

Tyranny as a Stereotype

King Jie and King Zhou's Influence on the Depiction of Tyranny

Francesco Gal

S1432699

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Yinghui Wu 吳穎慧

Leiden University: East Asian Studies

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Introduction

Jie of Xia dynasty (2207-1766 BCE)¹ and Zhou of Shang Dynasty (1766-1122) were the last rulers of their respective dynasties. Since their earliest mentioning in Chinese texts, they are identified as wicked rulers who, because of their lavish lifestyle and their ill-advised political conduct, brought about the demise of their dynasties. These two kings have become notorious examples of a trope in Chinese historiography, i.e. the tyrannical ruler, *baojun* 暴君, and/or the debauched ruler, *hunjun* 昏君. They also became the first examples of the wicked ruler at the end of a dynasty, *modai hunjun* 末代昏君.

Historical accounts regarding these two kings, and the events occurred during their reigns, were narrated centuries after they had happened, when the depiction of the two rulers had the purpose of legitimising the shift of rulership from Xia to Shang and then, finally to Zhou dynasty (1122–246 BCE). An epic cycle was developed to explain this shift of power: the two tyrants were the evil forces versus the good forces, represented by the founder of the new dynasty. The fall of the tyrants was perceived as inevitable *just* because of their moral corruption and because, on the other side, the epitomes of the upright and sage ruler opposed them. By the Han dynasty (206 BCE–220 CE), the two kings were “canonised” as the antonomasia of wicked ruling and their stories were permeated with the flavour of Confucian ideology. In the light of the moral didactic aim of Chinese history, the two kings’ life provided a valuable teaching as were seen as the utmost *exempla* of wicked ruling, negative counterexamples of illuminated rulership. By looking at the description of these two men, it is clear that they were made to fit a stereotype, their personality and evil deeds were meant to be the topical characteristics of tyranny and the blames addressed to them became, consequently, a regular pattern in depicting wicked rulers in Chinese history.

This study will address the stereotypical depiction of Chinese rulers by analysing, as study cases, the figures of Emperor Qianfei (449–466) of Liu Song dynasty (420–579) within official historiography, and Emperor Yang (569–618) of Sui dynasty (581–618) in fiction.

¹The dates, as well as small biographic facts regarding historical characters, are from *Zhongguo Lidai Renming Da Cidian* (1989) and *Zhongguo Lidai Diwang lu* (1985); dates regarding dynasties reign are from Wilkinson 2013, 3. However, for Xia and Shang dynasties dates, as well as for Jie and Zhou’s reign I used the dates proposed by Fracasso, 2005.

In the first chapter, Jie and Zhou will be introduced and their biographies analysed as presented in the *Biographies of Exemplary Women, Lienü zhuan* 列女傳, by Liu Xiang (79-8 BCE), Western Han dynasty (202 BCE – 8 CE), to see how the idea of tyranny developed within the Chinese culture. This will be followed by a contextualisation of the cosmological and political ideas that influenced the historical narrative tied to the shift of kingship proper of the pre-imperial period.

The second chapter presents a parallel between the pre-imperial kings and Qianfei within official historiography. We will note that the description of Qianfei's life is modelled to Jie's and Zhou's lives: same blames and same endings. Moreover, the historian ascribed to Qianfei one fact which was most likely taken directly from the life of Zhou of Shang.

In the third chapter, this study will focus on Yang by analysing a fictional tale about him to see what passages clearly allude to the lives of the two kings. The categories of tyranny as canonised within the stories of the two kings remain fundamental to represent the stereotype of tyranny.

My research aims to show that the depiction of tyranny was made not only by conforming to a pattern of customary blames, but also by paralleling the tyrant's life with Jie and Zhou's peculiarities in the two study cases. Such parallelism is made either in an implicit way, i.e. describing life scenes similar to those of the pre-imperial kings, or explicitly, by referring to Jie and Zhou directly into the discourse.

Chapter 1

A brief and concise biographical contextualisation will help to understand the subjects of the following analysis.

The first of these two figures is Jie 桀 (reign 1808–1765 BCE), also referred to as Jie Gui 桀癸, the last king of Xia dynasty. He was depicted as a violent and tyrannical ruler whose government turned into chaos and inevitably lost one of the fundamental bases of rulership, i.e. the *tianming* 天命 or mandate of Heaven. Following his penchant for licentious lifestyle, he neglected the state affairs, despised his officials, squandered state wealth and showed a callous attitude toward the people's suffering due to his policy. In his last years, threatened by the increasing power of Tang 湯, the king of Shang kingdom, he imprisoned him in a tower. Tang eventually liberated, led the revolt against Jie and defeated him in a battle at Mingtiao, after which he founded the Shang dynasty 商朝. Both Jie and his concubine Moxi 末喜 were exiled and died in the Nanchao Mountains (currently close to Nanjing). Jie was so inadequate that increasingly dire natural and unusual celestial phenomena were recorded: these signs were considered omens of his dethronement.

Zhou 紂, or Dixin 帝辛, was instead the last king of the Shang-Yin dynasty (reign 1154–1122 BCE). Like Jie, he was portrayed as a wicked ruler whose government turned chaotic, oppressive and tyrannical. He squandered state wealth and feasted night and day with his court and his favourite concubine Daji 妲己. Zhou was notorious for his brutality, sadism and contemptuous behaviour toward his counsellors. His story follows the same rough pattern of Jie: King Wen 文 of Zhou kingdom rebelled against Zhou's tyrannical government after having been imprisoned by the tyrant. However, Wen died before accomplishing the *coup d'état*. His son King Wu 武 claimed the Mandate and led his army against Zhou, defeating him at Muye. King Wu eventually founded the Zhou dynasty 周朝.

The concept of tyranny

My analysis addresses the idea of tyranny starting from the depiction of the two kings made during western Han dynasty. At that time, the depiction of these kings' lives was interpreted within the Confucian ideology which perceived history as a reservoir of positive and negative

exempla. At least in Liu Xiang's work, Jie and Zhou's lives can be read then as exemplifying ideals of the times when they were written and they were perceived within moral and ideological expectations proper of the Confucian ideology.

The lives of two kings can serve as a basis for analysing the characteristics of wicked ruling. To conduct such analysis, the first and second biographies of the seventh *juan*² of Liu Xiang's (79 - 6) *Biographies of Exemplary Women*, in the English translation made by O'Hara, 1945, will be used. Despite the fact that Moxi and Daji, the personal concubines of Jie and Zhou respectively, are the official protagonists of the stories, Liu Xiang depicts in detail the male counterpart as well³.

It is interesting to note that by the time of the Han dynasty, the two kings' stories appeared almost identical. They not only share similarities in their behaviour, such as alcoholism, self-indulgence, violent temper and licentiousness, but also similarities regarding their persona and life. They are said to have, e.g., the same supernatural strength⁴; their self-indulgence is manifested by building similar mansions where they spend their time, such as gorgeous palaces or lakes full of alcohol; they both ordered the composition of licentious music and, obviously, they both had a wicked woman at their side.

Mo-his (Moxi) was the concubine of [king] Chieh (Jie) of the Hsia (Xia) dynasty. She was beautiful in appearance but poor in virtue and she threw the entire palace into confusion in an unvirtuous way. She acted like a woman but had the heart of a man by wearing a sword and a cap. Chieh cast aside propriety and lusted after women. He sought beautiful women with which to fill up the palace harem; and gathered in hired singer and actors, pigmies, and jugglers who were able to give weird and strange performance. These he gathered into his houses to create idle and dreamy music. Day and night he drank wine and feasted with Moxi and the women of

² Juan 卷 indicates the sections in which a literary work is divided. For further information, see the appendix.

³ Briefly, Liu Xiang compiled his book with the intention of educating the Chinese noble women by presenting exemplary women as embodiment of certain ideas that constituted the world-view in Chinese society.

⁴ Actually, Liu Xiang reports nothing about Jie's physical strength. I gather the information from another major work compiled during the Han dynasty, the 'Records of the Grand Historian', *Shiji* 史記: "Jie of Xia and Zhou of Yin would battle against wild animals with bare hands, they could run as fast as four horses. They were brave and feared nothing. They won over hundreds of battle, all the feudal princes submitted, they ruled with authority and firmness" (My translation; excerpt taken from *Shiji*, 1959, 1241-1242. For the Chinese text of all the translation of *Shiji* excerpts in this work, please see the appendix). Needless to say, I am quoting the *Shiji* here for completeness of description. My analysis still takes Liu Xiang's work as pivotal.

*the imperial harem; he placed Moxi on his knees and harkened to her advices. He made a wine lake on which boats could move around [and from which] at one stroke of the drum, three thousand men drank like cows. (...)Lung-feng (Long Feng) entered to reprove [Chieh], saying, “if the prince be without virtue, he certainly will go to ruin” Chieh said, “Can the sun be lost? When the sun is lost, I shall be lost.” He would not listen to him but considering [his warning] as evil words, killed him. He built a house and terrace adorned with precious stones which towered high up toward the clouds and rain. Though he exhausted his riches and used up his wealth, still his desires were insatiate (...).The nobles rebelled strongly and thereupon T’ang received the mandate of Heaven and punished him. (...)*⁵.

*Tan-chi (Daji) was the wife of [King] Chou (Zhou) of the Yin dynasty, and as a concubine she found favour with Chou. Chou’s talent and strength surpassed that of other men; his hands could cope with fierce animals; his wisdom was sufficient to resist criticism, and his powers of argument were good enough to cover up his faults. (...). He loved wine and lewd pleasures and never left Tan-Chi at all; he valued highly whatever Ta-Chi praised and he destroyed whatever Tan-Chi dislike. He made sounds of new lusts, performed the dances of the northern villages, and partook of extravagant pleasures. He collected precious articles and stored them in the imperial harem; the flattering ministers and the hosts of women obtained whatever they wanted. He stored up grain until it was a hill, let wine flow until it filled a pond, and hug up meat like forest. He made men and women purse each other naked in their midst for a long night of feasting and Tan-chi loved it. The common people bitterly look on and there were those among the nobles who rebelled. Chou then instituted the punishment of the hot pillar by greasing a copper pole and placing live coals around its foot. (...). Pi-kan (Bi Gan) reproved him saying, “If you do not cultivate the way of the ancient kings but follow a woman’s counsel, misfortune will befall you in no time” Chou was angry and considered it an evil prognostication. Tan-chi said” I have heard that the heart of a sage has seven orifices” thereupon they cut it out and looked at it; he [also] imprisoned Chi-tzu and Wei-tzu fled from him. King Wu thereafter received the mandate of Heaven to raise troops to punish Chou; they fought at Mu-yeah (Muye) and the leaders of Chou turned down their spears (...)*⁶.

The first aspect we should note is that the two kings share a **tyrannical** violent temper *bao* 暴 (or *niie* 虐), and the tyrant is consequently indicated as *baojun* 暴君, literally ‘the violent

⁵ O’Hara, 1945, 186-187. Pinyin added to names.

⁶ O’Hara, 1945, 187-189.

prince'. This violent temper manifested in a disrespect for upright officials and consequent favouritism towards sycophants. This attitude also comprises harsh law, cruel punishment and an insensitivity toward the suffering of the masses. Zhou undoubtedly is the utmost example of sadism and cruelty, and his arbitrariness and perverse taste in the "hot pillar" torture eventually became legendary⁷. It would be misleading to consider the sheer brutality of the king as the sole problem; rather, we should comprehend these blames of violence within the broader context of how classical Chinese thinkers elaborated their thoughts regarding a wise and sage statecraft. As analysed by Turner (1993), Chinese thinkers could indeed justify an authoritarian ruler who used violence, torture or other punishments, provided that the aim was to enforce stability and maintain harmony. If the sage ruler abided to the *dao*, punishments and violence were tolerated. The two kings, instead, were clearly depicted as the antithesis of such wise ruling. To reinforce this statement, both Jie and Zhou failed to heed wise or reasonable counsel regarding proper statecraft; rather, they brutally kill their palace advisors. This blame is underpinned by philosophical adherence to Confucian values: the act of remonstrating to the emperor, as to admonish and teach, was considered a cardinal value. Henry (1987) illustrates how Confucianism stressed as a fundamental quality of the good ruler the ability to be receptive to wise and loyal counsel, even when offensive to the ear. This connected with the ability to recognise (*zhi* 知) the sage.

It is my belief that such a condemnation of violent temper implies also the growing awareness of bureaucratic class as a fundamental part in state affairs. By the time Liu Xiang writes, statecraft was in the hand of a small ruling elite: the Confucian bureaucracy. The bureaucratic class placed "a high value on consistency, impartiality and universality, a condition that would foster the security and opportunity to certain groups in Chinese society"⁸. Tyranny was perceived as a threatening force to such conditions. This is why tyrants had to be irrationally violent, acting against the harmonic and justified order of society and against the elite that helped in maintaining this harmony. In this sense and in the light of the moral didacticism of history, the Confucian bureaucratic class tried to safeguard its role by presenting what a king should have done (follow right ethical principles); and should not have done (threat the statecraft bureaucratic class).

⁷ Interestingly, "hot pillar" torture became canonised as one of the ancient penalties to the point that was still in use during the reign of Emperor Muzong of Liao (931- 969). For more information, see Wang Yongkuang, 50-59.

⁸ Turner, 1993, 324.

The second aspect related to the kings is a proper **debauched** behaviour, shown by their drunkenness, passion for rarities, passion for extravagances and for lavish constructions. This peculiarity, alongside with the aspect of licentiousness presented below, depicts the ‘muddle headed’, *hunjun* 昏君: a ruler lost in depravity and extravagances and, to a certain extent, unaware of the effects of his actions. Blames of extravagance are made through the representation of the king’s dwellings. The palaces are the manifest symbol of the tyrant’s lavish lifestyle, indeed starkly in contrast with concepts such as frugality, simplicity and modesty, part of the Confucian values⁹. Such extravagances affect directly people’s life conditions: the construction of such estates and their embellishment bring to the impoverishment of the state fund. The kings’ alcoholic addiction goes perfectly alongside the orgies and, as we can see, such drunkenness is well epitomised by the creation of an ‘alcohol lake’, *jiuche* 酒池. As a general remark, in the depiction of debauchery, two hyperboles are linked together: the king’s nature is extremely wicked, and the depiction of his whims is exaggerated. The more the wickedness, the more the exaggeration.

Third topical aspect of the bad ruler is a **licentious nature**. The character *yin* 淫, which means “lustful, excessive”, depicts both the kings and concubines’ sexuality. Jie and Zhou are lustful monarchs and appear corrupted because of their excessive sexual proneness. We should contextualise such corruption in the light of the Chinese conception of sexuality and gender hierarchy. These ideas related to the more complex cosmological paradigm of *yin-yang* 阴阳. Within the paradigm, sexuality is a pair of essences in mutual and constant interaction. The dichotomous relationship runs in a binary opposition of *yin*, representing the female, and *yang* for the male. Sexually, a man should absorb *yin* essence from the woman, without releasing his *yang* to her. Within the tyrant discourse, *yin-yang* harmony is lost: there is an excessive loss of *yang* leading to the king’s moral debilitation. Hence, the emphasis on the evil influence of the woman at court: the feminine *yin* had to be in a subaltern position to bring forth harmony. This dualism has a social reflection as well: the role of the feminine, *yin*, overcomes that of the male counterpart. As extensively analysed by Raphals, the *yin-yang* paradigm, although not

⁹ For example, as in chapter ten of the *Daxue*, 大学, one of the texts of the Confucian Canon, we read: “*The accumulation of wealth is the way to scatter the people; and the letting it be scattered among them is the way to collect the people*”. See Legge, 1895, Vol I, 376.

originally conceived as misogynous, eventually resulted in a theory encompassing gender roles, used to justify the submission of women in Chinese society¹⁰.

Bearing this in mind, we can now better contextualise the work of Liu Xiang: he writes as a male to other men and, by presenting women's lives, he is implicitly consolidating the subordination of women in respect to man. Regarding the tyrants' lives, misanthropy is exemplified by the fact the protagonists' allies of the tyrants are wicked females, while those who sided with the good kings are virtuous male, as correctly pointed out by Birell¹¹. The favourites appear evil and wicked because they are active, sexually unrestrained and protagonist of their own destiny: they break and provide a counter-model to that paradigm of passivity canonised in Chinese society¹².

Speaking of the figure of a wicked concubine, it is interesting to note that their physical traits and behaviour also cross over the masculinity of the *wen-wu* dichotomy, i.e. an idea of masculinity in terms of culture and force shaped on the figures of King Wu 武 and King Wen 文 of the Zhou dynasty.¹³ As noted by Loui and Edwards (1994), "the *wen-wu* dichotomy is applied to women only after they have transformed themselves into men."¹⁴ In the case of Moxi, and Daji, the former is clearly depicted as having masculine nature and wearing attire proper to men, while the latter enjoys a sexual freedom customary for males. Not to mention that Daji dares to speak in the place of the King and holds political power *de facto*. "Those who stepped beyond these limits were still contained within the notion of the *exemplary woman* whose adoption of manly traits only served to reinforce the *superiority* and *normality* of masculine ideals"¹⁵. Indeed, here the wicked concubines present a reversed paradigm of *exemplary*

¹⁰ A major turning point in such process where, in fact, the new ethical and cosmological theories codified during the Han dynasty by Dong Zhongshu 董仲舒 (179–104 BCE) who brought the *yin-yang* theory to a new misogynistic interpretation. See Raphals, 1983, 139-168.

¹¹ Birell, 1993, 109; cf. *ibidem*, 110.

¹² Besides the new interpretation of *yin-yang* dichotomy, women submission was also justified by the normative principle of the *neiwai*, 内外 (the strict distinction between domestic realm, *nei* 内, considered female, and the outside world, *wai* 外, men's domain), and by the normative principle of the *way of the triple submission* (*sancong zhi dao* 三从之道): submission to the husband, to the older brother and to the male heirs.

¹³ Loui and Edwards, 1995, 140.

¹⁴ *Ibidem*.

¹⁵ *Ibidem*, Italic added.

woman. The message is rather clear: the subversion of the traditional and codified social roles leads to instability and, thus, to demise.

Interestingly, the lustfulness of the tyrants is also epitomised by the *licentious* music they order to be composed. To see why this is relevant, such blame should be contextualised in the role that music had in the conduction of statecraft.

As analysed by Brindley, music played an important political role in the state order since early China: it was a key part of Zhou ritual and part of the religious, diplomatic and commemorative discourse. Regarding the music of the two kings, she notes how the discourses embraced a moral logic of personal and political orders. In this case, the association is made between wicked music and socio-political chaos, and, in turn, between proper music and socio-political order. Therefore, excess does not restrain only to moral debilitation of the kings, but also corrupts the rituality associated with music¹⁶.

A Dynasty cycle

Speaking about the two pre-imperial kings implies speaking about historical events in the way they have been handed down in later times compared to the time when they took place – a past that, in the case of Xia dynasty, cannot be historically attested yet¹⁷. More importantly, the era when this earlier past was recorded was a time when several ideas proper of the Chinese culture were forged and that, ultimately, reflected into the narrative about the historical context of these figures.

As Anne Birell notes, both kings belong to Chinese mythology as protagonists of an epic contest between evil and good forces that constitutes the cyclical pattern of pre-imperial history¹⁸. This pattern was the dynastic shift that saw the Xia dynasty conquered by the Shang and, later, the Shang dynasty ended by the Zhou army. In this context, the last kings of the falling dynasty and the new kings of the rising one were pivotal elements.

¹⁶ Brindley, 2012, 75-78.

¹⁷ Briefly, the historical existence of Xia dynasty is still matter of debate among Scholars: no specific archaeological evidences identifies Xia. The culture and the archaeological site of Erlitou 二里头, believed to be the archaeological evidence of Xia existence, is still heavily questioned. The historical existence of Xia dynasty rulers is highly doubted. See Wilkinson, 2013, 678–9.

¹⁸ Birell, 1993, 255–259.

Fundamental texts that speak about this epic Manichean contest are chapters in the *Shang Shu* 商书 (The Book of Shang) – especially the *Tang Shi* 汤誓 (Declaration of Tang)- and those in the *Zhou Shu* 周书 (The Book of Zhou) – especially the *Tai Shi* 泰誓 (The Great Declaration) - both part of the *Shang Shu* 尚书 (The Book of Historical Documents). *The Books of Shang* speak about the Shang conquest of Xia; *The books of Zhou* speak of the Zhou conquest of Shang. The genesis of these historical documents is rather complex; yet, the scope of this work does not allow us to engage into an extensive discussion of it. Concerning our matter, it is worth noting that the documents speaking about the dynasties' fall are not contemporary with the historical events they tell; rather, they are forgery of later times, whose creation and idealisation took place in a period spanning from early Zhou dynasty down to Han dynasty¹⁹. The narrative about the conquest of Xia by Shang and the conquest of Shang by Zhou is imbued with the philosophical/cosmological theories about the right of ruling proper of Chinese culture, and it is in this light that the epic context must be understood.

Originally, the right to rule was asserted by astronomical happenings: the favourable conjunction of planets was linked to the beginning of a dynasty (as it happened for Xia, Shang, and Zhou dynasties). This means that implicitly a dynasty enjoyed the approval of *tian* 天 “Heaven”. It came to be thought that the Heaven bestowed a founder of a dynasty with the right of ruling: the Mandate of Heaven, *tianmian* 天命. The founder was endowed with the quality of *de* 德, virtue, “giving him awe-inspiring prestige and deposing him to moderation and the inclination to heed good advice, and to piety in sacrifices to spirits”²⁰. The virtue of the dynasty derived from its founder, and was handed over generation after generation up to the point that Heaven would point a new sage ruler and bestow him with the Mandate. These philosophical ideas took shape during early Zhou dynasty and reached their final form with Mencius, a Confucian philosopher of the fourth century BCE, who stated that Heaven bestowed its mandate according to human actions²¹: the ruler had to follow principles of moral rectitude codified in the Classics. From the third century BCE on, the change of the Mandate began to be explained also by a cycle of five phases modelled on the correlative system called *wuxing* 五行, Five Phases, as an overcoming cycle of five elements (earth, wood, metal, fire and water).

¹⁹ Shaughnessy in Loewe, 1993, 376–389.

²⁰ Nivison in S. Cua, 1993, 541.

²¹ *Ibidem*, 540–543.

It is in such ideological light the last rulers of Xia and Zhou were epitomised as the quintessence of tyranny, while the founders of the following dynasty were mythicized as paragons of benevolence²². Jie and Zhou became negative ethical paragons, whose *nequitia* was seen responsible for their political failure. In this sense their figures occur quite often²³, as a binomial formula, in texts from that period on. Scholars agree that Jie's story, considering its being a justification of the conquest of Xia by Shang, could be just a creation made by Zhou dynasty to have the historical precedent to justify their conquest of Shang²⁴. This claim could be supported by another theory by Allan that sees Xia dynasty as a mythical creation of Zhou era. In her work, Allan shows how Zhou dynasty probably spoke about Xia dynasty to present it as the “mythical inverse of Shang”²⁵ because of the symbolisms, rituality and political vicissitudes that the two dynasties share. Zhou dynasty, according to their ideology and philosophical beliefs, created a historical narrative to legitimize its seizure of political power. They created a transition of the Mandate from Xia to Shang and, finally, to them. Thus, they found a justification for their war on the basis of the highly immoral conduct of the last ruler of the previous dynasty, showing how ethics – or the lack thereof – directly affected politics. Under such ideology, Chinese history started to be seen as a standardised pattern: the Dynastic Cycle, *Chaodai Xunhuan*, 朝代循环, which suggests that each dynasty witnessed its political, cultural, and economic peak at the beginning, and then declined constantly and inexorably, until the moral corruption of its rulers was completed. This cycle repeats itself under a pattern: the founders of the new dynasty call on themselves the Mandate and, thanks to Heaven bestowal, abundance and prosperity are enjoyed through society. Corruption, however, soon becomes rampant at court and the ruler progressively drifts apart from his people. Natural disasters wreck the country, famine dooms the population to the point that, finally, Heaven finds a saviour and bestows him with the task of founding a new dynasty²⁶.

The passage of the *Tianming* was incorporated in official historiography and went hand in hand with the concept of legitimate succession, *zhengtong* 正统, namely the story of a

²² Allan, 1981, 81-94 (for Jie); 106–17 (for Zhou).

²³ The couple of characters *jie zhou* 桀纣 recurs 337 times in texts from Pre-Qin period to Western Han; 138 times is present in the Confucian Classics. <http://ctext.org/pre-qin-and-han?searchu=%E6%A1%80%E7%BA%A3&reqtype=stats> accessed on 07/07/2015

²⁴ Shaughnessy in Loewe, 1993, 376–389.

²⁵ Allan, 1991, 11, 63–67.

²⁶ Reishauer and Fairbank, 1960, 114–118.

legitimate dynasty that had the mandate of Heaven, in contrast with previous or contemporary dynasties, seen as usurpers/puppets, *jian wei* 僭偽. In fact, the *Shiji*, the first great historiographical work of China, held the political significance to provide a historical pedigree for the Han dynasty by linking it to a chain of dynasties and rulers stretching back to the age of Xia dynasty. During the period of disunity, from the fall of Han Dynasty in 220 to the Sui dynasty in 581, historians tried to legitimise the pedigree of the court they worked for by depicting their dynasty as the legitimate successor of the Mandate interrupted with Han dynasty. L. S. Yang (1954) points out how legitimation varied in accordance with the time: historians tried to stress legitimacy on geographical basis, or blood relation in respect to the Han, and so on, adopting several criteria to evaluate the rise and fall of dynasties. As Yang notes, two criteria were fundamental to evaluate the emperors' reigns: natural happenings, (often tied to the cosmological theories of the *wuxing* 五行) and moral virtues, based on common sense. Concerning the imperial career, Yang notes how “tradition recognises a close relationship between successful emperors and long-lived emperor”²⁷. In our next study case, Emperor Qianfei 前廢帝 of Liu Song 劉宋 dynasty (449–466 CE), we will see that he belongs to this tradition: he died seventeen and he was considered one of the most brutal and despotic ruler ever ascended to the imperial throne.

²⁷ Yang, 1954, 339.

Chapter 2

This chapter will analyse how Jie and Zhou influenced the depiction of Emperor Qianfei. Liu Song dynasty was one of the four dynasties that ruled in the South (along with Qi 齐, Liang 梁, and Chen 陈) between year 420 and 589, in what became then known as the Northern and Southern Dynasties Period²⁸. We will see that there is a stereotypical representation of Emperor Qianfei's deeds, in which Jie and Zhou explicitly appear as terms of comparison in the discourse. Notably, a certain anecdote that characterised Zhou's debauchery is here ascribed to Qianfei.

In this chapter, the analysis regarding the stereotypical depiction of Qianfei will be carried out upon two works that wield the status of official historiography: the *Songshu* 宋書 (Book of Song) compiled by Shen Yue 沈约 (441–513)²⁹, and the *Nanshi* 南史 (History of the Southern dynasties) compiled by Li Yanshou 李延壽 (fl. 618–76)³⁰. Regarding the *Songshu*, it has been noted that Shen Yue was an official and he served as a historian to the Court of Song, Qi and Liang dynasties. It is possible that his closeness to the court affected his ability to write objectively. For example, he concealed the bad behaviour on the part of the Qi rulers who replaced the Liu Song ones. At the same time, he lamented the distortion of facts made by Xu Yuan 徐爰 (394–475), the author of the historical documents upon which Shen based his *Songshu*. For him, the work of Xu Yuan showed a biased favourable attitude while narrating the transition from the Eastern Jin to Liu Song³¹. This needs to be understood within the wider context of historiography. Besides, considering the status of these two works, few remarks about how the Chinese wrote historiography during the imperial period are necessary.

Histories were written by Chinese scholars for other officials and for the emperor. Historians were Confucian literati and officials charged with astronomical and archival tasks, whose focus was on history and politics. Their task was to compile the National History (*guo shi* 国史, history of current dynasty), a synopsis of summaries of historical documents drafted at court

²⁸ On this historical period, see Wilkinson, 2013, 729.

²⁹ The *Songshu* 宋書, arranged in a hundred *juan*, is the first official *History* regarding Liu Song dynasty. For further information, see the appendix.

³⁰ The *Nanshi* 南史, arranged in eighty *juan*, is one of the twenty four official *Histories*. The work focuses on the Southern dynasties of the Northern and Southern Dynasty. For further information, see the appendix.

³¹ Ng and Wang, 2005, 88–89.

(most importantly the ‘veritable records’, *shilu* 實錄, that were compiled at the beginning of each reign regarding the previous reign, and the Court diaries, *qizhuju* 起居注, a chronological record of the emperor’s activities). The composition of historiography could have been carried out by either individuals, often father and son, or by a team of scholars sponsored officially by the court³². Historiography saw a gradual institutionalisation, to the point that during Tang dynasty (618–907) a proper History Bureau (*shi guang* 史官) was created. Indeed, it was the Tang dynasty which started the compilation of the *Histories*, *zhengshi* 正史, a tradition that was carried on until the Qing dynasty. The *Shiji* 史記, a work by Sima Tan 司馬談 (d.110 BCE) and his son Sima Qian 司馬遷 (145-86 BCE), was taken as the first of these Histories. The great historiographical revolution of this work lies in the arrangement of historical material, namely the *jizhuan* 紀傳 (annals-biographies). This meant that the disposition of historical narrative was divided into categories, among which the most relevant for the purpose of this study are the *benji* 本紀 (basic annals) and the *liezhuan* 列傳 (arrayed biographies). The emperors’ lives and coeval events were narrated in the *benji*, which were chronological account (*nianji* 年紀, annals). Often, the *benji* records also biographical details, such as emperor’s personal name, his political activities and his pronouncements. These annals were important politically because they showed the achievements of a ruler and the pedigree of the ruling house³³.

Chinese historiography was meant as an aid for governance, a mirror from which a ruler could draw lessons, so as not to commit his predecessors’ faults but to emulate the virtuous ones. As stated by Yu (1988), “the preservation of the memory of the past serve the purpose of instruction, but what history teaches is principally to explain change, how to account or “the fortune of the ruling houses”³⁴. The task of the historian was to bestow praise and blame, *boabian* 褒貶, to the historical subject according to Confucian moral tenets. As noted by Pokora, such moralisation of history is a characteristic that dates back since the pre-Han period, “[i]t is typical of the Chinese attitude to history-and to historians-that a non-historical purpose on the part of a compiler o an ancient historical source has generally been supposed to exist”³⁵. Twitchett (1992) notes that during the Tang dynasty the habit of introducing a moral evaluation

³² Gardiner in Leslie, Colin and Wang, 1974, 42–52.

³³ Wilkinson, 2013, 603–630.

³⁴ Yu, 1988, 10–11.

³⁵ Pokora in Leslie, 1973, 24.

took place already in the earliest stage of historiographical drafting, namely during the composition of court diaries, “Court diaries were composed by officials with moral and political responsibilities, who saw themselves and were perceived by others as active participants in state affairs. The introduction of moral criteria into the historical record was therefore not simply an element introduced in the later stages of historiographical process when the historians were writing up a considered verdict on the events of a given reign”³⁶. Such moral-didactic aim of the historian was in conflict with the obligation to provide an accurate record of the events. It was not unlikely, then, that a distortion of events took place, considering the difficult position of the historian.

The Emperor

Former Deposed Emperor of Liu Song 劉宋前廢帝 (449–466) also known as Emperor Qianfei, personal name Liu Ziye 劉子業, was the sixth emperor of the Chinese dynasty Liu Song (420–479). Liu Ziye was born in 449, when his father Liu Jun 劉駿 (430–464) was the Prince of Wuling under Emperor Wen 文帝 (r. 424–453)³⁷, the third emperor of the dynasty and grandfather of Ziye. After having carried a coup against Emperor Wen, his uncle Liu Shao 劉劭 (426–453) imprisoned him in Jiankang, where he had spent his childhood. Liu Shao was eventually overthrown by Liu Jun, who took the throne as Emperor Xiaowu 孝武帝 in 454; the same year, Liu Ziye was made crown prince. In 464, Emperor Xiaowu died and Liu Ziye took the throne. His reign lasted only one year and was characterised by remarkable brutality.

Historians reported that during the investiture, he took the imperial seal showing no sadness nor filial piety for his father’s death. Later, he went to his father’s tomb and spread manure all over the place, damaging his tomb as well as the one of his father’s favourite concubine. When rumours spread in the country stating that the son of Heaven³⁸ was born in the southern regions, he toured in the south to suppress these rumours. Highly suspicious of a possible rebellion of his aunts, he gathered them in Jiankang and put them under house arrest in his palace. Among them there was Liu Yu 劉彧 (439–472), prince of Xiangdong 湘东, who eventually became

³⁶ Twitchett, 1992, 10.

³⁷ Liu Yilong 劉義隆 (407–453), third emperor of Liu Song dynasty.

³⁸ *Tianzi* 天子 indicates the legitimised emperor as he received the mandate of Heaven.

the new emperor after Qianfei's fall. At the same time, Emperor Qianfei continued with his lavish lifestyle and his brutal behaviour: the last nights of his reign were spent in the bamboo forest pavilion of Hualin Park 華林園 feasting debauchedly. When one of the concubines refused to join such lustfulness, he beheaded her. That night, a spirit of a woman came in his dream to admonish and curse him, stating he would not last until next year. The next day, he ordered to find a concubine who looked like the woman he had dreamt of and to kill her; then he held a ghost-hunting ceremony to get rid of the spirits of his victims. At the ceremony, one of Emperor Qianfei's attendants, Shou Jizhi 壽寂之 (? - ?), who had been plotting to overthrow the tyrant with other dignitaries, stabbed him to death. Eventually, Liu Yu ascended to the throne as Emperor Ming 明帝 (r. 466-472)³⁹.

A Political stereotype within the Book of Song

The following is a partial translation from the *benji* regarding Qianfei in the seventh *juan* of *Songshu*. I will try to draw a parallel between Qianfei and Zhou and see if the canonical blames put on the Shang king recur in Qianfei.

Before starting, a few more words about the source are needed. The *benji* about Qianfei is divided in two parts. The first part is the actual account of his life: year after year it talks about the political vicissitudes of the ruler. The annalistic account of the emperor's life ends sharply in the period that goes from 24th December of 465 to 1st January of 466, when the emperor dies⁴⁰. From this point on, the *benji* changes its style and content radically. The last part appears verbose, dense and remarkably wordy, in striking contrast with the dry and plain account up to that point⁴¹. Apparently, then, the historian is ready to deploy all his rhetoric to fit Qianfei into the stereotype of the "perfect tyrant". To make this clearer, the parallels according to different categories which depict this idea of the "perfect tyrant" will be provided.

³⁹ For a full account about Qianfei's life, see *Songshu*, 1974, 141-148; and *Nanshi*, 1975, 68-72.

⁴⁰ The annals report the day *xu* 戌 of the eleventh month of the year *heyuan* 和元.

<http://sinocal.sinica.edu.tw/cgi-bin/sinocal/luso.utf8.cgi>. See *Songshu*, 1974, 146.

⁴¹ Franke (1950) noted that such contrast in style recurs also in the *benji* on Shundi 順帝 (1333-1370), last ruler of Yuan Dynasty, another allegedly debauched of Chinese history. It would be interesting to see, from a stylistic point of view, if such wordy paragraphs occur more often when historians talk about tyrants. If so, there would be a correlation between tyranny and the historiographic style adopted when speaking about tyranny.

For sake of clarity, longer quotations from Qianfei's story are indented and short ones are simply in italics within the text; I put in italics those sentences which I believe correspond to the topical blames of tyranny⁴², bold text is used to show the categories of blames. The translations regarding Qianfei are mine⁴³.

By that time, the emperor became more ruthless as time passed by. *He killed people incessantly; nobody in the court and outside the court was safe.* A rumour started to spread⁴⁴, “In Xiang region the new son of Heaven is born”. The emperor toured to Xiang to get rid of these voices. Then he started to kill all his uncles, this was the cause of his deposition. Taizong⁴⁵ and the attendants Ruan Dianfu, Wang Daolong and Li Daoer, in accordance with the emperor's trusted Shou Jizhi and Jiang Changzhi, eleven people in total, secretly plotted to overthrow the emperor. *The night of the thirtieth day, the emperor was holding a ghost-hunting ceremony at in the bamboo forest hall at Hualin park.* That night a witch said, “This place is hunted”. The emperor personally participated the ceremony. (...).

This paragraph tells us about the **tyranny and the heretical practices** of Qianfei; the same situations can be traced in Zhou's story, “By the use of his power killing and murdering, he has poisoned and sickened all within the four sea”⁴⁶ and “[Zhou] has blindly thrown away the sacrifices which he should present”⁴⁷.

Other parallels can be detected after the emperor's death, when the historian continues the blame through the voice of Grand Empress Lu Huinan 路惠男⁴⁸ in a sermon she gave after Qianfei's death.

The great mother empress ordered:

⁴² Same methodology is used for the next three subchapters of chapter two.

⁴³ The analysis is based on the punctuated edition printed by *Zhonghua* Book Company, 1974; For this subchapter and for the following two ones, the excerpts provided in translation have been taken from pp. 146-148. For the Chinese text, see the appendix.

⁴⁴ This rumour appears to be completely invented to justify the imminent fall of Qianfei. It clearly is a stereotype regarding the dynastic cycle.

⁴⁵ Taizong 太宗 is the posthumous of Emperor Wen. But note: Emperor Wen was already dead, here the texts probably alludes to the prince of Xiang, the son of Emperor Wen. See below for further detail.

⁴⁶ Legge, 1895, vol IV. 295.

⁴⁷ *Ibidem*, 303.

⁴⁸ Lu Huinan (412–466) was the empress dowager during Qianfei reign.

To the eight commanders and generals of the ministry: Ziyue, even though he was the son of the primary wife, *since his childhood he had a fierce and vicious nature. He was not filial, not benevolent either; it was so evident when he was a child.*[...] Despite having lost his father, he was joyous, happy and abandoned himself to pleasures.[...]

Similar blames were formerly addressed to Zhou who enjoys the same **unfilial behaviour**, “And now (Zhou), the king of Shang treats with contemptuous slight the five constant virtues⁴⁹, and abandons himself to wild idleness and irreverence.”⁵⁰ The empress continues saying that Qianfei “*was intoxicated all night long for heavy drinking, and he neglected the state affairs*”. Such blames of **drunkenness and debauchery** bring us back to Zhou since he “indulged in heavy drinking all night long”⁵¹.

Following this, the empress blames Qianfei for the **neglect and abuse of officials, perversion of music**, since “*all the former wise counsellors were regarded as if they were sterile soil. The orchestra played endlessly and sumptuous banquets were arranged*”. Indeed, similar blames are addressed to Zhou, “[h]e has imprisoned and enslaved the upright official”⁵² and “[h]e ordered to his ministers to compose new licentious music”⁵³. Note that here the *Songshu* do not refer to music as “licentious”, *yin 淫*, but as “incessant”, *buchuo 不輟*. Such difference in terminology indeed conveys different meanings: music appears less moralised. Nevertheless, we should acknowledge that *yin 淫* has also the meaning of “excessive”. Somehow, then, the historian still hints at the debauched nature of Qianfei persona that indeed reflected also in a chaotic and hedonistic composition of music.

The **disrespect for the ancestors** is a peculiarity of Qianfei: *he insulted his ancestors, believing it was hilarious*. Indeed, the same was for Zhou since he “neglected also the temple of his ancestors, and not sacrificing in it.”⁵⁴

Another peculiarity of wicked ruling is also **favouritism toward mean people and criminals**. Again, Qianfei fits the category because “*he surrounded himself with mean people,*

⁴⁹ Benevolence 仁, *ren*; Righteousness 义, *yi*; Propriety 礼, *li*; Wisdom 智, *zhi*; and Fidelity 信, *xin*.

⁵⁰ Legge, 1895, vol IV, 294.

⁵¹ Excerpt taken from *Shiji*, 1959, 105. My translation.

⁵² Legge, 1895, vol IV, 294.

⁵³ Excerpt taken from *Shiji*, 1959, 105. My translation.

⁵⁴ Legge, 1895, Vol. IV, 286.

whose origins were unknown". Needless to say, Zhou was depicted in the same way, "They are only the vagabonds of the empire, loaded with crimes, whom he [Zhou] honours and exalts, whom he employs and trust [...]"⁵⁵.

Both Qianfei and Zhou are accused to be **extravagant and lavish**, especially when it comes to women. As we see, "*when [Qianfei] conferred the title of princess to the imperial concubine, the celebrations were far more sumptuous than those usually performed*". On the other hand, Zhou "makes contrivances of wonderful device and extraordinary cunning to please his woman."⁵⁶

The **disrespect toward relatives** links the two tyrants as well. Empress Lu informs us that Qianfei "*met a relative of the imperial family who looked like a servant, therefore ordered to whip and insult him. He despised his family's elders*". Similar blames are addressed to Zhou, who "blindly thrown away his paternal and maternal relatives, not treating them properly"⁵⁷. Evidently, such behaviour ultimately reflects into a **lack of respect to Heaven**. In fact, Qianfei "*opposed to Heaven and violated its principles*". Zhou, indeed, was said to have done the same: "He neglects the sacrifice to Heaven and Earth."⁵⁸

Lastly, Empress Lu addresses the **harsh law and cruel punishment** adopted under Qianfei's reign. Worth noting are the comparison terms used by the empress to depict Qianfei's treachery. "*He was cruel without limits. Cruel sentences and punishment were applied; the conduct of justice was harsh to the very extreme. Jie and Di Xin [Zhou] were not even close to Qianfei's brutality*". Once again, Zhou was the forerunner, "The people complained. When the nobles rebelled to him, Zhou Xin harshened his punishments, instituting the roasting pillar punishment."⁵⁹

What we witness here is a clear **identification** with the two pre-dynastic kings. The narrative tension of such stereotype abundance inevitably gives rise to a clear and straightforward parallel with Jie and Zhou. The "stereotype-ation" of Qianfei reaches its apex.

This comparison leads us to make few considerations. I have presented only a few excerpts taken from the *benji*, but from the whole discourse provided by Empress Lu, it emerges that

⁵⁵ *Ibidem*, 303.

⁵⁶ *Ibidem*, 295.

⁵⁷ *Ibidem*, 303.

⁵⁸ *Ibidem*, 295.

⁵⁹ Excerpt taken from *Shiji*, 1959, 106. My translation.

Qianfei far exceeds the two pre-imperial kings for his treachery and brutality. Albeit short in form, the accusations the historian made are supported by historical data as proof of their validity⁶⁰. On the other hand, notably, the accusation of drunkenness, the disdain for officials' advices, the perversion of music appear quite briefly in the discourse and it seems they are there just to comply with a stereotype⁶¹. In the second part of the *benji*, there is a clear simplification of historical matters and the necessity to provide the discourse with historical reliability; on the other hands, other accusations are not fully developed and the historian raises them just briefly. Whether or not the historian is telling the truth, it is clear that there is the same stereotypical characterisation of tyranny, as in the case of Zhou.

A miniaturised dynastic cycle

Empress Lu finishes her sermon with the following words.

The commander in chief ruler of Xiangdong was a descendant of our great founder ancestor; he is naturally heroic and sage. Emperor Wen⁶² preferred him over all the dignitaries and princes. I had early recognised his brilliant farsightedness. Because loyalists and righteous people worked out a secret and great plan, the tyrant was eliminated and his head was hanged on the white banner! The country prospered once more. The ancestral shrines will last forever; people and spirits know, the Mandate of Heaven is returned. Moreover, [The ruler of Xiangdong] is a person of high moral standing and reputation, the emperorship returned, he observed the old rules of Han and Jin dynasties; therefore he ascended to the throne. The ruler abided to the teaching of the classics to carry the statecraft.

⁶⁰ In the sermon, empress Lu speaks about the killing of Liu Ziyang (456-465), eight son of Emperor Wuxiao and brother of Ziyue; the kidnapping and sexual abuse of Empress Liu Yingmei, paternal aunt of Qianfei and tenth daughter of Emperor Wen; and the punitive expedition Liu Chang (436-497), ninth son of Emperor Wen who escape after Qianfei's ascension.

⁶¹ It might be argued that the historian does not develop fully, by providing concrete examples, the accusation made to the emperor, and that such accusation can be explained only by referring to biographies of those figures related to the emperor. Nevertheless, even though we might acknowledge that such *brevitas* not necessarily means historical falsification, following certain patterns of accusation without fully develop them makes us remain circumspect regarding their historical reliability.

The saviour the princess calls for in the sermon is Liu Yu 劉彧, prince of East Xiang, the region where the rumours of a new ruler started to circulate. After Qianfei's death, Liu Yu became emperor with the name of Ming 明. It might seem that there is a depiction of a brutal emperor in order to please a certain political compliance. One might argue that the historical material was drafted to overshadow Qianfei and highlight Emperor Ming's virtuousness. However, it is not the case. By reading the *benji* about Ming, such wise and illuminated Emperor turns out to be tyrannical after having ascended to the throne. Shen Yue himself points this out in his comment at the end of the *benji* about the Emperor Ming⁶³.

An interesting point of parallelism with the story of the two pre-imperial kings is that the whole sermon is *de facto* a miniaturised *fake* dynastic cycle. Qianfei is not the final ruler of Liu Song dynasty, therefore there is no proper *dynastic cycle* in such case; nevertheless, the paradigm of the tyrant overthrown by his antithesis recurs in the story. Importantly, such opposition of Manichaean historical characters is here used regardless the struggle that brought a dynasty to overthrow the previous one. Apparently, then, tyranny seems to be still perceived within a dualistic conception of pure evil *versus* pure good. Even though such "good ruler" was, in fact, not that good.

The wicked woman

Right after the empress's sermon, the historian operates a proper narrative flashback and narrates an anecdote regarding some dreams the emperor had when his mother died. In one of the dreams, the emperor's mother accuses him of unfilial behaviour, cursing him and his father, Emperor Wuxiao. She also expresses her wishes for a prompt return on the throne of the son of Emperor Wen (future Emperor Ming). Once again, by creating mere fiction, the historian stresses Qianfei's tyranny and justifies the abolition of his reign. The historian ends the annals giving us the supreme anecdote that pushes even further the identification of Qianfei with the pre-imperial kings to its highest peak:

The vices and lust of princess Shanyin knew no limits. She addressed the emperor saying, "Even though your majesty and I are different, since you're a man and I'm a woman, yet we are relatives. Your majesty's harem is full of concubines,

⁶³ Excerpt taken from *Songshu*, 1974, 171.

whereas I only have my consort. It's not fair at all!" The emperor then disposed thirty handsome men to be at the disposal of the empress. He then conferred her the title of grand princess of Kuaiji⁶⁴ province and gave her the same salary of a province prince, [equal to] two thousand families household income. Then, he arranged a music ceremony and twenty armed guardians. Every time the emperor went out in public, she was at the court councillors' side in the emperor's carriage.

Princess Shanyin⁶⁵ reminds us precisely of the wicked concubine— even if she is not an actual concubine. She is sexually active, unrestrained and protagonist of her destiny, as Moxi and Daji were in Jie and Zhou's stories. She bends the emperor to her desires and she an active participant in the emperor's debauchery. She is not a mere passive object in the story; rather, she acts actively to pursue her lustful nature. There is a stereotype in the stereotype: the motif of the wicked woman at the side of the wicked emperor returns. Notably, why did the historian put this anecdote here and not in the princess's biography? Is the account about a tyrant incomplete, unless he has a *worthy* female counterpart at his side? Apparently, it is so.

According to my understanding, Shen Yue, as stated above, gives here a clear example of the problems which arise when the historian merges together historical material presented with a moral-didactic purpose, proper historical accuracy and simplification of the events. The depiction of tyranny flows into a historical narrative that tastes of fiction⁶⁶ (since it records dreams, rumours, speeches, anecdotes), mixed with the necessity to present proper historical data in order to respect the truthfulness of proper historical accountancy. On the other hand, he strictly abides to such stereotypes of tyranny and, in my opinion, such abundance of stereotype cannot but lead to a straightforward parallel with the two pre-imperial kings.

⁶⁴ Kuaiji was a region founded during Qin dynasty (222 BCE), in current Jiangsu. It comprised part of the Yangzi River, parts of Zhejiang and Anhui. During Eastern Han was expanded to include Zhejiang and Fujian. See *Historical Dictionary of Medieval China*, 192.

⁶⁵ Liu Chuyu 劉楚玉 (?-465), daughter of Emperor Wu.

⁶⁶ Chinese conception of historiography and history did not exclude the simultaneous presence of reality and fiction in one work. See Pokora in Leslie, 1971, and Hightower, 1965, 14-19.

Beyond the stereotypes of tyranny

As we have seen, Qianfei's figure is clearly stereotyped as a tyrant. In the *benji* about Qianfei, inside the second *juan* of the *Nanshi* 南史, Li Yanshou ascribed to Qianfei a precise fact that strictly characterises Zhou's life. Such fact is missing in the *Songshu*⁶⁷. In my opinion, the historian wanted to bring the stereotypical representation of tyranny to a closer level of identification between the "great" tyrant of Chinese history and Qianfei.

Here is how Li presents Qianfei⁶⁸,

Before this [i.e. the dignitaries' conspiracy to assassinate the emperor] the emperor loved to wander in the hall of the bamboo park in at Hualin: He ordered the ladies-in-waiting to take off their clothes *and to chase each other naked. One lady refused to follow such order, therefore she was beheaded.*

This anecdote reminds us of Zhou as "[h]e hung meat to create a [meat] forest and ordered to men and women to chase each other naked while everybody indulged in heavy drinking all night long", "[t]he prince of Jiu's daughter did not bend to the king's debaucheries; Zhou killed her in his rage."⁶⁹

As we can see, the anecdotes are almost the same. Firstly, the tyrant orders the participants to run naked and to chase each other; secondly, the woman who does not comply with the tyrant's debauchery gets inevitably killed⁷⁰.

In the account about Zhou, the scene took place in the infamous meat forest (*roulin* 肉林) inside the king's palace. In the story of Qianfei, instead, there is no proper *meat* forest, but somehow the allusion returns because the scene is inside the imperial garden.

⁶⁷ This leads to speculations about the reason: either Shen did not want to put such fact on purpose, or he did not know of such fact at all; it might have been not recorded in the sources he compiled the material from, or the *textus receptus* of the Book of Song might had undergone textual corruption and lost such description.

⁶⁸ Excerpt taken from *Nanshi*, 1975, 70. My translation.

⁶⁹ Excerpts taken from *Shiji*, 1959, 105-106. My translation.

⁷⁰ Truth to be told, prince Jiu's daughter is not reported to have taken part to the debauched game in the meat forest, but she enters into the discourse few lines later. Nevertheless, Jiu's daughter and the lady-in-waiting of Qianfei's story, who instead is present at the debauched game at Hualin Park, share the same upright behaviour, as they do not bend to the tyrant's perversion, and the same ending.

Here, I guess there is a univocal reference to Zhou which goes well beyond the simple stereotype found in the description of the tyrant. In my opinion, Li Yanshou linked Qianfei's anecdote to Zhou's and modelled his characters on such famous paragon because, in Chinese tradition, Zhou dominated the idea of tyranny. Therefore, to the readers of the *Nanshi*, who were the emperors and the highly educated bureaucratic class, such cross reference was immediately clear.

Moreover, Li, like Shen, funnelled the tensions between moralizing necessity, simplicity of style and proper historiography into strict narrative and fictional terms. Li Yanshou's historiographical writing is characterised by a vivid narrative style which depicts its historical characters colourfully⁷¹. In fact, the *benji* about Qianfei renders great account of the wicked and tyrannical personality of the emperor, by proposing anecdotes that describe the erratic and extravagant persona of Qianfei. As an example, the emperor is reported to have vandalised his father and his concubine tombs, as mentioned above, and to have offended his father by calling him a *zhanu* 鬪奴, "slave with a brandy nose". The *benji* also gives extended account about the dreams the emperor had about a woman's ghost who pronounced his imminent demise. Adding such content the *Nanshi* solved many obscure points left in the *benji* within the *Songshu*. Chao Gongwu⁷² 晁公武 highly spoke of Yanshou's work: "[Li Yanshou] cut down the repetitive and added what was missing [*shanfan buque* 刪煩補缺]" to the point that "[his works] far surpassed the previous *Histories* [*guo benshi yuan* 過本史遠]"⁷³.

In sum, the depiction of this emperor's tyranny is still carried by highlighting all those characteristics that Jie and Zhou were condemned for. Qianfei appears to be a microcosm modelled upon their figures. At the time of the Liu Song dynasty, despite many other figures of tyrannies present in Chinese history, Jie and Zhou are still considered the absolute models for wicked ruling as they enter personally into the *benji* as terms of comparison; moreover, within the *benji*, there are clear allusions to the two pre-imperial kings. Finally, the depiction of tyranny involves not only the topical macro characteristics, but it also involves precise ascription to facts proper to the life of Zhou of Shang.

⁷¹ See the preface to the *Nanshi* published by the Zhonghua shuju.

⁷² Chao Gongwu 晁公武 (1105–1180), Scholar of Song dynasty. He was a collector of rare books and philologist. His major work is the *Jun zhai dushu zhi* 郡齋讀書志, a compendium of miscellaneous subjects.

⁷³ Wilkinson, 2013, 731.

Chapter 3

This chapter highlights the influence of stereotypical description of tyranny in fiction, to see how the two pre-imperial kings influenced the fictional representation of Emperor Yang 煬帝 (r. 604–618), the second and last emperor of Sui dynasty (581–618).

For this section, I selected excerpts from the twenty-fourth *juan*, *Sui Yang di you shao qian* 隋煬帝逸游召遣 (Emperor Yang of Sui is punished for his life extravagance) part of Feng Menglong's 馮夢龍 (1574–1646) *Xingshi hengyan* 醒世恒言 (Constant Words to Awaken the World), which in turn is the third volume of Feng's *Sanyan* 三言 (Three words)⁷⁴. The English translation is provided by Shuhui Yang and Yunqin Yang.

Firstly, a few words about the emperor. Emperor Yang was allegedly reported to be a tyrant and a muddle-headed ruler, whose reckless statecraft led to Sui dynasty's fall. His posthumous name, *Yang* 煬, means "to burn, to roast" and comes from his alleged hobby of punishing people using fire tortures. As noted by Wilkinson, such hobby brings Yang in close connection with Zhou of Shang, who was very inglorious for torturing people using the "hot pillar", *paole* 炮烙⁷⁵.

Yang's story, as presented by Feng Menglong, is a fictionalised version of the historical events⁷⁶.

The story starts when Yang, personal name Guang 廣, still a child, already shows his crafty nature when he overshadows his brother Yang Tong 楊侗 (605–619), the crown prince, by exploiting their mother's resentment toward the brother, who ends up being seen as unfilial and slothful. Eventually, he manages to completely overshadow his brother, who is de-ranked to a simple commoner by their father, Emperor Wen 文帝. Hence, Yang becomes crown prince (600) and, along with his father's most trusted minister, Yang Su (544–606) 楊素, he plots against the emperor to replace him. Not long after having become emperor, Yang gets rid of Yang Su who, believing himself the cause of Yang's ascension, starts acting boldly,

⁷⁴ Feng Menglong 馮夢龍 (1574-1646) was one the most prolific writes of his time. For further information, see the appendix.

⁷⁵ Wilkinson, 2013, 272.

⁷⁶ For Yang's detailed biography, see Wright, 1960, 49–60.

disrespecting the emperor and his will. The story then moves to the proper description of Yang's debauchery, who feasts restlessly in his newly created sumptuous palace, the "labyrinth compound"⁷⁷. Here the emperor wears himself out, alternating idly drinking, orgies and lavish tours within his immense compound. On the background, we are told of the construction of the Gran Canal (604–609), which ruins and impoverishes the population as well as the state finances, when "five million four hundred and thirty thousand labourers worked frantically day and night"⁷⁸. State finances are squandered also by a military expedition against the Korean state of Gogureyo, with which Sui has been battling since 598, and by a majestic tour that mobilise "a million people"⁷⁹ when the emperor moved from the capital Luoyang to Jiangdu (Current Yangzhou). From there, the emperor starts touring in the southern provinces, squandering state finances for his own amusement and his ladies' whims. The story ends narrating the last travels and Yang's increasing awareness of an impending doom on his reign. At the very last, the emperor dreamed of Shubao 叔宝 (553–604), last emperor of Chen dynasty (557–589) and another infamous debauched of Chinese history, and of his favourite concubine Zhang Lihua 張麗華 (?–589), famous "state-ruining" beauty. A few days after this dream, a rebellion breaks out: the chief of the imperial guards leads the coup and deposes the emperor, who eventually hangs himself in his bedchamber (618). Later, Tang's army enters the capital and Emperor Taizong 太宗 (598 – 649) orders to burn down the "labyrinth compound" and to set the palace women free.

Feng Menglong's story has to be seen in the light of the context which saw its birth. Feng's story *de facto* is a *pastiche* which mainly relies on different unofficial sources, four of which are of interest here: the *Daye Shiyi ji* 大業拾遺記 (Collection of discovered fragments of the *Daye* era⁸⁰), the *Hai Shan ji* 海山記 (Records of Seas and Mountains), the *Milou ji* 迷樓記 (Records of the Labyrinth Compound) and the *Kaihe ji* 開河記 (Records of the Gran Canal

⁷⁷ Interestingly, in the story, the compound first appear to be in Luoyang and then in Jiangdu (Yangzhou) where the emperor hangs himself after Tang's army enters into the capital. Actually, the compound was in Jiangdu and was built in replacement of a Buddhist temple present in the area. See Wright, 1960, 60.

⁷⁸ See Shuhui Yang and Yunqin Yang, 2009, 550. This project, along with the construction of the eastern capital of Luoyang, the improvement of the Great Canal and the reconstruction of the Great wall, all projects of appalling humans costs, were considered Yang's greatest sins by the later historiography and the cause for Sui's demise. Cf. Arthur, 1960.

⁷⁹ Shuhui Yang and Yunqin Yang, 2009, 551.

⁸⁰ 'Daye' is the Yang's reign name.

Opening). There fictional literary works of late Tang dynasty, reworked probably during Song dynasty (906–1279)⁸¹, deal with the historical events regarding the fall of Sui Dynasty and the rise of Tang dynasty and are all examples of a fascination for Yang’s debauched personality who *de facto* became a stock *villain* in Chinese fiction. Emperor Yang’s story inspired writers during Ming dynasty (1368–1644) as well: we read of him in Luo Guanzhong’s 羅貫中 (c. 1330–1400) *Sui Tang liang chao zhizhuan* 隋唐兩朝志傳 (Noted biographies of the Sui and Tang), in the *Sui Yang Di Fenshi* 隋煬帝艷史 (Colourful story of Yang of Sui), and, of course, in Feng’s story. As inspiring material for fictional writing, Yang’s debauchery did not stop with Ming dynasty, but continued under the Qing dynasty (1644–1912) too⁸².

As noted by Lu, “Chinese historiography developed a system of representation that privileged a faithful, straightforward recording and reproduction of external reality in compliance with the sanctioned, official worldview. In certain respects, historical writings provided the prototypes, plots, themes, and characters used and transformed by fictional writings.”⁸³ This is true not only for Emperor Yang: Zhou and his concubine Daji were also the protagonists of the vernacular novel *Fengshen Yanyi* 封神演義 (The Investiture of the Gods) attributed to Xu Zhonglin 許仲琳 (Ming Dynasty). In the case of a debauched, the historical material provided all the interesting characteristics for a narrative work: luxury, intrigues, sumptuous palaces, extravagances.

At this point, it is necessary to enter a caveat, for the flowering of fictional works regarding historical events and characters has to be contextualised within the development of fiction. During Tang dynasty, fiction emerged as *chuanqi* 傳奇, in literary language, and as *bianwen* 變文, in a mixture of literary and spoken language. Fiction written in proper vernacular language, derived from storytellers’ tradition, appeared only during Song and Yuan dynasties (1271–1368) as *huaben* 話本, which was probably the direct inspiration for the long historical

⁸¹ Of these, *Hai Shan ji*, *Milou ji*, *Kaihe ji* are also called the *Sui Yang sanji* 隋煬三記 (Three Records about Sui Yangdi), of anonymous authorship. These three present a corrupted emperor, highlighting how he would have been *inevitably* overthrown by Tang, in a mixture between pure fantastic elements (ghost stories mainly) and historical facts. For the sources used by Feng in the Emperor Yang’s story, see Tan Zhengbi, 1980, 490-503.

⁸² For example, the *Sui Tang yanyi* 隋唐演義 (Romance of the Sui and Tang), written by Chen Renhuo 褚人獲 (1635–?), represents the major fictional work in this sense during the Manchu period.

⁸³ Lu, 1994, 4.

novels typical of the Ming dynasty⁸⁴. The adoption of the vernacular language significantly broadened the clientele of these works, which then surely enjoyed widespread circulation and popularity, also because they provided a sort of “escapism” from the meagre conditions of ordinary lives⁸⁵. However, as noted by Lu, “*Hsiao-shuo* [*xiaoshuo* 小說], the approximate equivalent of “fiction” in Chinese, was regarded as a political force, a mode of discourse, and ideological persuasion. (...) It was considered (...) as a discourse potentially subversive of orthodox view. (...)”⁸⁶. Fiction written and conceived as a proper literary genre, and not simply as a “defective form of history”⁸⁷ was a gradual change occurring over a long period of time: gradually, the authors got free from the constraints of historiography which did not allow for any deviation from historical material.

Going back to Feng Menglong’s work, in her analysis of sovereignty within the *Sanyan*, Tian Xiaofei notes that “because of the absolute power concentrated in the person of the emperor, sovereignty tends to be an all-consuming role (...). [B]eing an emperor condemns a man to a stereotype: good emperor or bad emperor”⁸⁸. Yang is in fact the quintessence of debauchery, lost in perverted erotic games, alcohol, lasciviousness and unrestrained extravagance. Such monochromatic description of historical characters deepens its roots in the biography genre, *liezhuan* 列傳, canonised in Sima’s *Shiji*. The lives of individuals worth nothing were mere reflections of the greater events and ideals of the time when they took place, within a “familiar horizon of generic, literary and ideological expectations”⁸⁹. *Liezhuan* was a fundamental genre for the development of the Chinese literary production, since it incubated the seeds of fictional writing⁹⁰. Because the literary language developed certain literary tropes, as it happened for the *femme fatale*, they were re-applied in fiction during the seventeenth century⁹¹.

Feng’s depiction of Yang might be perceived as fulfilling a certain moralist intent proper of biographies and historiography. Nevertheless, it has been noted that within Feng’s works, “no

⁸⁴ Hightower, 1965, 76–80 and 102–107.

⁸⁵ Wright, 1960, 74.

⁸⁶ Lu, 1994, 4–5.

⁸⁷ Term used by Lu, 1994, to refer to fiction.

⁸⁸ Tian, 2009, 214.

⁸⁹ Lu, 1994, 7.

⁹⁰ Twitchett quoting Maspero in Beasley and Pulleyblank, 1961, 97.

⁹¹ McLaren, 1994, 1–14.

strident didactic voice is present here; instead many tales shot through with irony”⁹². Regarding Yang’s story, this statement is true. There is no harsh moralised account of the emperor’s life. Rather, the description is made only for entertaining the reader over human foibles. Interestingly, at the very end of the story, the narrator apparently took pity of Yang who, after all, is not perceived to be so “bad”, but rather as a pitiful man who lost himself. By the time Feng edited his stories, “fiction writers configure events, character, and emotions in a new fashion”⁹³, namely, an adhesion to the real word and a more psychological characterisation of the characters: verisimilitude. Fundamental for Feng is the idea of *qing* 情 (feeling, emotions, human nature) and its relationship both with *li* 理 (principles, with positive social function) and *shi* 史 (historical facts). To him, fiction does not necessarily involves faithfulness to history: “Subjective vision and emotional appeal take precedence over the hard facts (*shih*) of history”⁹⁴.

Regarding the Sui emperor, a seminal work was written by Wright in 1960. In his essay, Wright points out that in the *Suishu* 隋書⁹⁵ (Books of Sui, the official history of Sui dynasty, 636 CE) the figure of Yang was intentionally depicted as the “last bad ruler” during the following dynasty, i.e. the Tang dynasty. In order to justify the shift of power, political pressure was exerted on Tang historians to stereotype the figure of Yang as a topical tyrant. Hence, the moralising of Yang’s story to show how his behaviour inevitably led to Sui fall.

Wright also analyses extensively the fiction around Yang’s figure during Ming and Qing dynasties, as well as the stories upon which Feng’s bases his work. Surprisingly, Feng’s work is not cited once in his essay⁹⁶. Wright argues that fictional works were influenced by the historical writing of the Tang dynasty, although it is hard to know exactly when and how the canonisation of Yang as a stock villain happened⁹⁷. He also notes that, in the works used by Feng, Yang is stereotypically depicted as the “last bad ruler” on the model of Zhou of Shang, with a tyrannical behaviour accounted with florid details⁹⁸. Yet in Feng’s story very little of such tyrannical behaviour is depicted, and Yang is more a *hunjun*, a muddle headed, rather than a proper *baojun*, a violent oppressor. The only clue about violence comes in when the emperor

⁹² Hegel in Shuhui Yang and Yunqi Yang, 2009, xv.

⁹³ Lu, 1994, 134.

⁹⁴ *Ibidem*, 134-142. The quotation is at 136.

⁹⁵ The “Books of Sui” are the official history of Sui dynasty compiled in 636 CE by Wei Zheng 魏徵 (580–643).

⁹⁶ Wright, 1960, 69–76.

⁹⁷ Wright, 1960, 72.

⁹⁸ *Ibidem*, 70–71.

wants to ultimate the Gran Canal and issues an imperial decree stating that those who shirked the corvée duties had to be executed. Truth to be told, another clue in this sense is present, which will be analysed in due time, since it fits best to the discourse that follows.

Remarkably, there is no *femme fatale* in Yang's story, neither in the works analysed by Wright nor in Feng's. Princess Xiao, consort of Emperor Yang, plays indeed a marginal role in the story: the author talks about her jealousy, but he does not develop the character any further. Interestingly, Wright notes that she became a *femme fatale* in a work of Ming dynasty,⁹⁹ but in Feng's story the princess does not conform to this stereotype. Wright also notes that fictional writers of Ming dynasty highlighted the emperor's sexual prowess more, although this interest for pornographic stories was remarkably tuned down in Qing dynasty's probably for the increasingly puritanical mores encouraged by official neo-Confucianism made to protect the authors from the censorship¹⁰⁰.

My analysis will now turn to those excerpts I perceive to be greatly influenced by Jie and Zhou's lives to see to what extent Feng draws a parallelism between Yang and the pre-imperial kings.

The behaviour

*Emperor Wen's second son, Yang Guang, Prince of Jin and chief commander of Yangzhou, was born with a prepossessing exterior and a brilliant mind. At age ten e was already an avid reader of book, ancient and contemporary, and knew all there was so to know about medicine, astrology, geography, and the various arts. However, he was scheming crafty treacherous, much given to spying out interpersonal relationships, and able to endure humiliation and keep up pretences.*¹⁰¹

In reading this paragraph, one cannot but to recall Zhou of Shang: the king of Shang dynasty was described to be an intelligent man, extremely gifted both physically and intellectually.

[Zhou] His wisdom was sufficient to resist criticism, and his powers of argument were good enough to cover up his faults. He surpassed all men and officials in

⁹⁹ *Ibidem*, 320, 58.

¹⁰⁰ Wright, 1960, 74.

¹⁰¹ Shuhui Yang and Yunqin Yang, 2009, 542.

ability and towered above the whole world in renown, [so that] he considered that all men were inferior to himself¹⁰².

Needless to say, there are differences between the two rulers. While Yang is more inclined to “*keep up pretences*” and “*endure humiliation*” while acting craftily, Zhou on the other hand is more straightforward in imposing his personality. Nevertheless, I argue that it is the combination of “*prepossessing exterior and a brilliant mind*” that, somehow, juxtaposes Yang to Zhou. Here, as well as it was in the case of Zhou, the discourse emphasises that even if Yang had the qualities to potentially become a sage king, he perverted his talent *only* to achieve a personal goal. Such characteristic proper of Zhou might have been re-invented here for a different situation and with a different outcome.

The palace

The new palace was now complete with belvedere, verandas, secluded rooms and jade vermillion balustrades that ran continuously all around the compound. With numerous gates linking the halls together, the palace glittered in its dazzling resplendence. (...) The expenditure that went into the construction wiped out the imperial treasury. (...) An imperial decree was issued for specimens of every kind of bird, animal, and plant through the land to be transported to the capital via government courier stations¹⁰³.

In my opinion, the conception and the description of this palace are influenced by the *infamous* palaces of the first two debauched kings.

[Jie] built a house and terrace adorned with precious stones which towered high up toward the clouds and rain. Though he exhausted his riches and used up his wealth, still his desires were unsatiated¹⁰⁴.

[Zhou] increased the taxation as to fill the Lu tower with money and to store the granary at Ju bridge. Then, he collected dogs, horses, and rarities, with which he embellished and filled his palaces. He enlarged and ameliorated his parks and

¹⁰² O’Hara, 1945, 188.

¹⁰³ Shuhui Yang and Yunqin Yang, 2009, 545.

¹⁰⁴ O’Hara, 1945, 187.

towers at Shaqiu, and gathered a huge number of wild beasts and birds to be put therein¹⁰⁵.

As for Jie and Zhou, the palace is the architectural reflection of the tyrant's debauchery and extravagance: the more the emperor is debauched, the more the palace is portrayed as lavish, outlandish and sumptuous. There is a twofold hyperbole that comprises both the character and the environment where the character acts.

It seems to me that Yang's palace is clearly modelled after the pre-imperial kings' palaces. Shall we see such a description of Yang's palace as a clear and straightforward allusion to that shared-imaginary¹⁰⁶ of wicked ruling that was canonised within the life of the pre-imperial kings? I believe so. Such juxtaposition of sumptuous palaces and wicked ruling in the case of Yang went hand in hand with the intent to parallel Yang to Zhou and Jie. Indeed, the description of Yang's palace is far more detailed than the description of the two tyrants' dwellings. However, in the description the same clichés reappear: super-luxurious ornaments made of jade and precious stones; collection of exotic beasts, animals and curiosities. All this with the consequent impoverishment of state finances. Feng might have well in mind the peculiarities of the two pre-imperial kings' dwellings.

Engineering for Lust

To the reader, the following parallel might be perceived a bit daring. Nevertheless, I perceive such anecdote regarding Yang's extravagance as being indirectly influenced by Jie and Zhou's stories. As we have seen in the first chapter, the stories of the two pre-imperial kings were characterised by the alcohol lake, *jiuchi* 酒池.

[Jie] made a wine lake on which boats could move around [and from which] at one stroke of the drum, three thousand men drank like cows. While their heads were haltered they drank of the wine lake, and, becoming drunk, they drowned in the lake¹⁰⁷.

¹⁰⁵ Excerpt taken from *Shiji*, 1959, 104. My translation.

¹⁰⁶ Shared mainly by the educated literati class, only partially by the readers of such stories.

¹⁰⁷ O'Hara, 1945, 186.

[Zhou] *stored up grain until it was a hill, let wine flow until it filled a pond.*¹⁰⁸

Besides the hyperbolic description and idea of such *alcoholic* pond, which enhances the extravagance and debauched nature of the tyrants, it is worth noting that the lake was invented purposely to satisfy Jie and Zhou's whims. There is what I call an *engineering for extravagance*: namely, the precise use of human inventive to meet a (wicked) demand. In the case of Yang, the logic beneath the *engineering for extravagance* is applied also for what we might call *engineering for lust*.

*One day, curt minister He Chou offered the emperor a small wheelchair that could accommodate only one woman. On the chair was a device that could be used to bind the woman's hands and feet, if she happened to be a virgin, so that she could not make the slightest move. [...] The emperor tried the device out with a virgin and was thrown into raptures. He called He Chou to him and said, "What a wonderful device you came up with" Whereupon he rewarded He Chou with a thousand taels of Silver*¹⁰⁹.

The Sui emperor, through the creation of the wheelchair, sees the possibility to exercise his sexual desire into a more sophisticated form. The same goal, though not sexual, was achieved by the two pre-imperial kings with the creation of the *alcohol lake*, which allowed them to push their debauched games to a higher level of pleasure. I argue that we should see such examples as another macro-category of tyranny: the depiction of a *good* tyrant does is not simply a depiction of his persona, but it comprises also the materialisation of such debauchery into concrete objects/projects that reflect his personality – the same reasoning can be extended to comprise the palaces as well. Besides my personal interpretation, further scholar analysis will shed more light on this point to ascertain whether is a category often raised within discourses about tyranny. Nevertheless, we acknowledge that there is a link between the two pre-imperial kings and Yang of Sui, and that this link, in my opinion, is also made through a certain presence of *engineering* in their stories.

¹⁰⁸ *Ibidem*, 188.

¹⁰⁹ Shuhui Yang and Yunqin Yang, 2009, 545–546.

The topical omen

Being well versed in astrology, the emperor often rose during the night to observe the stars. He summoned Yuan Chong, gran astrologer, and asked him, "What astrological signs do you see?" Prostrating himself on the ground, Yuan Chong said tearfully, "The omens are very bad. An evil star is pushing aggressively against the emperor star. Disaster is likely to strike any moment now. May Your Majesty practice virtue so as to conquer it!"¹¹⁰.

This anecdote clearly has the purpose of bringing up the discourse the situation in which the tyrant is disowned by Heaven. The position and movements of the celestial body became dominant criteria for assessing a ruler's government, up to the point that the account of eclipses tied to ominous events was manipulated to show the inevitability of a dynasty fall¹¹¹. Considering the way it was presented, I believe that this anecdote is not present just to adhere a certain stereotyped characterisation, but also to juxtapose Yang to Jie. It seems to me that here the story alludes, although slightly, to the myth of the two suns that characterises Jie's story. The fall of Xia dynasty is presaged in this myth. The first clue in this sense is given by the answer of Jie to the admonishment of one of his counsellors inside the *Shangshu* "When the sun dies, we will all perish"¹¹². The reasons of this answer were later explained in a passage in the *Treatise on research into nature*, a text whose genesis spans from the third to the fifth century CE, where it is told of two suns in the sky.¹¹³

In the era of King Jie of the Xia, the king's clansman, Fei Zhang, was going along by the river when he saw tow suns, one rising the brilliant light form the east, the other sinking with fading light in the west (...). The sun in the west means the Xia, the Sun in the east mean the Yin (Shang)¹¹⁴.

Albeit different in terms of content, in my opinion, the star pushing against Yang's star reminds Shang's sun overshadowing Xia's sun. It might be argued that Feng did not know exactly the myth in the way it had been told in the fifth century, and therefore we cannot state the allusion for sure. Nonetheless, Feng, as a literate, certainly knew the figure of Jie: he is in

¹¹⁰ Shuhui Yang and Yunqin Yang 2009, 555.

¹¹¹ Franke, 1950.

¹¹² See first chapter, Liu Xiang reports the same speech that comes from the *Tangshi* within the *Shangshu*.

¹¹³ Birell 1993, 108-110.

¹¹⁴ *Ibidem*, 110.

fact mentioned indirectly afterward. It seems to me that this scene is a romanticised version of the two suns (here two stars) that was been applied to Yang's story.

Direct parallel with Jie

*Your majesty being of a fiery temper, who would have dared to protest? Those who did were ordered to be executed. Looking at one another in dismay, court officials decided to hold their tongues in order to stay alive. Even if Guang Longfeng had come to life, he would not have dared to remonstrate (...). If your Majesty wishes to mobilise the army again, the officers and soldiers will disobey*¹¹⁵.

This anecdote is the sole we have regarding the topical contempt toward advisors which is customary for the tyrant and it is clearly meant to adhere to the topical cliché that wanted the tyrant deaf to good advices. In my opinion, there is not only a general compliance with the stereotype itself, but also a more direct connection of Yang to Jie. First, there is a straightforward parallelism Yang/Jie which is made by raising Longfeng, counsellor of Jie killed because he had dared to admonish the evil king. Secondly, the discourse highlights the facts that the army will not obey to Yang's order; the same was said regarding Jie's army: "At the battle of Ming t'iao (Mingtiao), Chie's soldiers would not fight"¹¹⁶ and Zhou's army "(...) fought at Mu-yeah and the leader of Chou turned down their spears"¹¹⁷. It is interesting to note that such evident parallel with the two kings occurs almost at the end of the tale, when the story reaches its climax. I think that Feng is led to allude to the pre-imperial king because of his abidance to such stereotypes. In other words, I believe that the stereotypical depiction of tyranny creates a narrative tension toward the two pre-imperial kings that leads to a direct juxtaposition between the subject of the depiction and them.

¹¹⁵ Shuhui Yang and Yunqin Yang 2009, 557.

¹¹⁶ O'Hara 1945, 187.

¹¹⁷ *Ibidem*, 189.

Conclusions

As we have seen in the first chapter, the depictions of Jie of Xia dynasty and Zhou of Shang dynasty were purposely conceived to present the kings as the antonomasia of the tyrant, a scapegoat for political failure. The historical narrative around the two kings was strongly influenced by political and cosmological ideas which developed during the Zhou period to legitimise the shift of rulership in the so-called “dynastic cycle”. The depiction of the kings’ personae became stereotypical on customary blames employed again later to describe other tyrants in Chinese History.

In the second chapter, my analysis proved that Emperor Qianfei of Liu Song dynasty was presented as conforming to the *damnatio memoriae* of tyranny. Moreover, although he is not the last ruler of Liu Song, his dethronement recurs with the same pattern of the “dynastic cycle”, pure evil *versus* pure good. In the historical record of Tang dynasty, his person was ascribed with one particular event which, in my opinion, clearly alludes to an anecdote present in the story of Zhou. Qianfei’s depiction gives us also an example of the problematics which arise when the historian’s need to provide accurate historiographical material mingles with the necessity of simplification. This leads to a stereotypical representation of the historical subject. Moreover, it seems that the historian describes certain deeds just for the sake of introducing categories of blame customary in the description of tyranny. We cannot say whether or not he is telling the truth, and, in a way, it is not our concern. It is worth noting that the abidance to such stereotype is manifest and it is still used out in the way it was for the pre-imperial kings.

Regarding the figure of Emperor Yang of Sui, Wright showed that he was undoubtedly characterised as a tyrant for political purposes in official historiography. The historical accountancy about Emperor Yang’s personality influenced fiction writing, as he became a stock villain in Chinese fiction. In Feng’s story, we see how he perfectly corresponds to that stereotype, a *proper* “last bad ruler”. However, we must note that he appears as a debauched king, rather than as a violent oppressor. This account of Emperor Yang presents direct allusions to earlier accounts of the *first hunjun*. These cast direct influence on what is reported about Yang, sometimes exaggerating historical events which might actually have taken place.

To conclude, we perceive how *tyranny* as a concept is construed in medieval and early modern Chinese historiography and literature in reference to classical stereotypical behaviours. In the cases I have presented, we see how the aim of the historian, or of the fiction writer, to

portray a tyrannical ruler adheres, quite precisely, to the figures of the Shang and Xia *hunjun*, even to the extent of direct references to either Zhou or Jie, or both simultaneously. Parallels are not only achieved through this explicit comparison to the two kings, but also by introducing *further stereotypical* historical characters proper of the classical referents (see Jie's counsellor Longfeng in Emperor Yang story). Historico-literary presentations also include deeds and exploits that recall the story of the two kings, as in Qianfei's debauched game, and in Yang's taste for *engineered* pleasure or extravagant palaces. In my opinion, the idea of wicked ruling had at its very core the images of Jie and Zhou, and the stereotypical characterisation of tyranny, in the cases presented, called for a necessity to create direct and indirect allusions to the two debauched kings.

Appendix

Juan 卷 are the sections in which a literary work is divided. The word itself means “roll”: Chinese texts were written on slips of bamboo attached together and then rolled up to be stored. In the case of bulky testes, more “rolls” constituted a single opera. Later, when the medium changed from bamboo to paper, the term was still used to indicate the sections composing a text.

The Book of Song, *Songshu* 宋書, arranged in a hundred *juan*, is the first official *History* regarding Liu Song dynasty and it was compiled by Shen Yue (441-513). Song dynasty was founded by Liu Yu 劉裕 (363–422) in southern China after the military campaign that overthrown Eastern Jin Dynasty in 420. Liu Su ordered to start the compiling of National History in 439. Initially, historical records were compiled by He Chengtian 何承天, Shan Qianzhi 山謙之, Bei Song 裴松之 and others prominent historians at Song court. In 462, Xu Yuan 徐爰 (394-475) led a pull of officials and literati in order to compile the National History, according to the precedent works. Short after, however, Xu Yuan was dismissed by the court, and the compilation of the national history stopped consequently. In 487, the compilation of historiography started once more. Shen Yue started compiling the history of Song according to the previous historiographical material. He continued to carry the compilation of the history of Song dynasty when he moved to southern Qi dynasty and to Liang. The form reached his final form by the time Emperor Wu of Liang ascended to the throne in 512. Other histories of Song dynasties were compiled during Sourthen Qi and Liang dynasties by scholars such as Wang Zhishen 王智深, Pei Ziyue 裴子野, Wang Tan 王琰, Bao Hengqing 鮑衡卿. Unfortunately, these histories has been lost nowadays. The Book of Songs presents some corruption and some parts have been lost; however, many of the missing parts have been restored thanks of the Stories of Southern Dynasty, *Nanshi*. See the preface of the punctuated edition of the *Songshu* edited by the Zhonghua 1974.

The History of Southern Dynasties, *Nanshi* 南史, arranged in eighty *juan*, is one of the twenty four official *Histories* and it was compiled by Li Yanshou 李延壽 (fl. 618–76), scholar of Tang dynasty. The work focuses on the Southern dynasties of the Northern and Southern Dynasty period and it covers a temporal extension of roughly one hundred and seventy years. The work is paired by its twin, the History of Northern Dynasty, *Beishi* 北史, compiled by the

same author. Li Yanshou put into the annals-biography form a draft of annalistic history compiled by his father, Li Dashi 李大師 (570-628), who based himself on the existing *Histories* circulating (for example, the part regarding Liu Song dynasty was based on the *Songshu*). Li Yanshou's intent, as he writes in the preface of the *Beishi*, was to cut the repetitive and adding what was missing in previous *Histories* and to correct those terminological biases caused by the mutual contempt of Northern and Southern courts had toward each other (Wilkinson p.729). Therefore, a huge work of editing was carried out to eliminate elements that were not perceived working according to the sense of political unity proper of Tang Dynasty. Such omissions mainly regarded imperial edicts in the emperor's *Benji*; memorial to the emperors and ceremonies related to courts life in the *Liezhuan* sections; or whole essays and others literary works of major figures of a certain dynasty. See the preface of the punctuated version of the 南史 pp.1-8 and Wilkinson p 731.

Feng Menglong 冯梦龙 (1574-1646) was one the most prolific writes of his time. He came from a wealthy and educated family in the prosperous area of Suzhou prefecture, great cultural centre of Ming China. Around his twenties, Feng acquired the lower degree of the imperial examinations, *shengyuan* 生員, but had not further luck passing the exams despite his extraordinary broad culture and literary fame. In 1621 was published in Suzhou *Stories old and New, Gujin xiaoshuo* 古今小說; in 1624 was published *Comprehensive words to caution the World, Jingshi tongyan* 警世通言. In 1627, *Stories to Awaken the World, Xingshi Hengyang* 醒世恒言, was published in Suzhou and it was the third and the last volume, of his collection of stories written in the vernacular language the *Sanyan*. The individual stories in the *Sanyan* were largely rewritten by Feng and several unidentified collaborators who based themselves on earlier texts of fictional tales. His works encountered an enormous success and were avidly read by scholars as well as by gamblers. In 1630, he decided to accept the status of tribute student, and in 1634 he was promoted to a minor position as magistrate of Shouning Country in Fujian where he served four years. Toward the ends became involved in the resistance of the Ming government against the Manchus forces. He died at the age of seventy-two. See Shuhui Yang and Yinqin Yang pp, XIII-XXII.

Excerpts from primary sources.

I hereby provide the Chinese text used in this work. The text has been taken from the *Zhonghua* Book Company editions of the *Shiji*, *Songshu* and *Nanshi* respectively. For each excerpt, the reference to the pages of the printed version is provided. For the sake of clarity, I also provide the whole passage from which the single excerpt is taken. The parts underlined are the ones I personally translated and analysed, whereas the parts into brackets are those left outside.

Excerpts from the *Shiji*.

3rd *Juan* (*Shiji*, 1959, 105-106.)

(...) (帝紂資辨捷疾，聞見甚敏；材力過人，手格猛獸；知足以距諫，言足以飾非；矜人臣以能，高天下以聲，以為皆出己之下。好酒淫樂，嬖於婦人。愛妲己，妲己之言是從。) 於是使師涓作新淫聲，(北里之舞，靡靡之樂)。厚賦稅以實鹿臺之錢，而盈鉅橋之粟。益收狗馬奇物，充仞宮室。益廣沙丘苑臺，多取野獸蜚鳥置其中。(慢於鬼神。大聚樂戲於沙丘，以酒為池，縣肉為林，使男女裸相逐其間)，為長夜之飲。百姓怨望而諸侯有畔者，於是紂乃重刑辟，有炮烙之法。(以西伯昌、九侯、鄂侯為三公。) 九侯有好女，入之紂。九侯女不喜淫，紂怒，殺之，(而醢九侯。鄂侯爭之彊，辨之疾，并脯鄂侯。西伯昌聞之，竊嘆。崇侯虎知之，以告紂，紂囚西伯羸里。西伯之臣闕夭之徒，求美女奇物善馬以獻紂，紂乃赦西伯。西伯出而獻洛西之地，以請除炮烙之刑。紂乃許之，賜弓矢斧鉞，使得征伐，為西伯。而用費中為政。費中善諛，好利，殷人弗親。紂又用惡來。惡來善毀讒，諸侯以此益疏。)(...)

25th *Juan* (*Shiji*, 1959, 1241-1242.)

(...) 夏桀、殷紂手搏豺狼，足追四馬，勇非微也；百戰克勝，諸侯懾服，權非輕也。 (秦二世宿軍無用之地，連兵於邊陲，力非弱也；結怨匈奴，絀禍於越，勢非寡也。及其威盡勢極，閭巷之人為敵國，咎生窮武之不知足，甘得之心不息也。)(...)

Excerpts from the *Songshu*.

7th *Juan* (*Songshu*, 1974, 146-148.)

(...) 時帝凶悖日甚，誅殺相繼，內外百司，不保首領。先是訛言云：「湘中出天子。」 帝將南巡荊、湘二州以厭之。先欲誅諸叔，然後發引。太宗與左右阮佃夫、王

道隆、李道兒密結帝左右壽寂之、姜產之等十一人，謀共廢帝。戊午夜，帝於華林園竹林堂射鬼。時巫覡云：「此堂有鬼。」故帝自射之。(壽寂之懷刀直入，姜產之為副。帝欲走，寂之追而殞之。時年十七)。 太皇太后令曰：

司徒領護軍八座：子業雖曰嫡長，少稟凶毒，不仁不孝，著自髻鬣。孝武棄世，屬當辰曆。自梓宮在殯，喜容覩然，天罰重離，歡恣滋甚。逼以內外維持，忍虐未露，而凶慘難抑，一旦肆禍，遂縱戮上宰，殄害輔臣。(子鸞兄弟，先帝鍾愛，含怨既往，枉加屠酷。昶茂親作扞，橫相徵討。新蔡公主逼離夫族，幽置深宮，詭云薨殞。襄事甫爾，喪禮頓釋)，昏酣長夜，庶事傾遺。朝賢舊勳，棄若遺土。管絃不輟，珍羞備膳。詈辱祖考，以為戲謔。(行游莫止，淫縱無度。肆宴園陵，規圖發掘。誅剪無辜，籍略婦女。)建樹偽豎，莫知誰息。拜嬪立后，慶過恒典。宗室密戚，遇若婢僕，鞭捶陵曳，無復尊卑。(南平一門，特鍾其酷)。反天滅理，顯暴萬端。苛罰酷令，終無紀極，夏桀、殷辛，未足以譬。(闔朝業業，人不自保，百姓遑遑，手足靡厝。行穢禽獸，罪盈三千。高祖之業將泯，七廟之享幾絕。吾老疾沈篤，每規禍鳩，憂煎漏刻，氣命無幾。開闢以降，所未嘗聞。遠近思奮，十室而九)

衛將軍湘東王體自太祖，天縱英聖，文皇鍾愛，寵冠列藩。吾早識神睿，特兼常禮。潛運宏規，義士投袂，獨夫既殞，懸首白旗，社稷再興，宗祏永固，人鬼屬心，大命允集。且勳德高邈，大業攸歸，宜遵漢、晉，纂承皇極。主者詳舊典以時奉行。

(未亡人餘年不幸嬰此百艱，永尋情事，雖存若殞。當復奈何！當復奈何！

葬廢帝丹陽秣陵縣南郊壇西。)

(帝幼而狷急，在東宮每為世祖所責。世祖西巡，子業啟參承起居，書迹不謹，上詰讓之。子業啟事陳謝，上又答曰：「書不長進，此是一條耳。聞汝素都懈怠，狷戾日甚，何以頑固乃爾邪！」初踐阼，受璽紱，悻然無哀容。始猶難諸大臣及戴法興等，既殺法興，諸大臣莫不震懾。於是又誅羣公。元凱以下，皆被毆捶牽曳。內外危懼，殿省騷然。初太后疾篤，遣呼帝。帝曰：「病人間多鬼，可畏，那可往。」太后怒，語侍者：「將刀來，破我腹，那得生如此寧馨兒！」及太后崩後數日，帝夢太后謂之曰：「汝不孝不仁，本無人君之相。子尚愚悖如此，亦非運祚所及。孝武險虐滅道，怨結人神，兒子雖多，並無天命。大運所歸，應還文帝之子。」其後湘東王紹位，果

文帝子也。故帝聚諸叔京邑，慮在外為患) 山陰公主淫恣過度，謂帝曰：「妾與陛下，雖男女有殊，俱託體先帝。陛下六宮萬數，而妾唯駙馬一人。事不均平，一何至此！」帝乃為主置面首左右三十人；進爵會稽郡長公主，秩同郡王，食湯沐邑二千戶，給鼓吹一部，加班劍二十人。帝每出，與朝臣常共陪輦。(主以吏部郎褚淵貌美，就帝請以自侍，帝許之。淵侍主十日，備見逼迫，誓死不回，遂得免。帝所幸闈人華願兒，官至散騎常侍，加將軍帶郡。帝少好讀書，頗識古事，自造世祖誄及雜篇章，往往有辭采。以魏武帝有發丘中郎將、摸金校尉，乃置此二官。以建安王休仁、山陽王休祐領之。其餘事迹，分見諸列傳。)(...)

Excerpts from the *Nanshi*.

2nd Juan (*Nanshi*, 1975, 70-72.)

(...) (时帝凶悖日甚，诛杀相继，内外百官，不保首领。先是，讹言湘中出天子，帝将南巡荆、湘以厌之，期旦诛除四叔，然后发引。是夜湘东王彧与左右阮佃夫、王道隆、李道儿密结帝左右寿寂之、姜产之等十一人，谋共废帝。) 先是，帝好游华林园竹林堂，使妇人裸身相逐，有一妇人不从命，斩之。(经少时，夜梦游后堂，有一女子骂曰：“帝悖虐不道，明年不及熟矣。”帝怒，于宫中求得似所梦者一人戮之。其夕复梦所戮女骂曰：“汝枉杀我，已诉上帝。”至是，巫覡云“此堂有鬼”。帝与山阴公主及六宫彩女数百人随群巫捕鬼，屏除侍卫，帝亲自射之。事毕，将奏靡靡之声，寿寂之怀刀直入，姜产之为副，诸姬迸逸，废帝亦走。追及之，大呼：“寂！寂！”如此者三，手不能举，乃崩于华光殿，时年十七。太皇太后令奉湘东王彧纂承皇统。于是葬帝于丹阳秣陵县南郊坛西。)(...)

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