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Self-Canonization in Zuo Si's "Poems on History"

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Abstract

Zuo Si's 左思 [ca. 250-305] "Poems on History" [*yongshi* 詠史] have often been regarded as a milestone in the development of the poetic subgenre "poems on history." Scholars have noted Zuo's use of historical allusion and description to articulate his personal emotions and ambitions and to criticize the political hierarchy of the Western Jin [265-316]. In addition, they have recognized Zuo's "Poems on History" as representing an alternative to the ornamental style of poetry popular in his time.

This article addresses the way in which Zuo's poems contributed to the "poems on history" subgenre, as well as how they reflected the broader context of Six Dynasties [220-589] society. At the same time, it investigates another purpose for his use of historical figures in his poetry: self-canonization. This paper argues that Zuo used historical figures not only to express his emotions but also to skillfully place himself into the larger context and lineage of exemplary historical figures. Zuo is thus telling later generations that they should remember him with the same reverence—he is invoking history as a force of self-canonization. This self-canonization perspective reveals the complexity of Zuo's appropriation of earlier historical sources. It also deepens our understanding of the purpose of Zuo's "Poems on History" and of the ways in which history is disseminated through poetry in the Six Dynasties period.

Keywords

Poems on History – Self-Canonization – Western Jin – Six Dynasties – Zuo Si

1 Introduction*

Zuo Si 左思 [ca. 250-305], styled Taichong 太冲 (also written 泰冲), a native of Linzi 臨淄 (modern Zibo 淄博 in Shandong province) was well known for his literary writing in the Western Jin [265-316] dynasty.¹ An extensive amount of Zuo's writing survived into the Six Dynasties [220-589] period—the “Bibliographical Treatise” of *The History of the Sui Dynasty* [*Sui shu* 隋書] records a five-juan edition of his collected works.² However, of all his output, only three rhapsodies [*fu* 賦] and fourteen poems [*shi* 詩] are extant. The best known of these surviving works are his “Rhapsodies on Three Capitals” [*Sandu fu* 三都賦] and “Poems on History” [*Yongshi* 詠史]. The latter, a series of eight poems, constitutes more than half his extant writings, and they are often interpreted as a way to “ruminate on historical themes in order to criticize contemporary affairs and reflect Zuo's frustration at his inability to advance politically or socially in Luoyang.”³ Interpreted in this way, Zuo's poetry is an argument

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- 1 For Zuo Si's biography, see Fang Xuanling 房玄齡, *Jin shu* 晉書 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1974), 2375-77. Other accounts about Zuo can be found in *A New Account of Tales of the World* (*Shishuo xinyu* 世說新語). See, for example, Yang Yong 楊勇, ed., *Shishuo xinyu jiaojian* 世說新語校箋 [*Collation and Annotation of A New Account of Tales of the World*] (Taipei: Zhengwen shuju, 2000), 231-33. For an English translation of this work, see Richard B. Mather, *Shih-shuo Hsin-yü: A New Account of Tales of the World*, 2d ed. (Ann Arbor: Center for Chinese Studies, University of Michigan, 2002), 135-36.
- 2 Wei Zheng 魏徵, *Sui shu* 隋書 [*The History of the Sui Dynasty*] (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1973), 1063.
- 3 J. Michael Farmer, “Zuo Si,” in *Classical Chinese Writers of the Pre-Tang Period*, ed. Curtis Dean Smith (Detroit: Brucoli Clark Layman/Gale, 2011), 328.

against having social status determined by birth rather than merit; his poetry suggests that moral values are more deserving of merit and respect than title and rank.⁴ Scholars have also noted his use of allusion to articulate personal emotions and ambitions and to satirize the political hierarchy of the Western Jin. Finally, scholars have recognized Zuo's "Poems on History" as representing an alternative to the poetic style of ornamental amplification popular in his time. Zuo's poems break from the norms of the subgenre of "poems on history," which usually mimic historical narration and conclude with a conventional moral assessment.⁵

This article addresses the way in which Zuo's poems relate to the "poems on history" subgenre, as well as to the broader context of Six Dynasties society. At the same time, it also investigates another purpose for his use of historical figures in his poetry: self-canonization.⁶ This paper argues that Zuo used historical figures not only to express his emotions but also to skillfully place himself into the larger context and lineage of exemplary historical figures.⁷ Zuo is

4 Yue Zhang, "Approaches to Lore in 'Poems on History' from the *Selections of Refined Literature*," *Journal of Oriental Studies* 49, no. 2 (2017): 98.

5 For scholarship on Zuo Si, see David R. Knechtges and Taiping Chang, *Ancient and Early Medieval Chinese Literature: A Reference Guide Part Three* (Leiden: Brill, 2014), 2380-93; Xu Chuanwu 徐傳武, *Zuo Si Zuo Fen yanjiu* 左思左棻研究 [Research on Zuo Si and Zuo Fen] (Beijing: Zhongguo wenlian chubanshe, 1999); Yue Zhang, "Zuo Si ji," in *Early Medieval Chinese Texts*, ed. Cynthia L. Chennault, Keith N. Knapp, Alan J. Berkowitz, and Albert E. Dien (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2016), 514-18; idem, "A Selective Bibliography of Mainland Chinese Books (2002-2010) on Early Medieval Chinese Literature (220-589)," *Early Medieval China* 18 (2012), 76; idem, "The Reception of Zuo Si's 'Poems on History' in Early Medieval China," *Frontiers of Literary Studies in China* 14, no. 1 (2020): 48-75.

6 Scholars have analyzed self-canonization in Chinese *ci* lyrics, drama, and novels. See Zhang Hongsheng 張宏生, "Wan Qing citan de ziwo jingdian hua 晚清詞壇的自我經典化 [Self-Canonization in Lyric Poetry in the Late Qing]," *Wenyi yanjiu* 文藝研究, no. 1 (2012): 65-74; Zhu Lingjun 朱令軍, "Jin Yong wuxia xiaoshuo zizhu zhong de ziwo jingdian hua tanxi: Cong 'Minghe ban' *Jin Yong zuopin ji tanqi* 金庸武俠小說自注中的自我經典化探析—從'明河版'〈金庸作品集〉談起 [An Analysis of Self-Canonization in the Self-Annotation of Jin Yong's Martial Arts Novels: Discussion of the Minghe Edition of *The Collective Works of Jin Yong*]," *Suzhou jiaoyu xueyuan xuebao* 蘇州教育學院學報 32, no. 5 (2015): 44-50; Gao Yan 高岩, "Lun Yuanqu de ziwo jingdianhua 論元曲的自我經典化 [On Self-Canonization in Yuan Drama]," *Minzu wenxue yanjiu* 民族文學研究 35, no. 3 (2017): 129-35.

7 Scholars have studied canonization in such aspects of Chinese culture as literature and religion. See Grace S. Fong, "Gender and the Failure of Canonization: Anthologizing Women's Poetry in the Late Ming," *Chinese Literature: Essays, Articles, Reviews* 26 (December 2004): 129-49; Yang Yuanzheng, "Reformulating Jiang Kui's Lyric Oeuvre: The Canonization of Southern Song Dynasty Song Lyrics (*ci*) in the Qing Dynasty," *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 135, no. 4 (October—December 2015): 709-32. Fong and Yang's articles refer to research into the formation of the Chinese literary canon by James R. Hightower, David R. Knechtges, Stephen Owen, Kang-i Sun Chang, and Pauline Yu.

thus telling later generations that they should remember him with the same reverence—he is invoking history as a force of self-canonicalization. Zuo compares himself favorably to historical figures and references lessons from their lives when discussing different stages of his own. Zuo uses the experience of these historical exemplars to demonstrate his lofty ideals, discuss the collapse of his ambitions, and explore alternatives for unappreciated scholars such as himself. Moreover, because Zuo was not politically successful, these poems became an alternate path to becoming part of posterity. This self-canonicalization perspective reveals the complexity of Zuo's appropriation of earlier historical sources. It also deepens and complicates our understanding not only of the purpose of his "Poems on History" but also of the ways in which and the reasons that history is disseminated through poetry in the Six Dynasties.

Three main theories have been proposed on when Zuo's "Poems on History" were composed. The first, based on lines in the first poem, is that they were written when he was young, before the Western Jin unified the country.⁸ The second holds that these poems could not have been composed when Zuo was young because the divergent styles, moods, and spirit in these poems reflect different periods in the poet's life and draw on a variety of life experiences.⁹ The third theory points to the coherence of the "Poems on History" as a set—the first poem serves as a preface, and the next seven use miscellaneous historical and literary allusions to expand on the themes established in the first to articulate the poet's feelings—as evidence that the poems were composed as a set relatively late in Zuo's life.¹⁰ I find the third theory the most compelling. Not only do the poems form a coherent set, but their reflective tone, autobiographical style, and the summary they provide of his life all signify that Zuo was thinking about the impression he wished to leave for posterity. "Poems on History" covers a wide range of life experiences and therefore includes a

8 Lu Kanru 陸侃如 et al., *Zhongguo shishi* 中國詩史 [*The History of Chinese Poetry*] (Jinan: Shandong daxue chubanshe, 1985), 287.

9 Xu Gongchi 徐公持, *Wei Jin wenxue shi* 魏晉文學史 [*A Literary History of the Wei-Jin Dynasties*] (Beijing: Renmin wenxue chubanshe, 1999), 393-94; Lü Huijuan 呂慧鵬, *Zhongguo lidai zhuming wenxuejia pingzhuan* 中國歷代著名文學家評傳 [*Commentary and Biographies of Famous Chinese Literary Writers through the Ages*], vol. 1 (Jinan: Shandong jiaoyu chubanshe, 1983), 345; Ye Riguang 葉日光, *Zuo Si shengping ji qi shi zhi xilun* 左思生平及其詩之析論 [*Analysis and Discussion of Zuo Si's Biography and His Poetry*] (Taipei: Wen shi zhe chubanshe, 1979), 24.

10 Mou Shijin 牟世金 and Xu Chuanwu 徐傳武, "Zuo Si wenxue yeji xinlun 左思文學業績新論 [A New Discussion on Zuo Si's Literary Achievements]," *Wenxue yichan* 文學遺產, no. 2 (1988), 30; Qian Zhixi 錢志熙, *Wei-Jin shige yishu yuanlun* 魏晉詩歌藝術新論 [*Wei-Jin Poetics*] (Beijing: Beijing daxue chubanshe, 1993), 308-9; Ge Xiaoyin 葛曉音, *Badai shishi* 八代詩史 [*The History of Poetry from Eight Dynasties*] (Xi'an: Shanxi renmin chubanshe, 1989), 121-26.

number of historical allusions and archetypes: the ambitious youth, the unappreciated man of talent, the scholar eager for fame and reputation, and the recluse withdrawing from court to enjoy studying ancient documents. Zuo places himself in "conversation" with each of these stages of life, in an effort to find a suitable position for himself in the past, present, and future and to transcend the limits of time and space.

2 Self-Canonization in Zuo Si's "Poems on History": Demonstrating Lofty Ideals and Vision

Zuo Si was far from the first Chinese writer to seek to capture his own image in poetry. That ideal has been entrenched in the Chinese literary tradition at least since *The Book of Documents* [*Shangshu* 尚書] stated that "the poem articulates what is intently on the mind."¹¹ The "Great Preface" to *The Classic of Poetry* [*Shijing* 詩經] subtly adjusts this relationship between poetry and intent: "The poem is that to which what is intently on the mind goes. In the mind it is 'being intent'; coming out in language, it is a poem."¹² Here poetry becomes a medium, the external verbal manifestation of internal intent. The "Great Preface" goes on to stress that poetry should be a spontaneous, involuntary, and therefore genuine expression of one's feelings. On the one hand, the principles of the "Great Preface" have served as the basis for classical Chinese poetry hermeneutics for centuries; on the other hand, the inconsistencies between the behavior and personalities of writers and the literary works they produce have long complicated this somewhat simplistic idea of poetry.

Zuo Si carefully crafts the image he presents in his poems. To assure later readers that his actions stem from virtuous motives, he affects an indifference toward material comforts and a lack of desire for fame or power. He was selective about including in his poetry the events that he wished history to remember and omitting the events that he wanted history to forget. Zuo's poems are therefore not particularly faithful to the historical record, but they are faithful to Zuo's feelings. By composing poetry through stitching together pieces of historical lore, Zuo was able to make sense of the past and shape his own self-image.

Zuo's first "Poem on History" is transparently about the poet's own image. Zuo describes that, from a young age, he not only was a skillful writer but also had high personal standards and sought role models among the great historical

11 Stephen Owen, *Readings in Chinese Literary Thought* (Cambridge: Harvard University Asia Center, 1992), 26.

12 Owen, *Readings in Chinese Literary Thought*, 40.

- 鉛刀貴一割, Only the initial cut of a lead knife²² is valued.
 夢想騁良圖. I dreamed my ambitions would be of good use.
 左眄²³澄江湘, Looking to the left, I would pacify the region of the Yangzi
 and Xiang Rivers.
 右盼定羌胡. Glaring to the right, I would subdue the Qiang and Xiongnu.
 功成不受爵, After attaining such achievements, I would not accept any
 rank of nobility.
 長揖歸田廬.²⁴ Hands clasped, I would bow deeply and return to my cottage.

In this poem, Zuo Si recalls his youth, when he “played with a soft writing brush” and “read every kind of book,” in order to demonstrate his inherent literary talent, military aspirations, and overall humility. He begins by stressing his literary talents, claiming that from a young age he was not only skillful at reading and writing but also had high personal standards and sought role models among the great historical figures, such as Jia Yi 賈誼 [200-168 BCE] and Sima Xiangru 司馬相如 [ca. 179-118 BCE]. During Zuo’s youth, a series of major military engagements took place on the Jin frontier. Although Zuo was not trained as a soldier, he states that he had studied Rangju’s 穰苴 famous military strategies and wanted to contribute his talents to the process of unifying the country.

This account of Zuo’s youth is selective and embellishes his abilities as a young man. In fact, when he was young Zuo was a slow learner. According to *The History of the Jin Dynasty* [*Jin shu* 晉書], Zuo Si’s father often expressed to his friends his concerns about his son’s lack of abilities: “When young, Zuo Si tried to learn Zhong and Hu style calligraphy and play the zither, but was not successful. His father, Zuo Yong, told his friends, ‘His comprehension and understanding do not compare to what [my abilities were] when I was young.’”²⁵ The standard history suggests that Zuo Si lacked natural talent. For

22 A lead knife is a metaphor for incapable people—lead is soft and therefore not a good metal to use in the manufacture of knives. A lead knife can cut things once, but then it will become bent and will not cut well again. This metaphor is borrowed from Ban Chao’s 班超 [32-102] memorandum to the emperor, “I ride the sage Han’s magnificent spirit and am willing to die ten thousand deaths. I wish to serve the court as a lead knife that works best with its first cuts.” See Liu Zhen 劉珍 et al., Wu Shuping 吳樹平, ed., *Dongguan Hanji jiaozhu* 東觀漢記校注 [*Eastern Library Annotation and Commentary on the Records of the Han Dynasty*] (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 2008), 658.

23 *Mian* 眄 and *xi* 眄 both mean “look sideways.”

24 Xiao Tong 蕭統, ed., *Wen xuan* 文選 [*Selections of Refined Literature*] (Shanghai: Shanghai guji chubanshe, 1986), 987-88. The English translation of Zuo Si’s poems is based on the commentaries of the Five Ministers and Li Shan 李善 [630-689] (*Liuchen zhu* 六臣注).

25 Fang Xuanling, *Jin shu*, 2375.

obvious reasons, Zuo Si did not want to include these awkward experiences that might cast doubt on his abilities.

Nor are Zuo Si's efforts at airbrushing his image limited to his early years. In this sixth couplet, Zuo describes himself using Ban Chao's famous analogy of a "lead knife," indicating that he wanted to do his best to serve the court at a time of military crisis. Thus, by demonstrating his intentions and ideals as a young man, he attempts to persuade his readers of his dedication to literary and military achievements. After listing his ambitions, he maintains that what differentiated him from other politicians of the period was that he was not focused on fame or reputation but only wanted to use his talents to serve the country. In the first poem, Zuo works consciously and consistently toward building a poetic self for later readers to appreciate and respect. The third poem in the series makes these autobiographical ambitions even more explicit. In this poem, Zuo conspicuously appears via the word "I" [我 吾], informing the audience directly who he is, which ideals he embraces, and with which historical figures he would prefer to be associated:

III

吾希段干木，	I think highly of Duangan Mu: ²⁶
偃息藩魏君。	He stopped the Qin army and defended the Ruler of Wei. ²⁷
吾慕魯仲連，	I admire Lu Zhonglian:
談笑卻秦軍。	He defeated the forces of Qin by talking and laughing. ²⁸
當世貴不羈，	Their contemporaries valued their unrestrained behavior.
遭難能解紛。	When states encountered difficulties, they were capable of solving them.

26 Duangan is Duangan Mu's 段干木 (ca. 475-396 BCE) family name. See David R. Knechtges, *Wen xuan or Selections of Refined Literature Volume One: Rhapsodies on Metropolises and Capitals* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1982), 470.

27 The story about Duangan Mu and the ruler of Wei can be found in the *Shi ji*: "Marquis Wen learned the arts from Zi Xia 子夏 [507-ca. 420 BCE], and welcomed Duangan Mu as his guest. Whenever he passed Duangan's gate, he often stood in his carriage to pay his respects. Qin wanted to attack Wei, and someone said, 'Lord Wei treats people with respect, and people in Wei praise him as benevolent. The high and the low are in harmony, so we cannot yet attack Wei.'" See Sima Qian, *Shi ji*, 1839.

28 The story about Lu Zhonglian 魯仲連 [ca. 305-245 BCE] and his defeat of the Qin army is in the *Shi ji*: "The King of Wei sent his Foreign General Xinyuan Yan 新垣衍 [fl. 257 BCE] to have Zhao confer the title of emperor on Qin." See Sima Qian, *The Grand Scribe's Records*, 7.281; idem, *Shi ji*, 2460. Lu Zhonglian then had a heated discussion with Xinyuan Yan, who was eventually persuaded by Lu Zhonglian and did not dare again to propose making Qin emperor. When the Qin commander heard this, he retreated 50 li. See Sima Qian, *Shi ji*, 2465.

- 功成不受賞, When they accomplished these deeds, they did not accept rewards.
- 高節卓不羣. Their principles were far loftier than those of their contemporaries.
- 臨組²⁹不肯緜, When presented with the silk sashes of officialdom, they were unwilling to tie them.
- 對珪³⁰不肯分. When awarded the jade tablets of nobility, they were unwilling to accept them.
- 連璽耀前庭, A series of official seals shone before the court,
比之猶浮雲.³¹ They considered them the same as drifting clouds.³²

This poem echoes the first poem thematically, reaffirming Zuo's ideal of making great contributions without asking for rewards. To celebrate this ideal, Zuo praises two historical figures of the Warring States period [475-221 BCE] for their extraordinary ability to solve thorny political issues: Duangan Mu 段干木 [ca. 475-396 BCE] and Lu Zhonglian 魯仲連 [ca. 305-245 BCE].³³ Duangan Mu was a principled, erudite recluse and the ruler of Wei, Marquis Wen 魏文侯 [472-396 BCE], admired him tremendously and treated him with dignity. Due in part to Duangan's harmonious relationship with Marquis Wen, the Qin [221-207 BCE] army did not dare to attack Wei 魏國 [403-225 BCE], as they believed a state that knew how to respect talent was well-governed enough to resist their attack. As for Lu Zhonglian, his adroit diplomatic negotiations and eloquent speech secured the safety of the state of Zhao and the state of Yan. Both men refused to accept awards or titles. For example, Lu Zhonglian considered it venal to accept an official position right after he helped the state of Zhao.³⁴

Zuo's emphasis here on altruistic, patriotic efforts resembles how he framed his youthful political endeavors. Not all of Zuo's efforts were futile or indirect. For instance, Zuo participated in an intense debate in the Western Jin court, over whether the Jin house had inherited power from the Han

29 Zu 組 [a thin and wide silk band].

30 Gui 珪 [jade tablet conferred upon feudal princes by the emperor as a symbol of dignity and authority].

31 Xiao Tong, *Wen xuan*, 988-89.

32 "Drifting clouds" is an allusion to the *Analects*: "Eating simple food, drinking water, a bended arm for a pillow—there's happiness in these things too. Wealth and eminence gained by unrightful means are to me mere drifting clouds." See Confucius, *The Analects of Confucius*, trans. Burton Watson (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007), 49-50; Zhang Yanying 張燕嬰, ed., *Lun yu 論語 [The Analects]* (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 2006), 92.

33 For a detailed discussion on the interrelationship between poetry and history in Zuo Si's "Poems on History," see Zhang Yue 張月, "Zuo Si 'Yongshi' zhong de shi yu shi 左思〈詠史〉中的詩與史 [The Interrelationship of Poetry and History in Zuo Si's 'Poems on History']," *Wenxue yanjiu 文學研究* 5, no. 2 (2019): 85-99.

34 Sima Qian, *Shiji*, 2465.

[202 BCE-220] or the Wei [213-265] dynasty. Zuo's contribution was the "Rhapsodies on Three Capitals," a work of more than ten thousand characters (indeed, one of the longest extant rhapsodies), which he spent ten years writing and which informed readers that the Jin replacing the Wei and unifying the country represented the legitimate transfer of the Mandate of Heaven. This work therefore not only demonstrated Zuo's literary talent but also validated the mandate of the newly established Western Jin dynasty. It is also evidence of Zuo's efforts to seek favor from the court.

Zuo had high expectations for the reception of the "Rhapsodies on Three Capitals." According to his biography in *The History of the Jin Dynasty*, "Zuo Si himself thought his writing was not inferior to Ban [Gu] and Zhang [Heng]."³⁵ However, his writing was initially unappreciated by his peers and Zuo Si, seeking to salvage his reputation, actively sought out several important literati to ask for advice and support. One such figure was Zhang Hua 張華 [232-300],³⁶ who eulogized the "Rhapsodies on Three Capitals" and gave Zuo a suggestion on how to promote it: "Since your writings have not yet found recognition in the world, you should have them introduced by some gentleman of eminent reputation."³⁷ Zuo therefore visited the well-known scholar Huangfu Mi 皇甫謐 [215-282], who spoke highly of Zuo's rhapsodies and wrote a preface for them.³⁸

After Zhang Hua and Huangfu Mi's endorsements, the reception to the "Rhapsodies on Three Capitals" became positive, even among those who had previously scorned his writing. This critical *volte-face* led Zhang Zai 張載 [fl. third century] to write a commentary to the "Wei Capital Rhapsody" [*Weidu fu* 魏都賦], and Liu Kui 劉逵 [fl. third century] to compose both a preface and commentary to the Wu and Shu portions of the piece. Zhang Hua and Huangfu Mi's comments, along with Zhang Zai and Liu Kui's commentaries, greatly increased the circulation of the work. As the legend has it, so many people bought paper to copy his rhapsodies that it even caused an increase in the price of paper in Luoyang 洛陽.³⁹ Zuo hoped that the success of his writings would demonstrate his talent and allow him to achieve his political ambitions.

35 Fang Xuanling, *Jin shu*, 2377.

36 Although this example is from the anecdotal collection *Shishuo xinyu* 世說新語 [A New Account of Tales of the World], it probably reflects Zuo's efforts to promote his rhapsody.

37 Mather, *Shih-shuo Hsin-yü*, 135; Yu Jiayi 余嘉錫, annot., Zhou Zumo 周祖謨, Yu Shuyi 余淑宜, and Zhou Shiqi 周士琦, ed., *Shishuo xinyu jianshu* 世說新語箋疏 [Annotation and Commentary on A New Account of Tales of the World] (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 2007), 206. For recent studies on the *Shishuo xinyu*, see Yue Zhang, "A Selective Bibliography on *Shishuo xinyu*," *Early Medieval China* 20 (2014): 104-13.

38 Fang Xuanling, *Jin shu*, 2377.

39 An idiom describing this episode, "the price of paper in Luoyang is dear [*Luoyang zhigui* 洛陽紙貴]" is still used to describe a bestselling book.

However, while the eventual popularity of the "Rhapsodies on Three Capitals" allowed him to enter Zhang Hua and Jia Mi's 賈謐 [d. 300] inner circles, it only won him some minor positions in court, such as palace library assistant [*mishulang* 秘書郎] and libationer [*jjiu* 祭酒]. Thus, his youthful visions of meaningfully serving the state ultimately went unfulfilled.

3 Discussing the Collapse of His Ambitions

Whereas Zuo Si's first and third "Poems on History" focus on his ideals and ambitions, the second, sixth, and seventh poems express his disillusionment and disappointment. He expresses these feelings by commenting on exemplary historical figures, in the process demonstrating that his unfulfilled potential has ample precedent in Chinese history. The second "Poem on History," for example, alludes to a historical figure named Feng Tang 馮唐 [fl. 157 BCE]:

II

鬱鬱澗底松，	Luxuriant pines at the bottom of a ravine. ⁴⁰
離離山上苗。	Lush sprouts on the top of a mountain. ⁴¹
以彼徑寸莖，	With one-inch-diameter stems,
蔭此百尺條。	They shade hundred-foot-long pine branches.
世胄躡高位，	The descendants of nobility ascend to high positions,
英俊沈下僚。	While the talented sink to lower offices.
地勢使之然，	The differing terrain ⁴² made it so;
由來非一朝。	With time passing, it gradually became this way.
金張籍舊業，	The Jin and Zhang ⁴³ relied on the legacy of their ancestors.

40 "Luxuriant pines at the bottom of a ravine" is a metaphor for those who come from humble backgrounds but have real talents and abilities.

41 "Sprouts on the top of mountain" is a metaphor for those who hold high positions but lack talent.

42 "Terrain" is a metaphor for a person's status.

43 Jin refers to the Jin Ridi 金日磾 [134-86 BCE] family and Zhang refers to the Zhang Tang 張湯 [d. 116 BCE] family. The Jin clan held the position of palace attendant [*nei shi* 內侍] for seven generations, from the reign of Emperor Wu of Han 漢武帝 [r. 140-87 BCE] to the reign of Emperor Ping 漢平帝 [r. 1 BCE-6], and a member of the Zhang clan was appointed as either palace attendant or palace attendant-in-ordinary [*zhong chang shi* 中常侍] for seven successive generations, from the reign of Emperor Xuan of Han 漢宣帝 [r. 74-48 BCE] to the reign of Emperor Yuan 漢元帝 [r. 48-33 BCE]. The English translation of the official titles follows Charles O. Hucker, *A Dictionary of Official Titles in Imperial China* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1985), 188, 350. The story of the Jin and Zhang families are in Ban Gu 班固, *Han shu* 漢書 [*The History of the Han Dynasty*] (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1962), 2959, 2967.

七葉珥漢貂。 Seven generations wore the sables of Han.
 馮公豈不偉? How could Sir Feng⁴⁴ not be great?
 白首不見招。⁴⁵ Even in old age, he was not summoned by the emperor.⁴⁶

This poem argues for the importance of family background in deciding one's political career by comparing the fates of Jin and Zhang clan members with Feng Tang. The first four lines establish a contrast between young shoots on the top of the mountain and tall pine trees at the bottom of the ravine. Besides serving as a poetic contrast, this appearance of a natural image at the beginning of a poem is an important classic literary device in Chinese poetic composition, an "affective image" [*xing* 興], adopted from poetic devices used in the *Shi jing*. These natural images are meant to evoke feelings that resonate with the human affairs described in the poem. In this case, the natural disparity between the high-placed sprouts overshadowing the low-lying pines are akin to the Jin and Zhang aristocrats, whose family members could effortlessly obtain high positions, in contrast to the talented and worthy men without family connections, who must toil away in lowly positions. However, Zuo's depiction of Feng Tang is different from the image of Feng in historical accounts. *The Records of the Grand Historian* [*Shi ji* 史記] states that when the emperor spotted Feng Tang in a crowd, he approached Feng, and the two discussed state concerns. Because of the wise strategies he presented to the emperor, Feng was subsequently promoted to a high position.⁴⁷ Thus, although Feng was not discovered in his youth, he was eventually sought out and promoted by Emperor Wen 漢文帝 [r. 180-157 BCE]. The *Shi ji* records this event:

He [the emperor] appointed [Feng Tang] as chief commandant of chariots and cavalry with authority over the palace guards. Emperor Jing ascended the throne in 157 BCE and made [Feng] Tang chancellor of Chu. [Feng Tang] was dismissed. When Emperor Wu was enthroned and

44 Sir Feng refers to Feng Tang 馮唐 in the Western Han dynasty [202 BCE-8]. According to the *Shi ji*: "Feng Tang's grandfather was a native of Zhao 趙. His father had been transferred to Dai 代, and when the Han arose he had been moved to Anling 安陵. [Feng] Tang was known for his filial piety and [therefore] became the chief of the Bureau of Palace Attendants, serving Emperor Wen." See Ssu-ma Ch'ien, *The Grand Scribe's Records*, trans. William H. Nienhauser, Jr. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2008), 8:364; Sima Qian, *Shi ji*, 2757.

45 Xiao Tong, *Wen xuan*, 988.

46 "Was still not summoned (by the emperor)," i.e., he was not given an important position in the court. The English translation of this poem largely follows Zhang, "Approaches to Lore in 'Poems on History' from the *Selections of Refined Literature*," 106-7.

47 Sima Qian, *Shi ji*, 2757.

searched for worthy and capable men, he raised Feng Tang. [Feng] Tang, however, was at that time already over ninety years old and was not able to become an official again, whereupon [the emperor] appointed Tang's son, Feng Sui, gentleman.⁴⁸

The contrast between this story and the picture that Zuo Si paints of Feng Tang is clear. As I argue in another article, "Zuo was surely familiar with the history of the Western Han [202 BCE-8], as he taught it to Jia Mi,"⁴⁹ so he seems to have deliberately altered the image of Feng he presents in his poem. In so doing, Zuo is intentionally prioritizing the purposes of his narrative over the veracity of his account. Eventually, Zuo's depiction of Feng became more influential among later scholars and poets, and successfully supplanted the one found in the historical record.⁵⁰ Furthermore, Zuo's lamentation over the discrepancies between ability and status became an oft-quoted phrase, used to describe political inequities. For example, to explain why he did not rise through the ranks, Xue Cheng 薛澄 [fl. 520] quotes the third couplet from this poem, which points to the lasting legacy of Zuo's poem.⁵¹

While Zuo's second "Poem on History" focuses on the unfair advantages conferred by family status, his seventh poem addresses the importance of opportunity. In this poem, Zuo explores four additional frustrated scholars who were eventually able to carve out roles for themselves in court and become well-known historical figures in history. These four great figures were eventually immortalized for posterity despite their initial difficulties, and Zuo hoped that history (or at least his future readers) would vindicate him as well:

VII

主父宦不達，
骨肉還相薄。

Zhufu was not successful in his quest to serve;
His kin turned on him in disdain.⁵²

48 Ssu-ma Ch'ien, *The Grand Scribe's Records*, 8.367; Sima Qian, *Shi ji*, 2759, 2761.

49 Zhang, "Approaches to Lore in 'Poems on History' from the *Selections of Refined Literature*," 108.

50 For a detailed discussion on the cultural construction of Feng Tang, see Zhang, "Approaches to Lore in 'Poems on History' from the *Selections of Refined Literature*," 106-10.

51 Li Yanshou 李延壽, ed., *Bei shi* 北史 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1974), 1344-45.

52 "Zhufu" refers to Zhufu Yan 主父偃 [fl. 127 BCE], whose story is in the *Shi ji*: "His family was very poor, and he likewise failed in all attempts to borrow money. Later he traveled north to Yan, Zhao, and the region of Zhongshan, but again was unable to find anyone who would employ him. He suffered great hardship on his travels." See Sima Qian, *Records of the Grand Historian*, trans. Burton Watson (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996), 2.192-93; idem, *Shi ji*, 2953.

買臣困樵采，	Maichen was reduced to cutting timber;
伉儷不安宅。	His wife refused to live with him any longer. ⁵³
陳平無產業，	Chen Ping did not have any property,
歸來翳負郭。	He came home to shelter under the city walls. ⁵⁴
長卿還成都，	Changqing went back to Chengdu;
壁立 ⁵⁵ 何寥廓？	Nothing in the house but the bare walls. ⁵⁶
四賢豈不偉？	How could these four virtuous men not be great？
遺烈光篇籍。	Their legacy shines in the historical records.
當其未遇時，	Before their day arrived，
憂在填溝壑。	They worried about being left in the ditch.
英雄有屯遭，	Heroes have difficulties and frustrations，
由來自古昔。	It has been this way since ancient times. ⁵⁷
何世無奇才？	Which generation does not have great talents？
遺之在草澤。 ⁵⁸	They are abandoned in fields of wild grass.

In this seventh poem, Zuo Si mentions four historical figures from the Western Han dynasty: Zhufu Yan 主父偃 [fl. 127 BCE], Zhu Maichen 朱買臣 [fl. 115 BCE], Chen Ping 陳平 [fl. 178 BCE], and Sima Xiangru. Zuo does not provide a detailed biography of these figures, but instead highlights a few significant moments in their lives, distilling them into icons. In this poem, Zuo selected men who, like himself, were underappreciated scholars and officials whose lives were exceedingly difficult prior to the opportunities that changed their place in history. For

- 53 “Maichen” refers to Zhu Maichen 朱買臣 [fl. 115 BCE], whose story is in the *Han shu*: “His family was poor, but he liked reading books. He did not manage any property, and often made his living by cutting lumber. He recited books to himself as he carried the timber on his shoulder. His wife followed him, also carrying timber, and stopped him from singing on the way to the market. Maichen sang even more loudly, and his wife was ashamed of this. She asked to leave him.” See Ban Gu, *Han shu*, 2791.
- 54 Chen Ping’s 陳平 [fl. 178 BCE] story is in the *Shi ji*: “Prime Minister Chen Ping was a native of Huyou 戶牖 in Yangwu 陽武 county. In his boyhood, his family was poor.... He lived in a poor lane at the foot of the city wall with only some worn-out matting as a door.” The English translation is based on Sima Qian, *Records of the Grand Historian*, 2.118; idem, *Shi ji*, 2051-52.
- 55 *Bili* 壁立 means “nothing” or “naught.”
- 56 Sima Qian mentioned twice how poor Sima Xiangru’s home was. The details are in the *Shi ji*: “With the death of King Xiao, he [Sima Xiangru] left Liang and returned to his home in Chengdu, but by this time his family had grown very poor and he had no means of making a living.... That night Wenjun ran away from home and joined Xiangru, and the two of them galloped off to Chengdu. There they took up residence in Xiangru’s house, four bare walls with nothing inside.” See Sima Qian, *Records of the Grand Historian*, 2.259; idem, *Shi ji*, 3000.
- 57 This couplet is Zuo’s summary of the life experiences of these four great figures.
- 58 Xiao Tong, *Wen xuan*, 991.

instance, the first couplet refers to Zhufu Yan. Zhufu was well versed in military strategy, philosophy, and history, but he was continually pushed aside by rival scholars and so could not secure a political position in his own state:

He [Zhufu Yan] studied the diplomatic and military theories of the Warring States period, and in his later years of *The Book of Changes* [*Yijing* 易經], *The Spring and Autumn Annals* [*Chunqiu* 春秋], and the works of the various philosophers. He traveled about among the scholars of Qi but could find none who would treat him with any liberality. On the contrary, they refused to have anything to do with him, so that he could get nowhere in his native state of Qi.⁵⁹

What was significant for Zuo Si was that each of these four great figures was able to overcome the obstacle of his obscure origins and develop his intellect, persevering until he was able to contribute greatly to society. As Sima Qian 司馬遷 [ca. 145-86 BCE] writes of another subject of Zuo's poem, Chen Ping:

He devised many ingenious plans to overcome difficulties and to save the state from danger. In the time of Empress Lü, although troubles beset him, he not only succeeded in extricating himself but restored the dynasty, so he died a dignitary and was known to posterity as an able minister. Truly, "a good beginning makes a good ending." None but a wise man could have accomplished this.⁶⁰

The moral of Sima's story is that Chen Ping, in his wisdom, triumphed over his tribulations and ultimately gained the recognition he deserved. By contrast, Zuo Si does not emphasize these happy endings; rather, he stresses the troubles that they encountered before they were appreciated. The last couplet poses a stinging final rhetorical question to imply that he, too, is one of those talented but unappreciated scholars. The four figures Zuo writes about were eventually offered the opportunity to shine; Zuo, however, is left to trudge along in obscurity, never fully realizing his visions of political influence or social affluence. In this way, Zuo's poetic persona becomes a fifth figure, joining the quartet of historical figures that are the subject of his poem.

Realizing, as explored in the second and seventh poems in his "Poems on History," that family background and opportunity were equally essential to a successful political career, Zuo Si, lacking both, ultimately abandoned the

59 Sima Qian, *Records of the Grand Historian*, 2.192-93.

60 Sima Qian, *Selections from Records of the Historian*, trans. Yang Xianyi 楊憲益 and Dai Naidie 戴乃迭 (Beijing: Waiwen chubanshe, 2004), 143; Sima Qian, *Shiji*, 2062-63.

idealistic aspirations of his youth. In the sixth poem in the series, he vents his rage at the stifling aristocratic and hierarchical social system of his time by commenting on the famous assassin Jing Ke 荆軻 [fl. 227 BCE]:

VI

荆軻飲燕市， 酒酣氣益振。 哀歌和漸離， 謂若傍無人。 雖無壯士節， 與世亦殊倫。 高眇邈四海， 豪右何足陳？ 貴者雖自貴， 視之若埃塵。 賤者雖自賤， 重之若千鈞。 ⁶¹	Jing Ke drank in the Yan market, Intoxicated, his vigor became ever greater. He sang sadly to accompany Jianli's playing, As if there were no one else around. He was no principled hero, But he was different from everyone else in his time. He surveyed the world haughtily from on high, There was nobody who deserved to be called noble. Even as his betters thought highly of themselves, He saw them as dust and dirt. Even as those below him saw themselves as inferior, He treated them as if they were worth their weight in gold. ⁶²
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The three best-known accounts of Jing Ke's story are in *Strategies of the Warring States* [*Zhanguo ce* 戰國策], *Records of the Grand Historian*, and *Master Dan of Yan* [*Yan Danzi* 燕丹子]. The basic outline of the story is as follows. Jing Ke, a native of the state of Wei in the Warring States period, travels to the state of Yan. In the Yan marketplace, he demonstrates his unrestrained spirit to his friend Gao Jianli 高漸離 [fl. 226 BCE] and a dog butcher. At that time, Yan was being threatened by the expanding Qin state, and the prince of Yan, hearing of Jing's daring, recruits him to assassinate the Qin ruler. Jing requests three gifts from the prince of Yan, which he could present to the king of Qin to prove his sincerity and would therefore allow him to obtain a personal audience with the king. First, he asks for the head of General Fan Wuqi 樊於期 [d. 227 BCE], a traitor to the Qin. Next, he requests a map of part of the territory of Yan—to present such a map to the king of Qin would signify the cession of that territory to Qin. Finally, he requests a poisonous dagger. With these gifts, he obtains a private audience with the king. In their private meeting, Jing unrolls the map,

61 Xiao Tong, *Wen xuan*, 990.

62 The English translation of this poem largely follows Yue Zhang, "Teaching Classical Chinese Poetry through Reception Studies," *ASIANetwork Exchange: A Journal for Asian Studies in the Liberal Arts* 26.1 (2019): 89-90.

in which he has concealed the dagger, grabs the dagger, and tries to capture the king alive. He fails, is overcome, and in the end is executed.⁶³

Zuo Si makes the intriguing choice to highlight the moment when Jing Ke enjoyed his time with his friends in the Yan market, rather than the actual assassination attempt. As in previous poems, Zuo alters the biography of a historical figure to suit his purposes. The moment Zuo chooses saliently demonstrates Jing's maverick behavior in challenging the status quo by associating himself with people at the bottom of the social hierarchy. Zuo does not explain why Jing was so unconventional in his choice of friends, but readers can infer Zuo's subtext by reexamining the biography of Jing: Gao Jianli's assassination attempt proved that Jing's faith in Gao's loyalty was indeed wise. Zuo therefore highlights the moral dimension of Jing's preference for the lowly over the noble.⁶⁴

Although Zuo lauds and mirrors Jing Ke's attitudes, consistently championing the talented poor and opposing the mainstream hierarchical culture of his time, he also frequently partnered with and worked for the very aristocratic families he vehemently criticizes. When he was young, the ambitious Zuo sought patronage by joining Zhang Hua's circle. He later became a member of Jia Mi's "Twenty-Four Friends." Both groups were not only literary communities but also elite political alliances. Zuo likely joined Jia's circle to further his own political career.

How can readers reconcile this seeming contradiction? Zuo Si's life was deeply affected by politics and court intrigue. Because of Emperor Hui's 惠帝 [r. 291-306] inability to manage the court, his wife Empress Jia 賈皇后 [257-300] took control, purging her opponents. Members of her clan became increasingly powerful, especially her nephew Jia Mi. As Michael Farmer observes, "The empress's nephew, Jia Mi, was given free rein at court, and officials personally loyal to the empress were placed in charge of governmental affairs. Later historians view the nine years of the empress's control of the Jin court as a virtual reign of terror, describing her with terms such as 'jealous, vindictive, cruel, and murderous.'"⁶⁵ This was the environment in which Zuo sought to succeed and survive. To this end, he developed a deep personal relationship with Jia Mi. The *Jin shu* notes that "Jia Mi appointed Zuo Si to lecture on the *History of the*

63 The summary of the Jing Ke story follows Zhang, "Teaching Classical Chinese Poetry through Reception Studies," 88-89.

64 For a detailed discussion on Zuo Si's adaptation of the Jing Ke lore in this poem, see Yuri Pines, "A Hero Terrorist: Adoration of Jing Ke Revisited," *Asia Major* 21, no. 2 (2008): 1-34.

65 J. Michael Farmer, "On the Composition of Zhang Hua's 'Nüshi zhen,'" *Early Medieval China* 10-11, no. 1 (2004), 163-64.

Former Han.⁶⁶ Zuo believed that it would be advantageous for his career to develop relationships with the elite scholars of his day, but he became profoundly disillusioned by the ostentatious lives of luxury led by Jia Mi's circle.

4 Paths Forward for Unappreciated Scholars

After the collapse of his political endeavors, Zuo explored ways in which an unappreciated scholar such as himself could at least achieve literary immortality. In the fourth poem of his "Poems on History," Zuo models himself after the Han dynasty figure Yang Xiong 揚雄 [53 BCE-18]:

IV

濟濟京城內，	How dense and magnificent it is inside the capital, ⁶⁷
赫赫王侯居。	Impressive princes and marquises dwell within. ⁶⁸
冠 ⁶⁹ 蓋 ⁷⁰ 蔭四術，	Carriage canopies shade the roads in all directions,
朱輪竟長衢。	Vermilion wheels fill the long thoroughfares.
朝集金張館，	At dawn they gather in Jin and Zhang mansions.
暮宿許史廬。	At dusk they sleep in Xu and Shi's ⁷¹ villas.
南鄰擊鐘磬，	In the southern district, they beat chimes and bells.
北里吹笙 ⁷² 竽。 ⁷³	In the northern alley, they blow reeds and wooden pipes.
寂寂楊子宅，	How quiet and silent Master Yang's residence was!
門無卿相輿。	No high officials' carriages stopped at his home. ⁷⁴

66 Farmer, "On the Composition of Zhang Hua's 'Nüshi zhen,'" 163-64.

67 "Capital" refers to the capital of the Western Han dynasty, Chang'an 長安.

68 The caesura for this line could also be placed between the second and third characters, 赫赫/王侯居, which would read "How impressive princes and marquises' mansions are."

69 *Guan* 冠 [top hat that goes with formal dress].

70 *Gai* 蓋 [circular covering on ancient vehicles].

71 Xu 許 and Shi 史 refer to Xu Guanghan 許廣漢 [117-61 BCE] and Shi Gao 史高 [d. 42 BCE]. They were relatives of Emperor Xuan of the Han: Xu Guanghan was the empress's father, while Shi Gao was the eldest son of the emperor's grandmother's brother. Xu and Shi are often used together as a metonym for prominent families.

72 *Sheng* 笙, a reed pipe wind instrument.

73 *Yu* 竽, another ancient musical instrument, a pipe.

74 See Ban Gu, *Han shu*, 3585: "His home was often poor, but he liked drinking wine. Few people came to visit him."

寥寥空宇中， Isolated and lonely, he remained in his empty house.
 [or: His mind wandered in the empty expanses of the
 cosmos.]⁷⁵

所講在玄虛。 What he taught was shrouded in mystery.⁷⁶
 言論準宣尼，⁷⁷ In his speech, he regarded Confucius as the standard.⁷⁸
 辭賦擬相如。 In his rhapsodies, he imitated Sima Xiangru.⁷⁹
 悠悠百世後， Even after a hundred generations have passed by,
 英名擅八區。⁸⁰ His illustrious fame occupies the whole world.

Based on the content of the poem, it is possible that it was composed after Zuo Si moved to the capital and saw how the elites lived. The first two couplets provide a general panorama of the bustling atmosphere and magnificent mansions of the capital, while the third and fourth couplets zoom in and focus on the luxurious lifestyles of the wealthy city dwellers, which entailed extensive politicking and impressive musical performances in sprawling villas. This hustle and bustle in the city acts as a foil to Yang Xiong's situation in the following couplets. In contrast to the homes of the wealthy, Yang's home is seldom visited. Yet this does not mean he was isolated; in fact he had plenty

75 This couplet about Yang Xiong has two possible interpretations. It could mean he physically stayed in his quiet house, teaching his understanding of the *Yijing* to select pupils: "Lonely and barren, he stayed in his empty house." Or it could be a metaphor for his mental journeys: "His mind wandered in the empty expanses of the cosmos."

76 Mystery refers to *The Supreme Mystery* [*Tai xuan* 太玄], a Daoist concept and the title of one of his works. See Ban Gu, *Han shu*, 3583: "Yang Xiong thought no canon was more influential than *The Book of Changes*, and so, imitating the book, he wrote *The Supreme Mystery*." Yang Xiong was poor and taught from his works *The Supreme Mystery* and *Exemplary Words* [*Fayan* 法言] at home. See Ban Gu, *Han shu*, 3585: "Attentive people traveled from far and wide, carrying wine and food, to pursue knowledge with Yang Xiong. However, Hou Pa, a native of Julu, often learned from him in Yang Xiong's empty house, where Yang taught him the *The Supreme Mystery* and *Exemplary Words*."

77 *Xuanni* 宣尼 refers to Confucius. Emperor Ping of the Han dynasty conferred upon Confucius the title *Xuanni*.

78 Yang Xiong, imitating the *Analects of Confucius*, wrote *Exemplary Words*. The details can be seen in Ban Gu, *Han shu*, 3583: "Yang Xiong thought no biographies were more influential than *The Analects of Confucius*; so, imitating it, he wrote *Exemplary Words*."

79 Yang Xiong, imitating Sima Xiangru, wrote four rhapsodies. The details can be seen in the *Han shu*: "Previously, Shu had Sima Xiangru, who wrote rhapsodies very magnificent and gentle. Yang Xiong admired Sima Xiangru's writings, and so every time when he wrote rhapsodies, he often imitated Sima Xiangru's style.... No diction was more beautiful than Sima Xiangru, and so imitating his rhapsodies, Yang Xiong wrote four rhapsodies." See Ban Gu, *Han shu*, 3515, 3583.

80 Xiao Tong, *Wen xuan*, 989-90.

of disciples, but they were not drawn from the ranks of the elite. Furthermore, Zuo highlights that Yang saw Confucius and Sima Xiangru as his role models, implying that a good scholar and writer not only should possess outstanding literary skills but also hold high moral values. Although Yang was not “successful” in his lifetime in terms of his political career and worldly possessions, his fame as a scholar grew and lasted long after his death, as evidenced by Zuo Si’s poem, which was written centuries later. By contrast, many of those nobles who obtained wealth, power, and fame in their lifetime have long since been forgotten.

Naturally, as someone who had failed to gain respect in his lifetime, Zuo Si chose to employ allusions to Yang Xiong in his poem in the hope that future readers would remember his virtue and talent, just as other great historical figures, such as Yang, were posthumously revered.⁸¹ Zuo also attempts to persuade his readers of his own worthiness by demonstrating his long-held ideals through devotion to these historical figures. When Zuo “sings” [*yong* 詠] Yang’s praises, he is also simultaneously comforting and praising himself. The two figures shared many similarities in terms of disposition and values. Yang, for his part, was not involved in much court intrigue as far as we know. He participated in politics but in his later years preferred solitude and retired to focus on cultivating his morality and literary talent. Although Yang was poor and underappreciated in his lifetime, his philosophical and literary writings have been passed down for generations. Yang’s works transcend time and space, whereas the actions of fame-obsessed officials are ephemeral; words have been preserved and transmitted whereas the memory of deeds has eroded. In a similar fashion, although Zuo sought to serve the country as a young man, after years of political struggle, he felt underappreciated and eventually abandoned his ideals due to the toxic political environment. Like Yang, Zuo escaped the political rat race in his later years and focused on reading ancient documents and writing down his thoughts.

In addition to having a similar worldview and similar life pursuits, Zuo Si and Yang Xiong had high standards in their writing. Both sought to imitate Sima Xiangru’s rhapsodies, wrote rhapsodies on the subject of capitals, and composed rhapsodies that became well known. Zuo was, of course, aware of Yang’s famous “Rhapsody on the Shu Capital” [*Shudu fu* 蜀都賦]. Recent scholars have acknowledged Yang’s contribution to this literary genre. According to David Knechtges, “Yang Xiong was the first to move from description of

81 The following comparison between Zuo and Yang is based on Zhang, “Zuo Si ‘Yongshi’ zhong de shi yu shi,” 91-4 and Kōzen Hiroshi 興膳宏, “Sashi to Eishi shi 左思と詠史詩 [Zuo Si’s Poems on History],” *Chūgoku bungaku hō* 中國文學報 21 (1966): 28-32.

the imperial hunting party to description of a particular place. He wrote the first piece in Chinese literary history on a regional capital—the 'Shu Capital.' Ban Gu, Zhang Heng, and Zuo Si all were inspired by this rhapsody."⁸² Zuo so admired Yang that he quoted Yang's comments on poetic principles and the origins of the *fu* [rhapsody] genre in his preface to "Rhapsodies on Three Capitals."⁸³ Zuo even followed Yang's example in writing a rhapsody on the Shu capital.

The two men shared not only similar values and approaches to literary creation but also physical traits. Both Yang and Zuo were homely and stuttered, defects of which they were acutely aware. In a society that emphasized comportment and speech in its educated men, Yang and Zuo both knew that they were likely to be unappreciated in their own time, so they sought to cultivate their talent as writers. Zuo saw his literary talent as compensation for his physical shortcomings and a way to achieve success—if not in the short term in the political arena, at least in the long term, in the literary canon. For this reason, Yang, who had a reclusive focus on writing, was the ideal model.

Zuo Si's positioning of Yang Xiong as a figure who was not recognized by his contemporaries but became famous posthumously is a veiled critique of Western Jin society. And by comparing himself to Yang, Zuo tacitly implies that his own abilities are on par with those of Yang, and that, like Yang's talents, his own should be appreciated by future readers. Finally, regarding Yang as his model, Zuo realized that he did not belong in the social environment in the capital and made the important decision to leave. In his fifth poem, he contrasts himself with the noble families he had left behind:

V

皓天舒白日， 靈景耀神州。 列宅紫宮裏， 飛宇若雲浮。	The bright sky unfurls the white sun, The sunlight shines on the divine state. An array of residences in the Purple Palace, ⁸⁴ Flying eaves are like floating clouds.
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82 Gong Kechang, *Studies on the Han Fu*, trans. David R. Knechtges (Ann Arbor: American Oriental Society, 1997), 224.

83 From the preface: "The *Songs* has six principles. The second is called *Exposition*.' Yang Xiong has said, 'The *fu* of the *Songs* poets are beautiful but maintain standards.'" The English translation follows David R. Knechtges, *Wen xuan or Selections of Refined Literature Volume One: Rhapsodies on Metropolises and Capitals* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1982), 337; Xiao Tong, *Wen xuan*, 173.

84 The most common usage of "Purple Palace" during this period is as the name of a constellation. Here it is an allusion to the capital of Western Jin, Luoyang.

峩峩高門內， 藹藹皆王侯。 自非攀龍客， 何爲歛來遊？ 被褐出閭闔， ⁸⁶ 高步追許由。 振衣千仞崗， ⁸⁸ 濯足萬裏流。 ⁸⁹	Tall and high, behind the imposing gates, Numerous and vast, all belong to nobility. I am not a dragon-mounted guest, ⁸⁵ Why have I suddenly come here to travel? Clothed as a commoner, I go out the palace gate, With long strides, I pursue Xu You. ⁸⁷ I shake my clothes on the steep cliff edge. I bathe my feet in the long flowing river.
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Whereas the previous poem emphasizes literary creation as a route toward achieving posthumous fame, this poem redefines success, exploring the possibility of living the life of a recluse. The first three couplets are stylistically similar to the poem on Yang Xiong, offering a broad view of the city to depict its stunning grandeur. The poem then describes the palaces, mansions, and residences of high-ranking officials as a way to convey the luxurious lifestyle in the capital. This glorious and glamorous scene creates an enormous contrast to Zuo Si's conditions.

In the fourth couplet, Zuo enters the poem, this time by employing the self-reflexive *zi* 自 [I myself]. Here, he openly questions his original intentions and expresses regret over his past behavior—perhaps including his attempts to seek patronage. This couplet is therefore a confession. Zuo admits that he no longer fits in with the culture in the capital. Eventually, his attempts at gaining entry to court politics sufficiently thwarted, he decides to leave the capital.

In the last two couplets, Zuo Si expresses his desire to follow in the footsteps of the recluse Xu You 許由, a paragon of principle in the Chinese cultural imagination by the time of the Western Jin. Zuo claims that he no longer desires to pursue fame or power, as the seemingly glamorous contemporary world is merely an unremitting scramble for success. Qu Yuan 屈原 [ca. 340-278 BCE] purportedly once said: “Because all the world is muddy and I alone am clear,

85 “Dragon-mounted guest,” that is, those who try to curry favor with nobility.

86 *Changhe* 閭闔, the palace gate of Luoyang.

87 “With long strides,” i.e., Zuo Si would like to be far away from the sordid world of the capital. According to folklore, Xu You was a hermit who lived during the time of Yao 堯. “Yao yielded the world to Xu You, but Xu You would not accept. Humiliated at Yao's offer, he fled into hiding.” See Sima Qian, *The Grand Scribe's Records*, 7.1; idem, *Shi ji*, 2121.

88 A *ren* is a measure of about eight feet.

89 “Shaking clothes and washing feet,” i.e., Zuo Si wanted to get away from worldly customs; Xiao Tong, *Wen xuan*, 990.

and because all men are drunk and I alone am sober."⁹⁰ After living in the chaotic, hurly-burly capital city, Zuo was similarly disillusioned with official life and sought tranquility. He uses allusions to Xu You, who straddles the indistinct line between myth and history, to create his own legend.

After encountering difficulties and frustrations, he eventually abandoned his political aspirations: "I am not a dragon-mounted guest. / Why have I suddenly come here to travel?"⁹¹ While the first poem describes the ambitions of his youth, the fifth poem allows him to confess in his old age—before it is too late—that he is not cut out for political life. Whether Zuo Si wrote the poems periodically as he aged or all at once as he looked back on his life (or perhaps some combination thereof), poetry served as a way for him to work out the tensions between life's practicalities and his own exacting ideals.

After stepping outside the capital and expressing his own frustration by writing about various historical figures, Zuo Si, in the final poem of the series, reiterates his belief that unappreciated scholars can build themselves a legacy by living a reclusive life. To this end, he investigates one of life's ironies: those who openly seek fame and power often die prematurely attempting to obtain them, while those who seek to transcend fame and greed are eternally remembered for their virtues by later generations and achieve lasting glory. It is this fame, Zuo Si asserts, that true scholars pursue:

VIII

習習籠中鳥，	Fluttering, flapping, a bird within a cage,
舉翮觸四隅。	Beats its wings and touches the four corners.
落落窮巷士，	The frustrated scholar in the poor alley,
抱影守空廬。	Embraces his shadow and guards an empty hut.
出門無通路，	He goes outside but finds no way forward,
枳 ⁹² 棘 ⁹³ 塞中塗。	Thorny trees block his road.
計策棄不收，	His plans and strategies are rejected.
塊若枯池魚。	His lonely appearance, like a fish in a dried-up pool.
外望無寸祿，	Gazing afar, he has no stable income,
內顧無斗儲。	Turning back within, he has no rice to spare.

90 David Hawkes, *Ch'u Tz'ü: The Songs of the South, An Ancient Chinese Anthology* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1962), 90; Wang Siyuan 王泗原, *Chuci jiaoshi 楚辭校釋* (Beijing: Renmin jiaoyu chubanshe, 1990), 295.

91 Xiao Tong, *Wen xuan*, 990.

92 *Zhi* 枳 [*citrus trifoliata*, trifoliolate orange trees].

93 *Ji* 棘 [*ziziphus jujuba var. spinosa*, sour jujube trees].

親戚還相蔑，
 朋友日夜疎。
 蘇秦北遊說，
 李斯西上書。
 俛仰生榮華，
 咄嗟復彫枯。
 飲河期滿腹，
 貴足不願餘。
 巢林棲一枝，
 可爲達士模。⁹⁷

Relatives turn their backs in disdain.
 Friends become more distant each passing day.
 Su Qin traveled north to spread his teachings,⁹⁴
 Li Si submitted his memorial in the west.⁹⁵
 They obtained prosperity and high positions rapidly,
 Yet in a moment, they withered and died.
 In drinking from the river, [a mole] expects to fill its belly,⁹⁶
 Valuing sufficiency, and not longing for more.
 [The wren] makes its nest and roosts on a single tree
 branch,
 This can be a model for all enlightened scholars.

In this poem, Zuo highlights the importance of achieving contentment. At the beginning of the poem, he discusses the physical and spiritual difficulties that scholars who cannot find political (and therefore financial) success encounter: challenging living conditions and the contempt or indifference of their relatives. This vivid picture echoes his seventh poem on the four worthies. In this poem, Zuo offers Su Qin 蘇秦 [d. 284 BCE] and Li Si 李斯 [284-208 BCE], historical figures who rapidly ascended to powerful positions but just as quickly

94 Su Qin's 蘇秦 [d. 284 BCE] story is in the *Shi ji*: "Su Qin was a native of East Zhou's Luoyang.... [He said], 'I hope, Great King, that you might join in alliance with Zhao. When the world is as one, the state of Yan is sure to have no fears.' Marquis Wen said, 'Your advice is acceptable, sir, but my state is small. To the west we are near mighty Zhao, to the south we are close to Qi. Qi and Zhao are mighty states. If you are set on forming an alliance to secure the safety of Yan, we ask permission to follow with our state.'" See Sima Qian, *The Grand Scribe's Records*, 7.97, 99; idem, *Shi ji*, 2241, 2244.

95 Li Si's 李斯 [284-208 BCE] story is in the *Shi ji*: "Li Si was a native of Shangcai in Chu.... The clansmen of the House of Qin and the great vassals all said to the King of Qin: 'Most of the men of the feudal lords who come to serve Qin seek to advise or spy on Qin for their rulers. We ask that you expel all foreigners.' Li Si was also proposed as one of those to be expelled. [Li] Si thus submitted a memorial to refute this idea.... The King of Qin then revoked the decree expelling foreigners, restored Li Si's position, and eventually adopted his schemes. [His] position reached Commandant of Justice." See Sima Qian, *The Grand Scribe's Records: The Memoirs of Pre-Han China*, 7.335, 340; idem, *Shi ji*, 2539, 2541, 2546.

96 This is a reference to a parable from the *Zhuangzi* 莊子: "When the tailorbird builds her nest in the deep wood, she uses no more than one branch. When the mole drinks at the river, he takes no more than a bellyful. Go home and forget the matter, my lord. I have no use for the rulership of the world!" See Zhuangzi, *The Complete Works of Zhuangzi*, trans. Burton Watson (New York: Columbia University Press, 2013), 3-4; Chen Guying 陳鼓應, *Zhuangzi jinzhu jinyi* 莊子今註今譯 [A Modern Annotation and Translation of the *Zhuangzi*] (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1983), 18.

97 Xiao Tong, *Wen xuan*, 991-92.

met their demise, as a contrast to those talented men who were blocked from success. The account of Li Si in the *Shi ji* illustrates this point well:

Beginning in a simple hamlet, Li Si traveled among the feudal lords, then came to serve the Qin. "Seizing flaws and chinks," this was how he assisted the First Emperor. [The Emperor] finally succeeded in his imperial enterprise and Si became one of his "Three Masters." He can be said to have been put to an exalted use indeed.... In the seventh month of the second year of the Second Emperor [208 BCE] it was proclaimed that [Li] Si should be sentenced to the five punishments and cut in half at the waist in the marketplace of Xianyang.... His clan to the third degree [of relationship] was wiped out.⁹⁸

Zuo Si uses Li Si's life to make an insightful comment: life, as a rule, is volatile. In this last poem, Zuo offers an alternative to the desperate struggle for worldly power, suggesting that enlightened scholars should not eagerly seek fame and reputation because these are states subject to sudden, even violent, change. Rather than emulate "successful" politicians such as Su Qin and Li Si, Zuo argues that one should instead behave like the mole and the wren, as depicted in the *Zhuangzi* 莊子, because they only value self-sufficiency and do not yearn for more than they need. Thus, the eighth poem not only criticizes the strict hierarchical society of the Western Jin but also suggests a way for the talented poor to survive changing times. This mentality is also a reflection of the broader social zeitgeist after the fall of the Han dynasty. The disintegration and instability of the dynasty led to mass migrations of the elite population and deprived many of the protection of a close kinship network. In this situation, as far as Zuo Si was concerned, the talented poor might have been better served by following a path of reclusion and self-reliance—as Zuo Si did after his supporters, such as Jia Mi and Zhang Hua, were killed in 300.⁹⁹

In sum, using poetry to confess to his own faults and suggest a way out for scholars in a similar predicament, Zuo creates a self-image for later generations to remember. By the end of the "Poems on History," the extended and enduring fame of literature has gained more appeal for Zuo Si than political success, which eluded him all his life and proved dangerous for his friends who had achieved it. Thus Zuo urges us to aim for loftier goals. Only by cultivating and practicing virtue—and expressing it in an enduring literary form—can one be forever remembered.

98 Sima Qian, *The Grand Scribe's Records*, 7:355-57; Sima Qian, *Shi ji*, 2562-63.
99 Fang Xuanling, *Jin shu*, 2377.

5 Conclusion

This article investigated Zuo Si's efforts at self-canonization in his eight "Poems on History." By comparing his deeds and ambitions favorably with those of historical figures, these poems elevate Zuo's status and offer him an opportunity to disseminate his ideas, present his ideal self, and influence the later reception of his image and literary works. By understanding how Zuo wrote his "Poems on History" with future generations in mind, we gain a window into self-canonization practices in the Six Dynasties.

The self-narrative Zuo Si presents is a journey from youthful ambitions to eventual disillusionment. He gives us a condensed version of his life by recounting the fate of all educated men with political ambitions but no resources or connections: after years of struggle, they gradually come to doubt the feasibility of their lofty aspirations and realize that the social hierarchy and lack of opportunity will forever bar them from achieving their goals.¹⁰⁰ Zuo creates a stark contrast between youthful idealism and adult realism. By expressing his intentions and frustrations through allusions and other rhetorical devices in these eight poems, he tries to persuade his readers that his motivation for seeking political patronage was not fame or power but the desire to use his talent to serve the country. After failing to achieve political success, Zuo settled for conveying his ambitions and ideals to later generations through commenting on historical figures. Ultimately, through his "Poems on History," he succeeded in crafting a self-image comparable to that of those figures and thereby achieving self-canonization.

Zuo Si's innovative use of the word "I" and occasional self-reference tell readers that the real intention in writing poems about other historical figures is to establish an ideal poetic self. In the poetic culture of the Western Jin, a reader would consider direct autobiographical poetry biased and self-aggrandizing. Zuo's use of historical allusions to express his emotions allows him to assume an air of modesty and to lend his feelings legitimacy by linking them to admired figures in history. He did not want readers to see his anxiety and eagerness directly. Initially, it may seem as if Zuo's conscious shaping of his reputation belies the idea that a poem is an original, authentic, spontaneous expression of the self. In a way, however, he is still true to that early idea of a poem "articulating what is on the mind intently"¹⁰¹ because he uses poetry to express his poetic self—a self with a certain degree of authenticity, even if it does not quite reflect the historical narrative of Zuo's life.

100 Young men could not yet understand the importance of family background, networks, and historical opportunities.

101 See note 11.

Zuo's "Poems on History" reflect the different stages in his life. In his youth, he modeled his writings after those of Confucius and Sima Xiangru and studied the military strategies of Sima Rangju, with the goal of serving the state. After encountering political obstacles, he regarded Xu You and Yang Xiong as exemplars of a reclusive life that avoided the miseries of politics. He put himself in the company of these outstanding figures and through the medium of poetry transcended the bounds of time and space and connected with them spiritually; in so doing, Zuo Si achieved self-canonization.

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