

The View from Cloud Gate: Notes On the Northern Zhou Suburban Sacrificial Hymns

By Ryan Fleming¹

“Because we are in the world, we are *condemned to meaning*, and we cannot do or say anything without its acquiring a name in history.” – Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, “Preface,” p. xxii

1. Introduction

This paper is concerned with the Northern Zhou 後周 (a.k.a. 北周) (557-581 CE) dynasty's suburban sacrificial hymns (*jiao geci* 郊歌詞), which are attributed to the famous poet Yu Xin 庾信. These were hymns meant to be sung and danced to during the emperor's sacrifices to Heaven, Earth and the representatives of the five directions, which were important ceremonies of state. Every dynasty prior to the Northern Zhou (beginning with the Han) had their own versions of these hymns, and the legitimacy of the dynasty depended upon their regular, ritually appropriate performance.

This paper has two goals. First, I want to provide some historical and ritual context for these hymns, which will help explain why they were the source of what might be called “historical anxiety.” As will be discussed below, the ritual procedures and music of these state sacrifices were reconstructions based on plundered musical instruments and literary records – and yet, they were seen as providing a historical continuity between the past and the present. Exactly how these dances could be at once innovative and representative of the ancient past became a crucial issue for the Northern Zhou, albeit one that was best addressed implicitly. This discussion will touch upon the ephemeral nature of dance, gesture and music, and to what extent the written word can supplement these more ephemeral human activities without thereby losing something.

Second, I want to point out some ways in which the Northern Zhou hymns themselves respond to and attempt to overcome this anxiety. I argue that they do so through the practice of mythography, or the writing and rewriting of myths. These hymns picked up the pieces of a partially lost tradition and reconstructed it by introducing new voices and new ideas, in the process of which new ritual and mythic structures were brought into being.

Of course, in some sense, every document of a religious, poetic or ritual nature is a response to its own historical and social context, and there is no need to bring in the troubled concept

¹ I would like to express my heartfelt thanks to Michael Dufresne for generously taking the time to read over an early draft of this paper, make valuable suggestions and offer constructive criticism. Any and all errors lingering in this text are my own.

of “myth” to make this point. But I think that we gain something by treating these hymns as mythographic texts. The hymns are necessarily formulaic, largely following the vocabulary and structure of hymns of past dynasties. But in the “cracks” of these hymns, the ingenuity of their authorship peaks through, offering concerted reflections on history, ritual, and literature. They are, in short, evidence of, and incitements to, *thought*. And for lack of a better alternative, I want to assert that this thought is mythical in nature: while they may not tell stories in the same way that the Greek myths do, they are consciously attempting to write the gods, as well as the divinity of the person conducting these sacrifices, into being.

So far as I can tell, these hymns have not been studied in English, except for a few passing remarks. The prevailing attitude towards them seems to be that they are journeymen’s work – a prestigious and steady job for a languishing poet exiled to the frozen north, but which yields little worthy of comment. They have received somewhat more substantial treatment in Chinese scholarship, although literary and/or philosophical readings of the hymns remain difficult to find.²

This paper cannot pretend to comprehensively analyze these hymns, but it does hope to offer up some modest evidence that they are more interesting than they might at first appear. In what follows, I will first discuss the historical anxieties surrounding these hymns, and the ritual context in which they were to be performed. I will then touch upon their purported authorship, and discuss a memorial written by Yu Xin after seeing them performed for the first time. Finally, some points of interest within the hymns themselves will be outlined and analyzed.

2. The Dance in History

The suburban sacrificial hymns of the Northern Zhou were born of ritual requirements, and before discussing the particular meaning of these hymns, we need to first touch upon the extent to which ritual itself can be said to have meaning. Frits Staal, for example, has famously postulated that ritual might well have originally been, at some “pre-linguistic stage of development,” an inherently “meaningless” thing – a kind of empty syntax, or a system of grammar without reference. Against the objection that rituals we find in societies across the world seem to be meaningful in ways that ritualists can explain using language, Staal suggests that “referential meaning could have been introduced at a later [historical] stage.”³ This does not preclude the idea that rituals could theoretically have had other, non-linguistic kinds of meaning, but it does assume that for us as modern people to ask “for the meaning of ritual... means asking for an explanation in language.”⁴ Wanting to resist this tendency, Staal asks “whether ritual is perhaps unlike language and like dancing, about which Isadora Duncan said: ‘If I could tell you what it meant, there would be no point in dancing it.’”⁵

It is not my intention here to critique (or advocate) Staal’s position on the meaning of ritual, or lack thereof.⁶ It is, however, interesting to take note of Staal’s use of dance as an analogy for

² For instance, the groundbreaking study of the music and dances of the Northern and Southern dynasties by Liao Wei-ch’ing 廖蔚卿 does not, unfortunately, offer much in terms of analysis regarding the *content* of these hymns. Cf. Liao Wei-ch’ing 廖蔚卿, “*Nanbeichao yuewu kao* 南北朝樂舞考.”

³ Frits Staal, “Ritual Syntax,” pp. 137-8. For further development of this argument, cf. also Frits Staal, “The Meaninglessness of Ritual.”

⁴ Staal, “Ritual Syntax,” p. 120.

⁵ Staal, “Ritual Syntax,” p. 120.

⁶ For an important discussion on the impact of Staal’s position in studies of Daoist religion and Chinese ritual traditions, cf. Poul Andersen, “Concepts of Meaning in Chinese Ritual.”

a ritual without reference, since in the case of the suburban sacrifices of the Northern Zhou, the dances that formed a crucial part of these rituals were seen as *history*: they were thought to “hold within them the Six Generations (*bei liudai* 備六代)” i.e., the six periods of ancient Chinese history which began with the Yellow Emperor and culminated with the Zhou.⁷ In this ritual context at least, it was precisely *because* the dances had referential content that they needed to be danced: they evoked the past and thereby rendered the present legitimate. The cruel paradox, however, was that these history-bearing dances were all too easily lost to the ravages of time.

The *History of the Sui* (*Suishu* 隋書) records that in the first year of Emperor Gong of the Western Wei 魏恭帝 (r. 554-557), the Western Wei’s southern rival the Liang Dynasty 梁 was conquered, its musical instruments taken and given to Wei ministers.⁸ Six officials of music were appointed to try and recreate the ritual music of the Liang, who made the following report to the Emperor:

“The music of the Six Ancient Reigns is glorious indeed! The rhythms of its songs and the manner of its dances, however, are long lost to the vacuities of the past, such that we cannot scrutinize them. If we are to properly model ourselves on the ancients, can we do otherwise than start from this? We would do well to cling to the standards, put our songs and dances in order (*zhi* 制),⁹ and make sacrifices to the Five *Di*, the Sun, the Moon, and the Stars.”¹⁰

Then the ministers began the task of putting their sacrificial songs and dances in order, “using the music of the Yellow Emperor, singing to the ‘Great Bells,’ dancing the ‘Cloud Gate.’”¹¹ The author of the *History of the Sui* comments, however, that “though they wrote lyrics, they were in the end unable to put them into practice.”¹²

The conquering Western Wei faced a problem that we still face when dealing with the ritual dances of pre-modern China. Before cinema perfected the art of the death-mask, and was able to “mummify” change itself, how could one hope to preserve a dance?¹³ We do not know the steps of the dances performed during the Northern Zhou suburban sacrifices, or any of the other dynastic sacrifices for that matter. Nor do we know what the music sounded like. The only hope for preservation, paradoxically, was (and still is) innovation – only it must be a specific kind of

⁷ *Sui shu* 隋書, 14.332. Note that this “Zhou” refers to the more ancient Zhou 周 dynasty (1046 – 256 BCE), and not the Northern Zhou that is the subject of this paper.

⁸ The Western Wei, like all Northern Dynasties of this time period, was ruled by Xianbei 鮮卑 (i.e., non-Han) people, whom the writers of the official dynastic histories tended to portray as constantly pining after Han Chinese traditions. The extent to which this was actually the case, however, is up for debate. The *History of the Sui*’s account of the Western Wei conquest of the Liang, therefore, should probably be read with a grain of salt.

⁹ This translation is certainly open to criticism: to put in order what one does not have is obviously impossible. The reader might wonder why I did not translate this as simply “cling to the standards, and create the songs and dances.” I can only say in my defense that the word “create” smacked of a hubris that I do not detect in the Chinese. Translating the verb *zhi* as “to put in order” therefore seems most appropriate: these ministers did not, I think, see this as an act of *creation* pure and simple, but perhaps thought of it more along the lines of editing that, due to extenuating circumstances, must take more liberties than usual.

¹⁰ *Sui shu*, 14.331-2: 「六樂尚矣，其聲音之節，舞蹈之容，寂寥已絕，不可得而詳也。但方行古人之事，不可本於茲乎？自宜依準，制其歌舞，祀五帝日月星辰。」

¹¹ *Sui shu*, 14.332: 用黃帝樂，歌大呂，舞雲門。 The language of the last two phrases is taken from the *Zhouli* 周禮.

¹² *Ibid.*: 雖著其文，竟未之行也。

¹³ For an account of cinema as that which can “mummify” change, cf. André Bazin, “The Ontology of the Photographic Image,” esp. pp. 14-15.

innovation, one that adhered to certain rules and standards.

After the establishment of the Northern Zhou dynasty, Emperor Ming 周明帝 (r. 557-560) began to reorder the music of the now defunct Wei, but “did not reach an elegant and proper standard.”¹⁴ It was only in the first year of the reign of Emperor Wu (周武帝, r. 560-578) that a new set of dances, along with accompanying lyrics, was begun.

The *History of the Sui* says that it was Emperor Wu who “created” (zao 造) these dances, but the “Chronicle of Yu Xin’s Life” (*Yu Xin nianpu* 庾信年譜), written by Ni Fan 倪璠, the Qing dynasty commentator whose *Commentary on the Collected Works of Yu Zishan* [i.e. Yu Xin] was first published in 1687, states that “many of the lyrics (辭) for these dances came from the hand of Yu Xin.”¹⁵ This seems to be generally accepted by scholars, and echoes of the lyrics in other pieces written by Yu Xin seem to indicate that he was both familiar and comfortable enough with these lyrics of state to use them in other writings.¹⁶ Perhaps, however, it was not polite to acknowledge that a poet had taken the August Emperor’s prerogative of penning the state hymns.

I do not know for certain whether Yu Xin wrote the lyrics for these state sacrifices and dances. Having no evidence to the contrary, and in the wake of scholarship unquestioningly assigning authorship of these lyrics to Yu Xin,¹⁷ I am inclined to believe that he did. But the extent to which he is responsible for the content of these hymns remains a matter of speculation.

In ancient and Medieval Chinese, dead dances calcified and became poetry. It therefore makes some sort of sense to call on a poet when attempting to resurrect a lost dance. Yu Xin, or whoever authored these hymns, managed to make sense of the rituals of the past with only a literary record of those rituals. This is no small feat, for when a ritual is no longer performed, it dies a death that insults the understanding of the living. Henceforth no anthropology can explain it, no philosophy can render it into wisdom or folly – only myth, or a mythic kind of literature, can make those rituals present for us, and make the names that history has granted them dance again. This does not, however, amount to a repetition of the past, and we must be fully aware that this literature is a present perception gleaned from the hidden parts of relics: the dead might be revivable, but they certainly will not be as they once were.

3. The Sorrow of Exile and the Joys of Music

Given the fact that Yu Xin was the greatest poet of his age, and conveniently located in the Northern Zhou capital, it is understandable that a Northern Zhou emperor might ask for his assistance in writing sacrificial hymns. But from the perspective of Chinese literary history’s depiction of Yu Xin, it was an uncharacteristic thing for Yu Xin to do. Ni Fan asserts that “after

¹⁴ *Sui shu*, 14.332: 明帝踐阼, 雖革魏氏之樂, 而未臻雅正。

¹⁵ Ni Fan, 《庾子山集注》(hereafter referred to as *Collected Works*), p. 32 (entry under the second year of Jiande 建德二年): 其辭多出於子山之手。

¹⁶ The most striking instance I can find of this is a line in a song to be sung during the Rounded Hill Sacrifice (cf. *Collected Works*, p. 422 《皇夏》), which is reproduced in a memorial to Emperor Wu. Cf. 功臣不死王事請門襲封表 (also referred to as 請功臣襲封表), in *Collected Works*, pp. 549-52, on p. 551: 幽顯對揚, 神人咫尺. This couplet will be discussed further below.

¹⁷ Guo Maoqian 郭茂倩, Lu Qinli 逯欽立 and Liao Wei-ch’ing all assign authorship to Yu Xin, no doubt relying on the fact that they were included in Yu Xin’s *Collected Works*. On the other hand, neither the *History of the Sui* passage, the various biographies of Yu Xin in the official histories, nor the preface to his collected works written by Yuwen You 宇文逌 mention Yu Xin’s connection to these hymns. The fact that Yuwen You edited the original collection of Yu Xin’s writings while Yu Xin was still alive makes it likely that the author would have had some editorial control over the contents, but because the earliest edition we have of his *Collected Works* dates to the Song dynasty, we have no way of confirming that its original contents correspond to what is currently included therein. In short, those hoping for harder proof of this ascription of authorship should not hold their breath, but may, if they are so inclined, refrain from reading further.

Yu Xin entered through the pass [and went North], everything he wrote has sorrow (*ai* 哀) in it.”¹⁸ Yet the Northern Zhou’s sacrificial hymns seem to be the exception to this rule. How could that single word “sorrow,” which has come to signify Yu Xin’s life for so many of his readers, permeate something as important as the songs that accompany a dynasty’s legitimating rituals?

This becomes all the more incongruous once we realize what the emotional content of this word indicates in Yu Xin’s case. For this kind of “sorrow” is tantamount to exile.

Exile is traumatic – meaning, perhaps, that trying to describe it is as overwhelming as experiencing it. Yu Xin’s exile is, however, one of the most frequently described exiles in Chinese literary history, and we need not dwell on the facts of it too much here. After his native Liang Dynasty suffered a series of military defeats, conquests and civil wars, Yu Xin was sent as an ambassador to the northern state of Western Wei, only to be forced to remain in the north from 554 to the end of his life.¹⁹ James Hightower argues that the fact that Yu Xin “had come [north] initially on a peace mission was reason enough to regard himself as a failure; that he compromised his loyalty to the Liang by accepting office and honors from the [Northern Zhou] must have contaminated any relief he might have felt at his generous treatment in exile.”²⁰ Because of his former high standing in the Liang court and his continuing poetic prowess, however, his exile was not nearly as hard as it might have been: after the fall of the Liang capital of Jiangling, his surviving family members were brought to Chang’an to be with him.²¹ Nevertheless, Yu Xin’s exile was colored by the sense of having lost “an entire era, a way of life.”²² Almost thirty years of his life would be spent outside of that way of life, a leftover of that era, and his most frequently discussed poems consist of meditations on that longing.

In contrast, his lyrics for the sacrificial hymns of the Northern Zhou dynasty seem to be all-too frequently passed over in relative silence. For these hymns were written to be *sung* (sacrifices being musical as much as ritual affairs), and though it was hypothetically *possible* for music to be sorrowful, it was certainly not *desirable*.

Music, the “Record of Music (*Yueji* 樂記)” asserts, is “the means whereby the ancient kings adorned their happiness.”²³ It is a fitting adornment: music (*yue* 樂) was linguistically close enough to joy (*le* 樂) to justify using the same character for both words.²⁴ This is not to say that music is incapable of expressing sorrow, but only that even the most destitute notes hold some delight within them. Music cannot escape joy, for it finds joy in its own generation.²⁵ And yet, this does not mean that one can be reckless with music. Great care must be taken with it, as any musical mood threatens to expand without restraint until it has painted the whole world in its own particular joys. It needs to be communal, harmonizing – the legitimacy of the sovereignty it adorns depends on it.

Such harmonizing, communal work is hardly a fitting scene for an exile’s songs of dejection, even as learned and resourceful an exile as Yu Xin. When trying to delight the gods and cast

¹⁸ 註釋庾集題辭, in *Collected Works*, p. 4: 予謂子山入關而後, 其文篇篇有哀。For an alternate translation of this line, cf. Luo Yiyi, pp. 11-2.

¹⁹ For a more detailed summary, cf. William T. Graham, *The Lament for the South*, pp. 8-14.

²⁰ Graham & Hightower, “Yü Hsin’s Songs of Sorrow,” p. 7.

²¹ Cf. Tian Xiaofei, *Beacon Fire and Shooting Stars*, p. 390.

²² Tian, p. 392.

²³ Sun Xidan 孫希旦, comm., *Liji jijie* 禮記集解, vol. 2 (hereafter referred to as *Records*), p. 1035: 先王之所以飾喜也。

²⁴ Though this takes us beyond the purview of this paper’s subject, it is worth noting the Old Chinese readings of this character, which William Baxter and Laurent Sagart reconstruct as “[r]^hawk” for *le* and “[ŋ]^hrawk” for *yue*. Cf. *Old Chinese: A New Reconstruction*, p. 297.

²⁵ Cf. *Records*, p. 1008: 樂, 樂其所自生; 而禮, 反其所自始。

light upon the obscurities of the past, it is not hospitable to admit, let alone find a kind of joy in, one's own sadness. The suburban sacrificial hymns are not read as representative works of any poet, even though there are plenty of cases of exceptional poet-ritualists being asked to write or help with the hymns of state sacrifices.²⁶ Yu Xin, although a master at interweaving his own life story with the religious and literary history of China, could not but put aside the great obsession that some commentators assure us informs all his work. Like a good ritualist should, he gives precedent to the ritually appropriate emotions.

It therefore seems inappropriate to read these hymns through the received interpretation of Yu Xin's biography. Yet this is not to say that Yu Xin has nothing to tell us about these hymns. His *Memorial in Celebration of the New Music* (*He xinyue biao* 賀新樂表), presented upon first seeing and hearing these sacrificial hymns being performed, gives us an invaluable, albeit embellished, account of these hymns from the perspective of an audience member.²⁷ Our source notes that this was performed in the winter of the second year of the Jiande reign period in Chongxin Palace, (崇信殿) on the first day of the 10th month.²⁸ It must have been cold. The hundred officers were called in to observe, and the first lines of his missive make it appear as though Yu Xin is speaking on behalf of all those present. Here he is an obedient vassal, reacting to the performance with a proper level of awe and reverence. And if a "proper" introduction to these hymns is wanted, there is no better place to turn.

4. "Brightening The Opaque" – A Memorial on The New State Hymns

Music is not, in itself, an obscure thing. It bridges that distance so often felt between a subject and its object of attention: as Merleau-Ponty states, a subject cannot be said to "possess the musical or sensible ideas, precisely because they are negativity or absence circumscribed; they possess us."²⁹ The paradox of music, in this understanding at least, is that it is a human invention that ends up reinventing ourselves. It brightens what is mysterious in us, replaces the murkiness of lived experience with the certainty of an overwhelming affect. And when music and dance are felt to evoke the past (which is where both the gods and the ancestors live), it can awe us into feeling as if we ourselves are a part of that past, as if we are ourselves divine.

Yu Xin's memorial gives no indication that the hymns came from his hand: he merely praises the hymns as one possessed. But in the course of his praising, he shows us what these hymns were intended to do: harmonize the present with the weight of the past, as well as the weight of the world.

The opening lines begin with a cosmic reckoning of music, interweaving the landscape into its harmonies:

"Your servant has heard that when Heaven and Earth interflow in their movements, then thunder emerges as bass-note; when the sages complete their tasks, the wind moves in rhythm. Thus, with the virtues of the Six Ages which lie in the *gong* note of the hymn "Xianchi 咸池,"

²⁶ Kevin Jensen points out that in the Wei-Jin period, four poets have extant sacrificial ballet hymns: Wang Can 王粲, Fu Xuan 傅玄, Xun Xu 荀勗 and Zhang Hua 張華 (cf. "Wei-Jin Sacrificial Ballets: Reform versus Conservation", p. 4). Guo Maoqian's collection of *yuefu* poetry adds Yan Yanzhi 顏延之, Xie Zhuang 謝莊, Chu Yuan 褚淵, Xie Chaozong 謝超宗, Wang Jian 王儉, Xie Tiao 謝朓, Jiang Yan 江淹 and Shen Yue 沈約 to the list of pre-Sui dynasty hymn writers/editors (cf. Guo Maoqian 郭茂倩, 《樂府詩集》中華書局, 1998, chapters 1-4). It should also be noted that the hymns of the Northern Qi dynasty were written anonymously.

²⁷ 賀新樂表, in *Collected Works*, pp. 511-6.

²⁸ *Collected Works*, p. 511: 冬十月甲辰.

²⁹ Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible*, p. 151 (*The Intertwining – The Chiasm*)

one can tune the mountains and valleys; when the winds from the eight directions enter into the performance of the hymn “Chengyun 承雲,” the human and divine suffer no tumult.”³⁰

Music, in other words, is simultaneously an event *in* the world and a harmonizing *of* the world.

Following this comes a panegyric of the Northern Zhou dynasty’s founder, who “embodied his state and forged paths through wilderness, established offices and divided tasks, changed the [Western] Wei into the [Northern] Zhou, altered the Airs and corrected the Elegies.”³¹ This last act (referring to the editing of songs and poems), far from a distortion of the past, is portrayed as what allows history to inform the present. Yu Xin then represents the current Emperor Wu’s reorganizing of the hymns as a ritual positioning of the past: it is Emperor Wu’s correctives that allow for the “study of the eight tones, the investigation of the six eras, and the investment of the [former ruling families of] the Jin and Wei dynasties as regional Kings, just as the Yin and Zhou dynasties instituted the Three Reverences.”³² A precarious tightrope is walked here – Yu Xin is careful to praise the unique accomplishments of Emperor Wu and simultaneously emphasize his ritually reverent attitude towards the past.

After this, we are told that the sacrificial hymns “move the Heavens and the Earth, commune with divinity, praise the powers of the Highest,”³³ and brighten images (*xiang* 象) of the opaque.”³⁴ Such a grandiose statement can be easily dismissed as empty rhetoric, but it naturally follows from Yu Xin’s earlier claims: music having the ability to change the world, it is not surprising that this sovereign and expertly undertaken performance will create a historical, and cosmic, continuity. It both harkens to and consummates the past, rendering it meaningful for the present once again. And it brightens those ever-elusive (but ever-enticing) images that clutter the night sky, telling half-hidden tales of gods and heroes. The hymns will brighten those parts of time and the world where divinity seems to lurk, and bring it to bear on the present.

References to the Yellow Emperor and his Cloud Gate dance, as well as a dance reenacting King Wu of Zhou’s conquest of the Shang, are offered as examples of performances that can “incorporate the Three Names [of “Heaven,” “Earth” and “Humanity”],³⁵ and harmonize all in

³⁰ *Collected Works*, p. 511: 臣聞天地順動，則雷出為豫；聖人成功，則風行有節。故六德在《咸池》之宮，山谷可調；八風入《承雲》之奏，人神不雜。

³¹ *Collected Works*, p. 511: 體國經野，設官分職，變魏為周，移風正雅。

³² *Collected Works*, p. 512: 故得參考八音，研精六代，封晉、魏為二王，序殷、周為三恪。In an annotation on the last phrase of this line, Ni Fan quotes from the *Zuozhuan* (from the 25th year of Lord Xiang), wherein it is stated that a certain Lord Hu was invested in the kingdom of Chen to complete the “Three Reverences.” This quote, however, does not clarify what these three Reverences actually were. In a footnote to their recent translation of the *Zuozhuan*, Durrant, Schaberg and Lee note that the *Records* suggest that these refer to the descendants of the three sage kings the Yellow Emperor, Yao and Shun, while Du Yu, a commentator on the *Zuozhuan* text, claims that this refers to the three dynasties before the Zhou: the Yu, Xia and Shang. Cf. *Zuo Tradition*, p. 1150, ft# 777.

³³ It is unclear, at least to me, whether this refers to the High God of the Heavens (天帝) or the semi-divine monarchs of the past. As it could very well be both, I leave the translation purposefully ambiguous here.

³⁴ *Collected Works*, p. 513: 足以感天地而通神明，康帝德而光玄象。The word *xiang* 象 here most likely refers to specifically celestial images, *xuan* 玄 being the ritual “color” (*se* 色) of the sky: cf. Ni Fan’s annotation on this line in *Collected Works*, p. 514, note #11: “《易》曰：「天玄而地黃。」以天色玄，故云玄象。” “Color” however, does not seem like the right word here, especially given our understanding of color as a quality of light – it is tantamount to talking about the “color” of a shadow. I am inclined to say rather that *xuan* is in this instance a quality of depth, not light *per se* – the depth of the sky. Paul Kroll’s dictionary defines it as “the quality of permitting the passage of light but without making visible what is on the other side,” as the light of the stars penetrate the night sky but do not thereby reveal their ‘shapes’ (Kroll, p. 519).

³⁵ Following Ni Fan’s note here, which points to a passage in the 《太平經》：形體有三名：天，地，人。

a single era.”³⁶ This will be relevant when discussing the hymns themselves in the following section, but for now we will simply suggest that the first reference was prompted by the fact that the dances of the Northern Zhou’s sacrifices took their name “Cloud Gate” (*Yunmen* 雲門) from the legend of the Yellow Emperor. This capacity for names to survive the vicissitudes of history gives them great power, which the hymns are eager to capitalize on.

The final lines of the memorial focus on the audience’s reaction, comparing them to animals swayed by music:

“In ancient times even a fish of the depths, on hearing a tune, would still risk a flash of its scales; a stabled horse, hearing strings, could still raise its head and whinny.³⁷ We, your servants, truly pale before the one who knows the tone, and dare not forget such joys as these! Were we commanded to describe the tones and pitch-pipes, this would set us into deep meditation – we can merely note its clinging and clanging,³⁸ and take this as our pleasure.”³⁹

Here music is seen not as an answer to questions posed, or the wordless expression of our thoughts. Music is the gift of feeling itself – an affect that cannot be described, and yet takes possession of anything that hears it. These final lines give us a description of the power of art to possess us – even, we might suggest, art that has come from our own hands.

This is a more subtle understanding (one might almost say “theory”) of the interplay of musical performance, history and affect than that presented in a later memorial Yu Xin wrote (*He ping Ye du biao* 賀平鄴都表) to congratulate the emperor on the Northern Zhou dynasty’s conquest of Ye 鄴, the capital of the neighboring Northern Qi 北齊 dynasty. This latter memorial was written in the sixth year of Jiande, four years after the sacrificial hymns were completed. Yu Xin at one point comments: “The music of the Six Eras was all laid out, but could not sing of this Divine Martiality.”⁴⁰ While the previous document had praised music’s ability to harmonize the past and the present, here conquest is the one thing that defies musical representation. Seen in the role of conqueror, Emperor Wu of the Northern Zhou breaks with the past; seen as the director of the state sacrifices, dances and music, he is a conductor manipulating time and space. Perhaps Yu Xin was trying to hide a blunt truth, which he had himself lived through: while music and ritual establish livable worlds, conquest desecrates those worlds. In the wake of such destruction, poets, ritualists and musicians are forced back into the Herculean labors of bringing together the past, the present and the gods into a single performance, such that we might be possessed once again.

Yu Xin’s earlier memorial, then, gives us a rubric by which to judge the Northern Zhou hymns. But do the hymns fulfill the purpose the memorial outlines? Do they allow the past and the gods to possess us, and envelop the lived world in its harmonies?

³⁶ *Collected Works*, p. 513: 遂乃包括三名, 克諧一代。

³⁷ Following Ni Fan’s gloss of *yangmo* 仰秣 as “The laughter of a horse” (馬笑) which seems to come from Gao You’s 高誘 gloss on a line from the *Huainanzi* 淮南子。

³⁸ Xu Yimin 許逸民 usefully provides a reference to a line from the “Record of Music” here for context: “When the gentleman listens to something, he does not merely listen to its clinging and clanging.”

³⁹ *Collected Works*, p. 516: 昔淵魚聽曲, 尚得聳鱗; 樞馬聞絃, 猶能仰秣。臣等誠愧知音, 敢忘悅豫! 若使詳其音律, 是所邈然, 但能記其鏗鏘, 於斯為幸。

⁴⁰ *Collected Works*, p. 505: 六樂俱陳, 無以歌其神武。

5. The View from Cloud Gate

"I am the absolute source, my existence does not stem from my antecedents, from my physical and social environment; instead it moves out towards them and sustains them, for I alone bring into being for myself (and therefore into being in the only sense that the word can have for me) the traditions which I elect to carry on, or the horizon whose distance from me would be abolished – since that distance is not one of its properties – if I were not there to scan it with my gaze." – Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, "Preface," ix.

Ritual seems at first glance to be a poor device for the historian: it appears largely mechanical, resistant to change and concerned solely with its own indefinite repetition. But once we cast doubt on the possibility of repetition *per se*, and propose that no ritual can ever really be perfectly repeated, ritual becomes a more dynamic, and contingent, thing: something more akin to writing poetry, history or myth. The imperfection of ritual's repetitions, in other words, gives it a voice.

The Northern Zhou hymns expand the repertoire of what a sacrificial hymn can contain: they incorporate "theoretical" sources and language, and they also include surprisingly "personal" statements. Though most of the imagery in these hymns can be found, in one form or another, in previous hymns, there are slivers of difference that make them unique.

These slivers of difference, these attempted repetitions that never quite perfectly reproduce themselves, render ritual historically relevant. Ritual may or may not be meaningful in and of itself, but it *becomes* meaningful once we situate ourselves within its ever-broken circles of repetition, *affirm* those circles of repetition – just as one mends the cracks of a lacquered bowl, thereby affirming a person's use of it and making it unique. Yu Xin had only a cracked and imperfect tradition to work with, but for those who rise to the occasion, such cracks are space enough to engender a world of one's own.

These sacrificial hymns are therefore, despite their seemingly formulaic nature, greater and more complex than I can attempt to summarize here. But I do want to weave a thread through these hymns that takes into account their unique contributions to the genre: a willingness to be more "theoretical" than his predecessors, and also an incorporation of statements that are uniquely dialogical (or "personal").

A. Ritualizing the Philosophical – The Hymns of Sacrifice to Heaven and Earth

The Northern Zhou hymns are appropriately concerned with the ritual they are meant to accompany, and descriptions of the gestures meant to take place at certain moments in the ritual are frequent. But they also have moments that are unabashedly "philosophical," or at least that take a more theoretical attitude towards the proceedings. They are explicitly concerned with the metaphysics of the *ritual* itself, which tended to be sub-text in previous dynastic hymns, far more than with the gods to whom sacrifice is being offered. The effect of this, however, is to render philosophical thought appropriately ritualistic. These musings on the metaphysics of the ritual are not excused or divorced from the proceedings of the ritual, but are instead introduced so as to engender a ritual effect of their own.

When, for example, Yu Xin references the *Xunzi* 荀子 in a hymn ("The Mandate of the State lies in its rituals, the Mandate of our Lord lies in Heaven"⁴¹), an astute listener might be startled by its prosaic origins,⁴² but it is perfectly ritually appropriate. For this line is to be sung while

the Emperor drinks wine blessed by Heaven, and thus underscores that the Emperor is at this moment drinking in his legitimacy to rule, while the ritual itself assures the empire that it has contributed to this. It is a bold move to risk making the state hymns sound “colloquial” for the sake of a perfect reference.⁴³

If Yu Xin is more willing to use prosaic language in his hymns than his predecessors, he is also hesitant to describe divine visitations directly. Instead, he takes pains to emphasize the ways in which the rituals at hand intertwine the invisible and the visible, the divine and the human. The Han and Jin dynasty hymns included in their songs quick-paced descriptions of divine visitations, the speed of which were rhetorically emphasized by use of three-character lines.⁴⁴ Yu Xin includes no such descriptions in the sacrifices to Heaven and Earth: the lyrics of the Northern Zhou hymns are resolutely modest in their claims, careful to never allow the poetic perspective to exceed the bounds of the visible.⁴⁵ There is no mention of “divine chariots” (*shen zhi jia* 神之駕) or “the hundred spirits respectfully listening” (*bailing songting* 百靈竦聽), as there was in the hymns of the Northern Qi dynasty.⁴⁶ In the sacrifice to Heaven, the climactic moment of divine visitation takes place during the newly created “Yong” 雍 hymn,⁴⁷ to be played when the offerings are removed from the altar. Even here, however, Yu Xin cleverly ambiguates the god of Heaven and the Son of Heaven (i.e., the emperor), such that the listener/reader is left unsure whether the song refers to the god receiving the sacrifice or the emperor who has offered it.⁴⁸ This is done at precisely the point in the ritual that is most likely to appear underwhelming: nothing could be more disappointing than seeing one’s offerings carried away by mortal hands

⁴¹ *Collected Works*, p. 427: 國命在禮，君命在天。The *Xunzi* makes a similar statement in two chapters (*Qiang guo* 彊國 and *Tian lun* 天論), but in both instances the term opposing “state” is not “our Lord” but “the people” (人). Yu Xin’s slight modification fits the line to the ritual significance of the moment.

⁴² The philosophical chapters of the *Xunzi* are not, it need hardly be emphasized, particularly admired for their poetry. The repetition of *zai* 在 here has, as far as I could discover, only one precedent in the sacrificial hymns of past dynasties: a line from the Liu-Song dynasty’s “Song for Welcoming and Seeing off the Gods (迎送神歌),” ascribed to Yan Yanzhi 顏延之: “The ascent of accompanying [ancestors] takes place in the capital, the descent of power takes place amongst the people” (陟配在京，降德在民).

⁴³ Other, even more striking instances of colloquial language can be found: for instance, in the last couplet of the *Huang Xia* 皇夏 hymn to be sung during the sacrifice to the Earth (*Collected Works*, p. 436). After describing the offerings of “Buried jade, covered up meat – store its fragrance, collect its *qi*,” the hymn ends with an act of naming: “This is called ‘Approaching the Obscure,’ and completes this Earthen intent (瘞玉埋俎，藏芬斂氣。是曰就幽，成斯地意).” A phrase like “this is called” (*shi yue* 是曰) is not to be found in earlier dynastic hymns.

⁴⁴ Cf. the Han dynasty song “Hua Yeye (華燁燁)” in Guo Maoqian, p. 8, as well as the Jin 晉dynasty’s “Hymn Feasting the Gods in Heaven’s Suburb” (天郊饗神歌) and “Hymn Feasting the Gods in Earth’s Suburb” (地郊饗神歌) in Guo Maoqian, pp. 12-3.

⁴⁵ And as Fu Xuan’s 傅玄hymn for the sacrifice to the Earth (地郊饗神歌) explicitly remarked, the gods are largely invisible even in their visitation, giving only the faintest suggestion of their presence. This does not, however, dissuade him from lingering on their elusive majesty: “The body of the Earthen gods (*qi* 祇) has neither form nor image. They are sunken into Grand Obscurity, they cavernously commune with the undifferentiated. The emergence of the Earthen gods is a hidden hypothetical. Yet these spirits are not distant – the mother of the world. The coming of the Earthen gods leaves behind a vista of light. They shine as if present, yet the end is murky, murky!” (祇之體，無形象。潛泰幽，洞忽荒。祇之出，夢若有。靈無遠，天下母。祇之來，遣光景。昭若存，終冥冥), etc.

⁴⁶ The second line of the opening hymn of the Round Hill sacrifice (to Heaven), which reads “The Divine Light not yet descended, the wind reverent” (神光未下風肅然), is a surprising statement of absence. It seems to have been surprising enough to have caused Guo Maoqian to alter the line in his compendium to read “The Divine Light descends toward us, the wind reverent” 神光來下風肅然. Guo Maoqian, p. 45.

⁴⁷ This was another innovation in sacrificial hymns specific to the Northern Zhou dynasty: no dynasty before, save the Zhou itself, had felt it necessary to write a new “Yong” hymn.

⁴⁸ It should also be remarked here that the poem upon which this is based, the “Yong” hymn in the *Book of Songs* (#282), is solely concerned with the Son of Heaven, and does not describe Heaven itself. The only mention of the deity comes when it is remarked that the Son of Heaven’s “appeasement reaches to August Heaven” (燕及皇天).

without so much as a hint that something special has happened. The hymn ends with images of lingering joys, as if, under the illusion of a mundane spectacle, we have been tricked out of glimpsing Heaven itself. There are no chariot tracks or hoofprints to be seen, yet a misty red dawn seems to suddenly hold hints of divinity within it.⁴⁹

The reticence of these hymns towards the gods does not, however, undercut the efficacy of the ritual gestures and offerings they accompany. There is a definite faith that if only one can “take one’s methods from Heaven” one will “bring down Its everlasting blessings.”⁵⁰ Analogy and ambiguity are used to insure the reflexivity of the human and the divine, the obscure and the manifest – at least within the space of the ritual itself. If one chooses not to explicitly sing of the visitation of the gods, one can still rest assured that the gods are nevertheless involved.

One variation of the *Huang Xia* 皇夏 hymn, to be played as the emperor ascends the altar, makes this explicit. After the first lines establish the cosmic efficacy of the Round Hill, the Emperor is said to “reach the place of *yang*, like the rising of the sun.”⁵¹ His manner, the hymn continues, is reverent, pious, and grave. His sacrificial masters and scribes lay out his offerings, an “opaque symbol” which is therein “validated.”⁵² All this lead to the final lines of the hymn: “The obscure and the manifest exalt each other, humanity and divinity each the other’s measure.”⁵³ Neither phrase in this line is entirely original with Yu Xin: the first four characters are a reworking of a line from the Northern Qi hymns (“obscure and manifest both arrive”⁵⁴), while the latter is a direct quote from another hymn in the same Northern Qi sequence.⁵⁵ And yet by putting these lines together, Yu Xin sets the tone of his own ritual attitude towards these sacrifices. The lines are a testament to his understanding of ritual, of its correlative communion with the invisible, as well as a declaration of his poetics. He will not route divinity out of its chosen opacity, shedding vulgar light on what prefers the depths of the sky or the thickness of the earth. Rather, he hopes to influence it analogously, like the very ritual his hymns sing into being.

B. A Mythic Subjectivity – The Hymns to the Five Monarchs

The above discussion has dealt exclusively with the hymns for sacrifices to Heaven and Earth, and while Yu Xin’s innovations to these are important, they remain relatively subtle. When turning to the “Hymns to the Five Monarchs” (*Wudi ge* 五帝歌), however, the voice of the author shines through more boldly. These hymns have plenty of precedent: there are hymns dedicated to each of the five Monarchs (*Di* 帝) from almost every dynasty between the Han and the Northern Zhou.⁵⁶ The identity of these Monarchs is a complicated affair,⁵⁷ and we need not delve too deep into it here. Suffice it to say that since at least the Qin dynasty, there has been ritualist literature indicating that each cardinal direction, as well as the Center, has a High God and/or semi-divine

⁴⁹ Cf. *Collected Works*, p. 428: 無轍迹，有烟霞……雨留甘，雲餘慶。

⁵⁰ From the *Huang xia* 皇夏 to be sung as the emperor enters. *Collected Works*, p. 419: 取法於天，降其永祚。

⁵¹ *Collected Works*, p. 422: 就陽之位，如日之升。

⁵² *Collected Works*, p. 422: 祝史陳信，玄象斯格。

⁵³ *Collected Works*, p. 422: 幽顯對揚，人神咫尺。

⁵⁴ Guo Maoqian, p. 36: 幽顯咸臻。From the 肆夏樂 hymn in the 南郊樂歌 sequence.

⁵⁵ Specifically the second *Huang xia yue* 皇夏樂: cf. Guo Maoqian, p. 37

⁵⁶ The only exception, so far as I can tell from Guo Maoqian’s compendium, being the Jin 晉dynasty hymns, where there are no hymns devoted to the Five Monarchs.

⁵⁷ For one explanation, cf. Kevin Jensen, pp. 15-18, 54-5, et passim.

human Monarch ruling over it. These directional deities/sage-kings have corresponding seasons, elemental phases, numbers and colors.

The Northern Zhou version of these hymns, however, make an important innovation, one that no previous dynasty seems to have done. The Northern Zhou wrote separate hymns, and performed separate dances, for each of the Five Divine or Heavenly Monarchs (*Wu tian Di* 五天帝) and the Five Human Monarchs (*Wu ren Di* 五人帝) who ritualistically “accompany” (*pei* 配) the Divine Monarchs.⁵⁸ This innovation was perhaps an attempt to clarify the mythic hierarchy of gods and human rulers made divine, which was already disputed during the Han, and only became progressively more muddled as the post-Han period of division went on.

As for the content of the hymns, there are a number of odd things about Yu Xin’s version.⁵⁹ I will only focus on the two hymns offered to the Divine and Human Yellow Monarchs, which are perhaps the most striking in the collection. The hymn to the Divine Yellow Monarch (*Huangdi Yunmen Wu* 黃帝雲門舞) is unique insofar as its imagery is largely new: unlike the other hymns in this sequence, where the influence of the hymns of previous dynasties is fairly conspicuous, this one seems to be largely *sui-generis*. It begins, almost in willful defiance of the associations of the Yellow Monarch with the Earth, by evoking the Three Luminaries of the Heavens (*Sanguang* 三光), followed by the winds and the clouds, before descending into the more appropriate tropes of the yellow (the color of the Earth), the flat and the dark. And while previous dynastic hymns devoted to the Yellow Monarch had explicitly focused on the alterations of the seasons, Yu Xin’s hymn passes over this with a quick mention of the “four *qi*” (*siqi* 四氣), only to spend the majority of the hymn describing the ritual itself. Here as elsewhere, Yu Xin shows a preference for highlighting and reflecting on the hymn’s ritual context within the hymn itself.

The accompanying hymn (*Pei Di wu* 配帝舞) to the Yellow Human Monarch (more commonly known as the Yellow Emperor 黃帝), stands as the true center of this sequence. It begins by emphasizing the hymn’s foundational status: its first couplet takes up the theme of the seasons, claiming that “the four seasons all hold a single power, the five *qi* can be spoken of together;”⁶⁰ and the third states that “these rounded ritual vessels hold an earthy density, this position ties all together, worthy accompaniment of divine reverence.”⁶¹ Underlying both of

⁵⁸ This language is not used in the hymns themselves, but has instead been taken from Ni Fan’s commentary. Cf. Ni Fan, *Collected Works*, pp. 437-8. Following the *Zhouli*, which the Northern Zhou was concerned to replicate as far as possible, the Divine Monarchs of the Five Directions are Lingweiyang 靈威仰 (of the East), Chibiaonu 赤熛怒 (of the South), Hanshuniu 含樞紐 (of the Center), Baizhaoju 白招拒 (of the West), and Zhiguangji 汁光紀 (also known as Yeguangji 叶光紀, of the North). These are more commonly (and perhaps reverently) referred to simply by their directionally correlated colors: The Blue, Red, Yellow, White and Black Monarchs, respectively. The Five Human Monarchs are Tai Hao 太皞 (East), Shen Nong 神農 (South), Huang Di 黃帝 (Center), Shao Hao 少皞 (West), and Zhuan Xu 顓頊 (North). Confusing though it may be, these figures are also referred to by the directionally correlated colors.

⁵⁹ One such oddity, which I am unable to explain to my own satisfaction, is the meter of the hymn dedicated to the Divine White Monarch of the West, and his Accompanying Human Monarch. Following the tradition of all existing hymns to the Divine Monarch, each hymn’s meter is determined by the directionally correlated number: 3-character lines for the East, 7-character lines for the South, 5-character lines for the Center, 9-character lines for the West, and 6-character lines for the North. Yu Xin follows this exactly, except for his hymn to the West, which uses 4-character long lines. Four is associated with the West in some sources (the “Hongfan” 鴻範 chapter of the *Shujing* 書經, for example), but it is nevertheless surprising that the precedents of other hymns are disregarded in this single instance alone. Though this goes against the conclusion of section 3 of this paper, which claimed that Yu Xin’s biography was not relevant to the reading of these hymns, it is almost as if Yu Xin, who once wrote in a poem [擬詠懷之九] that his “chest holds an autumnal heart, grieving only this” (懷秋獨悲此), could not bring himself to offer ritually proper praise to the god of the autumnal west.

⁶⁰ *Collected Works*, p. 445: 四時咸一德, 五氣或同論.

⁶¹ *Collected Works*, p. 445: 器圓居土厚, 位總配神尊.

these couplets is a conviction that the center (i.e., the Earth phase) holds all in place, that its density is a permeating power underlying and informing all others.

The hymn, however, proves to be a curious mix of the ritually impersonal and the mythically specific. For against these abstract claims of centrality lies the specificity of the mythic Yellow Emperor. The sage king that stands at the opening of the great Sima Qian's 司馬遷 famous history of China, the Yellow Emperor had already amassed a huge body of mythic lore and literature by Yu Xin's time. Yu Xin takes advantage of this, referencing two stories of the semi-divine figure: the first to his fashioning of bamboo pitchpipes after listening to the calls of male and female phoenixes;⁶² the second to when the emperor, wearing yellow clothes and a yellow cap, sat in meditation in his garden, after which a flock of phoenixes large enough to "block out the sun" flew into the garden, eating bamboo shoots and resting in the *wutong* 梧桐 trees.⁶³ But it is the final couplet where the ritual and the personal come together, in a masterful interweaving of myth and ritual: "Now do [you] know that this music played today still makes use of my 'Cloud Gate.'" ⁶⁴

On the surface, this couplet is almost scandalous. To use the first-person pronoun in a ritual hymn is not unprecedented, but to speak in the voice of the figure to whom you are sacrificing certainly seems to smack of impertinence. Yet it is precisely by giving the figure of the Yellow Emperor this single line of dialogue that ritual dance, poetry and history (here no different from myth) are brought into a harmonious whole. It is an affirmation of the meaning of the name – a meaning at once historical, literary and ritualistic. The court ritualists of the Northern Zhou knew that their Cloud Gate songs and dances needed to be filled in, even invented. But the fact that the name itself survives, and evokes a mythic subjectivity, is enough to insure that those inventions can nevertheless fulfill their purpose. The perfect repetition of gestures and dances is impossible, but a name acquired in and persisting through the passage of history offers an affirmation that wrestling with these things *is* meaningful. We are, indeed, "condemned to meaning" by virtue of the continued existence of these names.

The mythical ascription of the Cloud Gate dance, which is used as a name for the dances of all of the sacrifices of the Northern Zhou, assures us that the Yellow Emperor does indeed underly the whole ritual edifice; that those who carry on these sacrifices and dances continue His work; and that therefore it is not impertinent to embody Him in this dance, for the dance gives continued life to the name he bestowed upon it, and carries him into the present. The listeners (or readers) of the hymn discover in this moment that they have been accompanying the Yellow Emperor during the whole of this ritual performance – that He has indeed bundled up all the sacred into Himself, just as the emperor of the Northern Zhou is attempting to do in these rituals.

6. Conclusion

This paper has merely attempted to point out a few things of interest in the Northern Zhou suburban sacrificial hymns. There is plenty more in these hymns worth our consideration, for they offer up a vista of experience that we have in general been too quick to dismiss: they render names meaningful through ritual activity, which is also poetic and historiographic activity. I introduced the notion of "mythography" in an attempt to overcome these rather awkward

⁶² From the *Lüshi Chunqiu* 呂氏春秋. Cf. *Collected Works*, p. 446.

⁶³ From the *Lirui mingji* 禮瑞命紀. Cf. *Collected Works*, *ibid*.

⁶⁴ *Collected Works*, p. 445: 始知今奏樂, 還用我《雲門》

divisions, and to provide a name for the unity of purpose I have found in these hymns, but I do not know whether this will prove to be a meaningful term of analysis for future scholars. If this paper prompts others to train their attention on these hymns, and to discover their own views from these Cloud Gates, I will consider it a resounding success.

One final point. Merleau-Ponty has been quoted in passing throughout this paper. It seems to me that Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology will not recover for us some hidden meaning in these ancient texts. Merleau-Ponty is, however, very useful for chastising us as readers, and this strikes me as the best praise we can offer a theory or philosophy. Theory should not explain away the mysteries of the past, but rather compel us to return, again and again, to those mysteries, to render them phenomenally *present* for us and pregnant with an as-yet invisible meaning, which only the exercise of our own subjectivity can birth. Theory, in other words, can only ever help *prepare* us for the work to which these dances, and the worlds they harbor within them, condemn us.

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Abstract

This paper is concerned with the Northern Zhou 後周 (a.k.a. 北周) (557-581 CE) dynasty's suburban sacrificial hymns, which are attributed to the famous poet Yu Xin 庾信. These were hymns meant to be sung and danced to during important ceremonies of state: namely, the emperor's sacrifices to Heaven, Earth and the representatives of the five directions. The paper begins by providing some historical and ritual context for these hymns, and explains why they were a great source of what we might call "historical anxiety." After this, I discuss their supposed author Yu Xin, and offer a brief reading of a memorial he wrote after seeing and hearing these songs and dances performed for the first time. Finally, I point out some interesting features of the hymns themselves, which I argue are instances of mythography, or rewritten and recontextualized myths.