in the wake of the lovely female puppet that preserved the peace and stability of the Han dynasty.

Lin Zi 林滋: "Muren fu" 木人賦 (Rhapsody on a wooden man)

Lin Zi's "Muren fu" is just as much a fantasy as Xie Guan's rhapsody. This particular piece does, however, have an older literary precedent, given that it was inspired by a short anecdote concerning King Mu of Zhou that is preserved in the *Liezi*. A highly divisive figure, King Mu features – in what may be termed the mainstream tradition to have been handed down from antiquity – as an appalling ruler, who caused relentless chaos during his reign.[31] However, there is also a highly positive tradition about this charismatic monarch, represented by texts such as the *Mu Tianzi zhuan* 穆天子傳 (Tale of Mu, the Son of Heaven) and *Zhushu jinian* 竹書紀年 (Bamboo annals), which document his travels beyond the borders of the human realm to encounter gods and spirits.[32] The passage from the *Liezi* in which King Mu and his consort, Lady Sheng Ji 盛姬, encounter Master Yan and his amazing puppet are associated with this tradition of positive representations. The dating of the *Liezi* remains highly controversial, but this text was evidently compiled over a considerable period of time.[33] In the case of the story of Master Yan and his puppet,

30 For an overview of changing attitudes in Chinese society towards jealousy, which was always coded as a purely feminine emotion which men could not feel, see Olivia Milburn, *The Empress in the Pepper Chamber: Zhao Feiyan in History and Fiction* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2021), 110-21. Since sexual jealousy might limit the ability of elite men to have children with a wide variety of women, this distrust was traditionally very strongly condemned.

31 For a detailed analysis of this negative representation articulated in the *Shiji*, *Zuozhuan* 左傳 (Zuo's Tradition), as well as many other early texts, see Du Yong 杜勇, "Zhou Muwang fei zhongxing zhi zhu" 周穆王非中興之主, *Baoji wenli xueyuan xuebao* (*Shehui kexueban*) 寶鷄文理學院學報 (社會科學版) 42.5 (2022): 5-13.

32 These two books were discovered together in in what was believed to be the tomb of King Xiang of Wei 魏襄王 (r. 335-319 BCE) in 279 CE; see Fang Xuanling 房玄齡, *Jinshu* 晉書 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1974), 51:1432-33. The similarity in content is presumably the result of derivation from a distinctive textual tradition about King Mu, which may (on the evidence of contemporary bronze vessel inscriptions) date back to the Western Zhou; see Edward L. Shaughnessy, "The *Mu Tianzi zhuan* and King Mu Bronzes," *Bulletin of the Jao Tsung-I Academy of Sinology* 1 (2014): 55-75.

33 For detailed discussions of the dating of this complex and challenging text; see Mou Zhongjian 牟鍾鑒, "Dui *Liezi* de zai kaobian yu zai pingjia" 對列子的再考辨與再評價, *Wenshizhe* 文史哲 5 (1986): 48-54; Angus Graham, *Studies in Chinese Philosophy*

this represents a medieval addition, since this anecdote is closely related to similar Indian tales found in Buddhist sutras of wonderful artisans and their amazing wooden creations which can fool others into believing that they are human.[34] Furthermore, while King Mu is a well-documented historical figure, his consort, Lady Sheng Ji, does not appear in any transmitted text and only became known after the discovery of the *Mu Tianzi zhuan* among the Jizhong 汲冢 tomb texts during the Jin dynasty.[35] Accordingly, this Sino-Buddhist tale is likely only to have come into existence in the fourth century CE, some four hundred years prior to the composition of the rhapsody it inspired.

According to the account preserved in the *Liezi*, King Mu of Zhou encountered Master Yan and his wooden "singer" (*chang* 倡) on his return from the magical Kunlun 昆侖 mountains.[36] The king was completely deceived as to the nature of the artiste performing for him, believing that this was a human being and not a wooden puppet. As a result of this misunderstanding, his majesty was outraged when at the conclusion of his performance, *Changzhe shun qi mu er zhao wang zhi zuoyou shiqie* 倡者瞬其目而招王之左右侍妾 (The singer winked his eye and gestured to summon the king's concubines in attendance to his left and right).[37] By behaving in this way, the wooden figure openly flouts

and Philosophical Literature (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1990), 216-82; Timothy H. Barrett, "Lieh tzu," in Michael Loewe, ed., *Early Chinese Texts: A Bibliographical Guide* (Berkeley: Society for the Study of Early China and Institute of East Asian Studies, University of California, 1993), 298-308; Ji Xianlin 季羨林, *Fojiao shiwu ti* 佛教十五題 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 2007), 219-28; and Fan Ziye 范子燁, "Jiguan muren yu Yugong yishan: Ji Xianlin *Liezi* chengshu yu Xi Jin shuo xudiao" 機關木人與愚公移山: 季羨林列子成書於西晉說續貂, *Zhongguo wenhua* 中國文化 1 (2016): 235-44.

34 As noted by Ji Xianlin, *Fojiao shiwu ti*, 219-28; this story is derived from the *Jātakanidāna* (Birth stories), a compilation of tales about previous lives of the Buddha, which was translated into Chinese by Dharmarakṣa 竺法護 (c. 233-310) as the *Shengjing* 生經. For an overview of similar tales; see Zhao You, "Oneself as Another: Yantraputraka Metaphors in Buddhist Literature," *Religions* 14.4 (2023) https://doi.org/10.3390/rel1404053; Accessed 31 August 2025.

35 Guo Pu 郭璞, *Mu Tianzi zhuan zhu* 穆天子傳注 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1985), 6:33-39. Unfortunately, there is no translation of this important work into English, but a French translation exists; see Rémi Mathieu, *Le Mu tianzi zhuan* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1978).

36 *Chang* were performers who specialized in singing; see Duan Yucai 段玉裁, *Shuowen jiezi zhu* 説文解字注 (Nanjing: Fenghuang chubanshe, 2007), 666 ["Renbu" 人部].

37 *Liezi*, 180 ["Tang wen"]. Accordingly, there are occasional references to this story in English-language research on human-robot sexualized interactions; see for example Adrian David Cheok and Emma Yann Zhang, *Human-Robot Intimate Relationships* (Cham, Switzerland: Springer, 2019), 2; and Yan Wu, "Artificial Intelligence in Chinese Science Fiction: From the Spring and Autumn and Warring States Periods to the Era of Deng Xiaoping," in Stephen Cave and Kanta Dihal, eds., *Imagining AI: How the World*

the king's authority and calls into question his power to control sexual access to his womenfolk. Enraged by this effrontery, King Mu threatened Master Yan with execution:

> He immediately split open the singer in order to demonstrate to his majesty that [his creation] was all put together using leather, wood, glue, lacquer, and white, black, red, and green [paint]. The king investigated this: inside it had liver, gallbladder, heart, lungs, spleen, kidneys, intestines and stomach, while on the outside it had bones and sinews, limbs and joints, skin and peach fuzz, teeth and hair – all were artificial, but everything was complete.[38] On putting everything back together again [the wooden contraption] was just as when first seen. The king tried taking out its heart and then its mouth could not speak; he tried removing its liver, and then its eyes could not see; and when he took out its kidneys, its feet could not walk.[39]
>
> 立剖散倡者以示王，皆傅會革、木、膠、漆、白、黑、丹、青之所為。王諦料之，內則肝、膽、心、肺、脾、腎、腸、胃，外則筋骨、支節、皮毛、齒髮，皆假物也，而無不畢具者。合會復如初見。王試廢其心，則口不能言；廢其肝，則目不能視；廢其腎，則足不能步。

The story in the *Liezi* has attracted a great deal of academic attention on a number of different fronts. This represents a clear example of a Buddhist theme becoming nativized in China, with the addition of a Chinese historical background. It is also interesting because the *Liezi* is a Daoist text, and so this tale has been studied to better understand the confluence of Daoism and Buddhism in the early medieval period.[40] However, the *Liezi* anecdote is also

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Sees Intelligent Machines (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2023), 361-72, and see pages 361-62. This is not an aspect of the story which has attracted much academic attention in China, though it does figure as an important theme in modern Chinese science fiction re-imaginings of the *Liezi* story.

38 *Mao* 毛 in this line refers to vellus hair or "peach fuzz," that is the small colorless hairs that are found all over people's bodies. This is contrasted with *fa* 髮, which denotes head hair.

39 *Liezi*, 180 ["Tang wen"].

40 See for example Ge Gangyan 葛剛岩, "*Liezi* Fojiao gushi yu wenhua chuanbo de fansi" 列子佛教故事與文化傳播的反思, *Jiangxi shifan daxue xuebao* (*Zhexue shehui kexueban*) 江西師範大學學報 (哲學社會科學版) 43.6 (2010): 60-64; and Wayne Kreger, "Echo of the Master, Shadow of the Buddha: The *Liezi* as a Medieval Masters Text" (Ph.D. diss., University of British Columbia, 2016).

of important in the study of attitudes towards body and spirit in China, for this robot is made of materials like wood and leather which have been formed into the shape of human internal organs, so that only the closest examination reveals that they actually work entirely differently.[41] It is within Master Yan's powers to make a figure that appears human in every respect, can act in a life-like way, and yet his artifice fails to function in the same way as a person. It is also worth noting that this wooden creation is presented as a fundamentally sexualized figure: he is male and presents himself as not merely masculine but also very heterosexual, flirting with the king's concubines. This in turn leads to another aspect of the presentation of this figure in the *Liezi*, which is not overtly explored in this text – in eyeing up and propositioning King Mu's concubines, the wooden puppet seems to be acting under his own volition and not at the direction of Master Yan.[42] Indeed, the angry monarch promptly threatens to execute Master Yan alongside his creation. This tale therefore begins to explore the theme of a robot that has achieved sentience and thus is no longer under human control, though ultimately the king and the automaton's creator both move quickly to reestablish their authority over the wooden figure.

Some, but not all, of the themes present in the *Liezi* would make their way into Lin Zi's Tang dynasty rhapsody, which is prefaced by a single sentence: *Yi Zhou Muwang shi you jin si xi wei yun* 以周穆王時有進斯戲爲韻 (Using the rhymes in the time of King Mu of Zhou someone presented this performance).[43] The opening section of this rhapsody is concerned with the act of making the puppet in the first place and then manipulating it so that it can move. Unlike the robot of the *Liezi*, who moves automatically thanks to its superlative craftsmanship, the main figure in the Tang rhapsody is definitely a puppet, made of wood and put in motion by strings, and Lin Zi makes use of a succession

41 Edward Slingerland, *Mind and Body in Early China: Beyond Orientalism and the Myth of Holism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), 84-85. For the importance of this story in early Chinese understandings of robotics; see Zhang Chaoyang 張朝陽, "*Liezi* yuyan yu gudai jiqiren" 列子寓言與古代機器人, *Heilongjiang jiaoyu xueyuan xuebao* 黑龍江教育學院學報 6 (2005): 84-85; and Jeffry Ritchie, "I, Robot: Self as Machine in the *Liezi*," in Ronnie Littlejohn and Jeffrey Dippmann eds., *Riding the Wind with Liezi: New Perspectives on the Daoist Classic* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2011), 193-208.

42 The power imbalance between the human beings and the robot in this story, and how this relates to the wooden figure's role as a sexualized entity, are discussed in Lydia Liu, *The Freudian Robot: Digital Media and the Future of the Unconscious* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010), 243-49; and also in Ari Larissa Heinrich, *Chinese Surplus: Biopolitical Aesthetics and the Medically Commodified Body* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2018), 43-44.

43 *Quan Tangwen*, 766:7972.

of wood and tree-based metaphors to stress the arboreal nature of the (here unnamed) artisan's creation:

Who is this person, so different from others –	何伊人兮異常
So willing to humble himself to pay court to the king?	爰委質以來王
Thinking back to the beginning of its creation,	想具體之初
It all started with chopping and cutting.	既因於乃雕乃斫
But now that he has come here possessed of all his qualities,[44]	及抱材而至
Who would ever imagine that he would be so marvelous?[45]	孰知其爲棟爲梁
Originally	原夫
Everything began with cutting down a trunk,	始自攻堅
And ended with him dependent on the hands of others.	終資假手
Even though its self-control is due to less than small ingenuity,	雖克已於小巧之下
Still, in its becoming a man, it moves beyond the basic materials.	乃成人於大樸之後
Its progress is the same as leaving the earth,	來同辟地
It raises its toes, so its roots have disappeared.	舉趾而根柢則無
Its movements must follow those of the string:	動必從繩
Its tongue is tied so words there are none.	結舌而語言何有
The mind concentrated on the sliding knife has reached this point,[46]	心遊刃兮在茲
The nose stroked by the whirling axe has survived undamaged.	鼻運斤兮罔遺
Though bare ground may eventually see the appearance of Lord Tree;[47]	兀若得木公之狀

44 There is a pun here, for *cai* 材 means both "materials" (in other words, this is a puppet made from wood) and "qualities" or "talents" such as a human being would possess.

45 As in the previous line, this is a pun. *Dongliang* 棟梁 means pillars and beams of wood, but it also refers to a person of outstanding talents and abilities.

46 This image comes from the *Zhuangzi*, 117-119 ["Yangsheng zhu" 養生主], where Cook Ding 庖丁 was supposed to show superlative skills in cutting up meat, sliding his knife through the carcass. For a translation of this tale; see Mair, *Wanderings on the Way*, 26-27.

47 "Lord Tree" is a term for the pine. This is a visual pun, for the word "tree" (*mu* 木) and "lord" (*gong* 公) together make up the character for "pine" (*song* 松).

No mere clod of earth can be sculpted into a clay figure.[48]	塊然非土偶之資
Bent and straight in exact proportion:	曲直不差
Still worm free right up to the present day.	既無蠹於今日
Long and short in perfect measure:	短長合度
Happy to boast of its achievements before the regnant monarch.[49]	寧自伐於當時
Each of its kind:	莫不
Escapes forever decay and desiccation, and thus has reached this point,	脱枯槁以前來
Thanks to glue and lacquer they can make careers for themselves.	投膠漆而自進
Moving back and forth, serious and stern in appearance.	低回而氣岸方肅
Standing upright, robes waving back and forth.	佇立而衣裾屢振
Their physical beauty unchanging:	穠華不改
Confronting the peach and plum, they show themselves to be even lovelier.[50]	對桃李而自逞芳顔
Decay never attacking them:	朽質莫侵
Facing the osier or willow, they do not fear old age.	指蒲柳而詎驚衰鬢
When its hands dance and feet stamp,	既手舞而足蹈
[The puppeteer] must spin left and tug right.	必左旋而右抽
A hidden mechanism deep inside makes it move,	藏機關以中動
While artificial powder and paint make its outer appearance perfect.	假丹粉而外周
Born in the forests:	生本林間
Hoping to achieve the beauty of its companions.	苟有參乎之美
Placed in the ruler's palace:	立當君所

48 This line alludes to the story in the *Zhanguo ce* 戰國策 (Stratagems of the Warring States) in which a clay figure explains to a peach-wood image that in a flood, it will simply dissolve and return to the earth. *Jin zi, dongguo zhi taogeng ye, kexue zi yiwei ren, jiangyu xia, zishui zhi, liuzi er qu* 今子, 東國之桃梗也, 刻削子以為人, 降雨下, 淄水至, 流子而去 (However you are made from peach-wood from the eastern kingdom, and they have cut and carved you into the shape of a human being, so that when the rain falls and the Zi River rises, they will wash you away); see Zhu Zugeng 諸祖耿, *Zhanguo ce jizhu huikao* 戰國策集注匯考 (Nanjing: Fenghuang chubanshe, 2008), 564-65 [Qi ce 齊策 3: "Mengchangjun jiang ru Qin" 孟嘗君將入秦].

49 This term meaning "to boast" is derived from the *Laozi* 老子; see Wang Qianzhi 王謙之, *Laozi jiaoshi* 老子校釋 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 2000), 92 [22].

50 These two lines repeatedly make use of metaphors derived from the *Shijing*; see *Mao Shi*, 103 [Mao 24: "Hebi nongyi"].

Why should it be ashamed of a comparison with firewood?[51] 何慚柴也之儔

In this opening section, Lin Zi focuses on the creation of the puppet, and then proceeds to describe the physical beauty of the finished figure in a series of highly feminized images, in which its appearance is compared to flowers and trees. Many of the same allusions as in Xie Guan's piece can be found in Lin Zi's rhapsody. In part, this is no doubt because there are only a relatively limited set of references to sculpture and woodcarving to be found in the great canonical texts of the Chinese tradition and the key works of classical philosophy. However, it is worth noting that both Xie Guan and Lin Zi's rhapsodies both make use of the same images and metaphors related to feminine physical beauty derived from the *Shijing*. This is because both the puppets are performers: though one is female and the other male, they are obliged by their role as professional entertainers to be appealing, charming, and attractive to the eye of the beholder. The tradition of utilizing a feminized vocabulary to portray male actors and singers has attracted much research, mostly focused on the late imperial period.[52] Of particular importance is the use of the term *hua* 花 (flowers) in writings concerned with evaluating the attractiveness of actors.[53] This textual practice seems to have been established already in the Tang dynasty, and so the imagery found here reflects underlying understandings of male performers as sexualized, sexually available beings: a stereotype which could apparently also be reflected onto simulacrums like automata and puppets. Accordingly, Lin Zi could make use of floral imagery derived from an epithalamion preserved in the *Shijing* to describe the beauty of his male puppet – a song which is also quoted in Xie Guan's rhapsody:

51 *Quan Tangwen*, 766:7972.

52 See for example Sophie Volpp, "The Literary Circulation of Actors in Seventeenth Century China," *Journal of Asian Studies* 61.3 (2002): 949-84; Andrea S. Goldman, "Actors and Aficionados in Qing Dynasty Texts of Theatrical Connoisseurship," *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies* 68.1 (2008): 1-56; and Wu Cuncun and Mark Stevenson, "Speaking of Flowers: Theatre, Public Culture, and Homoerotic Writing in Nineteenth Century Beijing," *Asia Theatre Journal* 27.1 (2010): 100-29.

53 As noted by Chao Guo, "Shifting Gender Roles: Male *Dan* in Chinese Theatre" (Ph.D. diss., University of Otego, 2018), 75-79, *huapu* 花譜 (manuals of flowers) was a term applied to books about evaluating male actors' skills. Numerous late imperial works of this kind survived, some of which use the names of specific flowers such as the *Yanlan xiaopu* 燕蘭小譜 (Little manual of Yan [Beijing] orchids) of 1785.

How luxurious they are, resplendent like the peach or plum!
The granddaughter of King Ping and the son of the marquis of Qi.[54]

何彼襛矣, 華如桃李.
平王之孫, 齊侯之子.

No matter how handsome the puppet and how graceful his movements, the "Muren fu" also repeatedly reminds the reader that he is entirely artificial. In this regard, Lin Zi's rhapsody differs significantly from the *Liezi* story, which emphasizes the "reality" of the robotic singer – which is repeatedly said to have fooled King Mu of Zhou into "believing that he was a human being" (*xin ren ye* 信人也) or "thinking that he was in fact a person" (*yiwei shi ren ye* 以爲實人也).[55] Thus, the while *Liezi* puppet appears human and is sexually threatening to King Mu, the "Muren fu" puppet is definitely artificial and at the same time accepting of being the focus of same sex desire. Following this theme of the "Muren fu" presenting its wooden figure in an unthreatening way, the actions that so offended the king are handled in a curiously oblique way. As in the *Liezi*, it is made clear that the wooden figure has angered King Mu of Zhou by both moving its eyes and waving its arms, but the focus of these movements is not explained. Instead, it is stressed that these actions are "mistaken" (*wu* 誤) and "suspicious" (*yi* 疑). Accordingly, Lin Zi has placed emphasis in his rhapsody on the way that the puppet has apparently escaped the control of the puppeteer, rather than engaging directly with the theme of a social inferior attracting the attention of royal concubines in a way that challenges the monarch's control over his womenfolk:

Thus:	是則
In succession come [the steps of] his "Wuxing" dance,[56]	貫彼五行
He surpassed all other kinds of festival entertainment.[57]	超諸百戲

54 *Mao Shi*, 103 [Mao 24: "Hebi nongyi"].

55 *Liezi*, 179-180 ["Tang wen"].

56 "Wuxing" here appears to denote the name of a particular suite of dances, once performed at the temple dedicated to the founder of the Han dynasty; see *Shiji*, 10:436. According to the commentary by Pei Yin 裴駰 (fl. fifth century), "Wuxing" was a traditional Zhou dynasty dance.

57 *Baixi* 百戲 literally means "one hundred performances" and refers to all manner of entertainments, including music, dance, acting, juggling, acrobatics, and so on performed in antiquity on the occasion of festivals; see Geng Zhanjun 耿占軍 and Yang Wenxiu 楊文秀, *Han Tang Chang'an de yuewu yu baixi* 漢唐長安的樂舞與百戲 (Xi'an: Xi'an

But he mistakenly showed off his articulation by staring with his eyes,	誤穿節以瞪目
Suspiciously paraded his great strength by gesturing with his arms.	疑聳幹於奮臂
If he had been ordered to take his place above the wolfberry or catalpa,[58]	如令居杞梓之上
Then establishing his virtuous reputation would be no difficult matter.	則樹德非難
If you caused him to go first through fire and water,	若使赴湯火之前
Then his body would be burned to a crisp and his beauty taken away.	則焚軀孔易
Advancing and withdrawing in perfect harmony,	進退合依
Yet still here in the same place.	依然在斯
Never losing anything yet also never gaining anything,	既無喪無得
And all the while unaware and unconscious.	亦不識不知
Footsteps moving away from the grass and weeds:	跡異草萊
His words are lacking in ill intent.[59]	其言也無莠
His emotions remains a wooden as ever:[60]	情同木訥
His movements are the result of the presence of rods.	其行也有枝
You could say:	可謂
Hidden harmonies have given rise to a successful performance,	暗合生成
Secret maneuvers have been practiced until they are perfect.	潛因習熟
Even though his hewn form is owed to the axe head,	雖則挫身於斤斧
How could he have remained untouched in the mountain forests?	曷合守身於林麓
How appropriately –	宜乎

chubanshe, 2007); Xiao Kangda 蕭亢達, *Handai yuewu baixi yishu yanjiu* 漢代樂舞百戲藝術研究 (Beijing: Wenwu chubanshe, 2010); and Ji Wei 季偉, *Handai yuewu baixi kaoshu* 漢代樂舞百戲考述 (Zhengzhou: Henan daxue chubanshe, 2013). Many modern-day genres of entertainment have their origins in *baixi* performative traditions.

58 The wolfberry and the catalpa are fine timbers that were used in allusion to fine ministers, following a reference found in the *Zuozhuan*; see Yang Bojun 楊伯峻, *Chunqiu Zuozhuan zhu* 春秋左傳注 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1990), 1120 [Xiang 26].

59 The term used here for ill-intentioned speech is derived from the *Shijing*; see *Mao Shi*, 708 [Mao 192: "Zhengyue" 正月].

60 The wording of this line quotes the *Lunyu*, 143 [13.27: "Zilu" 子路] where Confucius praised the virtues of the "simple and modest" (*munhe* 木訥). However, *munhe* also literally means "wooden," and thus alludes to the material the puppet is made from.

[Master Yan] carved your shoulder,	削爾肩
And hollowed out your stomach.	刳爾腹
But since it caused confusion to the true lord,	既有亂於真宰
How could it provoke laughter from Mu of Zhou?[61]	寧取笑於周穆

Having raised the specter of the puppet acting in an offensive way, Lin Zi immediately quells it again by stressing that the wooden artiste is entirely inanimate. His movements are directed by the strings or rods held by the puppeteer, and any misunderstandings that arise are the result of human projections of emotions onto the wooden figure and not its intrinsic qualities. Indeed, the second half of this text argues that the puppet does not have any intrinsic qualities – he is just made of wood, after all. Lin Zi's rhapsody consistently plays with the conceit, also found in the *Liezi* passage which inspired it, that it was possible for the great artisans of remote antiquity to make a wooden figure that was entirely identical in external appearance and movement to a human being, and yet because it was not human, it could be considered entirely safe. Nevertheless, a sense of discomfort remains at the very end of this rhapsody; the king has been fooled, in public, and he is not happy about it. Although order has been reasserted and sexual boundaries confirmed, the fact remains that the king was deceived, and at least momentarily, his control over the situation slipped.

Conclusion

Both these Tang dynasty rhapsodies on puppets can be considered as pioneering works of science fiction, exploring a world in which people and robots interact without the humans being aware, for the figures made of wood, lacquer, glue, and paint are so naturalistic that they appear to be entirely lifelike. However, the relationships thus formed turn out to be fraught with dangerous misunderstandings – in Xie Guan's rhapsody, Xiongnu men become convinced that they can sexually exploit what they imagine to be a beautiful Chinese woman; while in Lin Zi's work, the Zhou king is profoundly disturbed at the idea that a handsome actor puppet might seduce the women of his harem. In these writings, wooden figures worked by strings and rods turn out to be a mechanism for exploring attitudes towards gender, sexuality, ethnicity, and class. It is because these robots look human, but are not, that the authors of

61 *Quan Tangwen*, 766:7972.

these rhapsodies can tackle the subject of (elite) male entitlement to the bodies of other people. Both puppets appear to be threatened – the female with sexual violence, the male one with execution – but the crisis is ultimately averted. To the reader, reminded repeatedly that both puppets are in fact wooden simulacra, there is no danger because neither are human beings to be hurt. However, lurking behind the text of each rhapsody is the specter of those occasions when the target of Xiongnu lust or royal jealousy is not a wooden figure but a real person.

This pair of Tang dynasty rhapsodies deal boldly with the question of artifice: the figures that are the subject of these writings are a triumph of human ingenuity. They are both apparently indistinguishable from human beings and yet they are also made from wood. Accordingly, these puppets are at once the focus of human emotions projected onto them, while at the same time it is impossible that they do more than appear to obey the demands made of them. These rhapsodies, therefore, present an interesting and unusual literary reflection on what it means to be a gendered human, and in both cases specifically a sexualized being, in a society which required extraordinary levels of obedience and acceptance of exploitation on the part of women and lower-class men alike.