

# Two Modes of Goddess Depictions in Early Medieval Chinese Literature

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## Abstract

Early medieval Chinese literature depicts two modes of goddesses, derived from the two masterpieces attributed to Song Yu, “Rhapsody on the Goddess” and “Rhapsody on Gaotang.” Since Cao Zhi’s “Rhapsody on the Goddess” overshadowed other works among rhapsodies and poems, it appeared as if the influence of “Rhapsody on Gaotang” had stopped. This study reveals the two lineages of goddess depictions in medieval Chinese literature, showing that the “Goddess of Love” has never disappeared.

## Keywords

early medieval China – goddess depiction – literature

The “Rhapsody on Gaotang [Gaotangfu 高唐賦]” and “Rhapsody on the Goddess [Shennüfu 神女賦],” traditionally attributed to Song Yu 宋玉 [c. 290-c. 223 BCE], are the most famous and likely the earliest works that describe hierogamous encounters between a mortal and a goddess. These two works exerted great influence over various genres of literature in later times. Although the influence of “Rhapsody on the Goddess” has been well addressed, the influence of “Rhapsody on Gaotang” has long been neglected or understated; one scholar even went so far as to claim that the “Goddess of Love” in the “Rhapsody on Gaotang” had disappeared altogether from Chinese literature.<sup>1</sup> This study attempts to reveal the two modes of depicting goddesses in the

1 See Ye Shuxian 葉舒憲, “Gao tang shennü de kua wenhua yanjiu 高唐神女的跨文化研究,” *Renwenzazhi* 6 (1989): 100-101.

literary works of early medieval China [220-589] derived from the above-mentioned early works of Song Yu, showing that the “Goddess of Love” never truly disappeared.<sup>2</sup>

### Bringing the Subject in Question into Clearer View

Tradition has it that Song Yu, a famous rhapsody writer, wrote the noted “Rhapsody on Gaotang” and “Rhapsody on the Goddess” to depict encounters between King Huai 懷 of Chu 楚 [r. 328-299 BCE] and King Xiang 襄 of Chu [r. 298-263 BCE], respectively, and female divinities.<sup>3</sup> The preface to “Rhapsody on Gaotang” reads:

In the past, the former king [King Huai of Chu] once visited the Gaotang shrine; he was tired and took a nap during the daytime. He dreamed of a woman who said to him, “I am the daughter of Mount Wu, and now a visitor to Gaotang. I heard that Your Majesty is traveling here, so I wish to serve you with my pillow and mat.” Thus the king favored her with his bed.<sup>4</sup>

2 This essay was originally written for a seminar for graduate students at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, and presented at the 49th Annual Meeting of the Southeastern Conference on Asian Studies, Louisville, KY, January 15-17, 2010. In recent years, someone has tried to outline the “two branches of goddess depictions” (see Jin Cui 金翠, “Gao tang shennü xingxiang yanjiu 高唐神女形象研 [A Study of the Image of Gaotang Goddess],” MA thesis, Shenyang Normal University, 2012), but some of her observations are problematic, as discussed below.

3 The authenticity of these two rhapsodies has been challenged. Lu Kanru 陸侃如, for example, argues in his *Song Yu* 宋玉 (Shanghai: Yadongtushuguan, 192, 107-110) that most of the works attributed to Song Yu are unreliable. But Shi Zhimian 施之勉 holds a totally different opinion; see his “Song Yu wufu 宋玉五賦,” *Daluzazhi* 22 (1961). Western scholars, such as Arthur Waley, David Knechtges, and Steven Owen, all accepted the traditional attribution of the two rhapsodies. See Arthur Waley, *The Temple and Other Poems* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1923), 65-72; David Knechtges, *Wen Xuan or Selections of Refined Literature* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996), 3: 325-349; and Steven Owen, *An Anthology of Chinese Literature: Beginnings to 1911* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1996), 189.

4 昔者先王嘗遊高唐，怠而晝寢，夢見一婦人曰：妾者，巫山之女也。為高唐之客。聞君遊高唐，願薦枕席。”，王因幸之。Xiao Tong 蕭統, ed., *Wen xuan* 文選 [Selections of Refined Literature] (Shanghai: Shangwuyinshuguan, 1936), 393. Previous English translations of this rhapsody include Waley, *The Temple and Other Poems*, 65-72; and Knechtges, *Wen Xuan*, 3: 325-339. Recent Western scholarship on the Gaotang goddess

In another version quoted by Li Shan 李善 [c. 630-689] from *Anthology of Song Yu* [*Song Yu ji* 宋玉集], there are several variations in the words of the goddess:

In the past, the former king once traveled to the Gaotang shrine; he was tired and took a nap during the daytime. He dreamed of a woman who said of herself, "I am the youngest daughter of the Emperor [of Heaven], and my name is Yaoji. I died before I could marry and was enfeoffed with the terrace of Mount Wu. I heard that Your Majesty has come to travel here, and I wish to serve you with my pillow and mat." Thus the king favored her with his bed.<sup>5</sup>

"Rhapsody on Gaotang," in essence, is a work about a goddess and sex, likely the earliest extant narrative about an erotic dream in Chinese literature. The goddess is beautiful, passionate, free-spirited, and brave, taking the initiative in seeking a tryst with the king. This may be why some consider her the Chinese "Goddess of Love."<sup>6</sup>

The female divinity in "Rhapsody on the Goddess" is quite different. Although she shares the beauty and ethereal loveliness of the goddess in "Rhapsody on Gaotang," her attitude toward the mortal ruler differs greatly:

Restless with anger she seeks to maintain self-control  
 She has remained inviolate.  
 Thus she shakes the decorations she wears,  
 And rings the jade simurgh bells.  
 Straightening her garment,  
 She assumes a serious expression.  
 Looking back at the Woman Tutor,  
 She gives an order to the Grand Tutor.

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includes Li Wai-Yee, *Enchantment and Disenchantment: Love and Illusion in Chinese Literature* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993), 23-46; and Paul Rouzer, *Articulated Ladies: Gender and the Male Community in Early Chinese Texts* (Cambridge: Harvard University Asia Center, 2001), 8-69.

5 昔先王遊於高唐，怠而晝寢。夢見一婦人，自云：“我帝之季女，名曰瑤姬，未行而亡，封於巫山之台。聞王來遊，願薦枕席。王因幸之。” Li Shan's annotation to Jiang Yan 江淹, "Zatishi 雜體詩," in Xiao, *Wen Xuan*, 696-697. For explorations of the origin of the Gaotang goddess, see Edward H. Schafer, *The Divine Woman: Dragon Ladies and Rain Maidens in Tang Literature* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1973), 34-38; and a summary of Chinese scholarship on this topic in Jin, "Gao tang shennü xingxiang yanjiu," 4-9.

6 Ye, "Gao tang shennü de kua wenhua yanjiu," 100-101.

Though our joyful feelings have yet to be joined,  
She is about to say good-bye and depart.<sup>7</sup>

In the end, King Xiang of Chu, failing to consummate the erotic dream as his father had, could only shed tears of disappointment:

Harboring private feelings myself,  
Whom could I speak with?  
Disappointedly shedding tears,  
I seek her until dawn.<sup>8</sup>

Apart from their physical beauty, the goddesses in the two rhapsodies differ markedly from each other in personality and morality. In other words, in “Rhapsody on the Goddess,” the goddess’s attitude about sex differs from that of the goddess in the “Rhapsody on Gaotang.” In a discussion of the two works, Ye Shuxian 葉舒憲 observes,

Simply put, the goddess in “Rhapsody on Gaotang” devotes herself to a man through her initial action of offering her pillow and mat, but the goddess in “Rhapsody on the Goddess” makes the man attracted to her give up his intimate desire after seducing him. As the rhapsody depicts, she is a woman who “has remained inviolate,” interrupting King Xiang of Chu’s fervent wish to recreate his father’s erotic dream. Therefore, “Rhapsody on the Goddess” is clearly in accordance with the traditional moral model, “initiated by emotions but curtailed by rituals.”<sup>9</sup>

Then Ye gives his explanation for the difference between the two pieces:

We can say that the Goddess of Love created by Song Yu in the “Rhapsody on Gaotang” has already been removed in the “Rhapsody on the Goddess.” By talking about King Huai of Chu’s erotic meeting with the goddess, Song Yu drew on the image that had been activated by his own desire and created a goddess who initiates a tryst and makes love to a man in the

7 顚薄怒以自持兮，曾不可乎犯干；於是搖珮飾，鳴玉鸞。整衣服，斂容顏；顧女師，命太傅；歡情未接，將辭而去。(Xiao, *Wen xuan*, 19: 397-400). An English translation of this rhapsody is found in Knechtges, *Wen Xuan* 3: 339-349; and Rouzer, *Articulated Ladies*, 58-68.

8 情獨私懷，誰者可語。惆悵垂涕，求之至曙。(Ibid.).

9 Ye, “Gao tang shennü,” 100-101.

“Rhapsody on Gaotang.” When he wrote the “Rhapsody on the Goddess,” however, social morality and ritual propriety caused Song Yu to constrain the desire of the ego, the essential characteristic of the Goddess of Love, so the goddess changed into a chaste beauty who keeps her body as pure as jade. From the fact that more than half the lines are used to describe the beauty of the goddess, the goddess had changed from the Goddess of Love into the Goddess of Beauty.

Furthermore, he concludes, “From then on, China has only Goddess of Beauty, but no Goddess of Love,”<sup>10</sup> and the sensual love deity, the Gaotang goddess, has no descendants and never appears in later literature.

Generally speaking, distinctions between the two works exist, and Ye mentions some important ones. His conclusion, however, is not necessarily accurate. The theme of “great beauty with restrained desire” in “Rhapsody on the Goddess” undoubtedly continued and was well received in later times, especially in the popular Chinese literary form rhapsody;<sup>11</sup> meanwhile, the motif of sensual love in “Rhapsody on Gaotang” did not disappear either. In fact, the story of a goddess and her dalliances with men was not merely retold but extended in two distinct lines in early medieval Chinese literature.

### The Motif of “On the Goddess” in Jian’an Literature

In the Jian’an 建安 reign period [196-219] of [Emperor Xian of] the late Eastern Han dynasty, four rhapsodies with the same title, “On the Goddess [Shennüfu 神女賦],” were written around the same time. Moreover, Cao Zhi’s 曹植 [192-232] “Rhapsody on the Luo River Goddess [Luoshenfu 洛神賦],” with its gorgeous words and evocative descriptions, overshadowed other works on goddesses before and after it. For these reasons, the Jian’an reign period was an important time for the development of literary depiction of goddesses, during which the Luo River goddess emerged as the most popular literary subject.

“Rhapsody on the Luo River Goddess” shares the theme of “great beauty with restrained desire” with Song Yu’s “Rhapsody on the Goddess”:

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> Liao Guodong 廖國棟 has identified five stages in this motif: origin of the goddess, dreams of the goddess, the beauty of the goddess, hierogamous encounters, and departure of the goddess. See Liao Guodong, *Jian’an cifu zhi chuancheng yu tuo xin* 建安辭賦的傳承與拓新 [*The Inherence and Creation of the Jian’an Rhapsodies*] (Taipei: Wenjinchubanshe, 2000), 358.

Parting her vermilion lips, she slowly speaks,  
 articulating the key principles of her liaisons [with men].  
 How hateful that the ways of men and spirits are different!  
 How woeful that the prime of my life has gone!  
 I lift sleeves to cover the tears on my face,  
 The tears flow down the front of my garment as a stream.  
 Grieving that the fine meeting will be forever cut off,  
 I mourn for the fact that, once I leave, I will be in a different land.<sup>12</sup>

Because “the ways of men and spirits are different,” the meeting tragically ends. This is the same ending as Song Yu’s “Rhapsody on the Goddess.” Jin Cui classifies the Luo River Goddess in Cao Zhi’s rhapsody as one who “serves a man with her pillow and mat” but was resolutely refused by the author.<sup>13</sup> This is clearly overstated, because, apart from the line cited above, “Grieving that the fine meeting will be forever cut off,” what we can see in Cao’s rhapsody are no more than the lines, “Lifting a jasper gem to reply my offering, she points to the hidden depth as a place for our meeting.”<sup>14</sup> Clearly, their desire was consummated.

Many scholars maintain that depictions of goddesses in this period all derived from Song Yu’s “Rhapsody on the Goddess,” and, apart from the celebrated “Rhapsody on the Luo River Goddess,” other works do not merit mention.<sup>15</sup> In fact, this is not true at all. The motifs of the four “On the Goddess”

12 動朱唇以徐言，陳交接之大綱。恨人神之道殊兮，怨盛年之莫當。抗羅袂以掩涕兮，淚流襟之浪浪。悼良會之永絕兮，哀一逝而異鄉。 Ding Yan 丁晏, *Cao jiquan ping* 曹植集詮評 [A Collection of Cao Zhi’s Works with Annotation and Commentary] (Beijing: Wenxuegujikanxingshe, 1957), 18. An English translation of this rhapsody is found in Knechtges, *Wen Xuan* 3: 355-365.

13 Jin, “Gao tang shennü xingxiang yanjiu,” 21.

14 抗瓊瑤以和予兮，指潛淵而為期。

15 See Ye Shuxian, *Gao tang shennü yu wei na si* (Beijing: Zhongguo shehui kexue chubanshe, 1997), 431; Gao Qiufeng 高秋鳳, “Cong Song Yu ‘Shennüfu’ dao Jiang Yan ‘Shuishang shennü fu’—Xian Chin zhi Liuchao shennü fu zhi fazhan 從宋玉‘神女賦’到江淹‘水上神女賦’——先秦到六朝‘神女賦’之發展 [From Song Yu’s ‘Rhapsody on the Goddess’ to Jiang Yan’s ‘Rhapsody on the Goddess of the River’: The Development of Rhapsody on Goddess from Pre-Qin Period to the Six Dynasties],” in *Di san jie guoji cifu xue xueshu yantao hui lunwen ji* 第三屆國際辭賦學學術研討會論文集 [A Paper Collection of the Third International Conference on Rhapsody] (Taipei: Guoli zhengzhi daxue, 1996), 849; Deng Shiliang 鄧仕樑, “Lun Jian’an yi xian xie he shennü wei zhuti de liang zu fu 論建安以‘閒邪’和‘神女’為主題的兩組賦 [On the Rhapsodies on Leisure and Goddess in the Jian’an Period],” *Xinya xue shuji kan* 13 (1994).

poems, for example, are actually fairly different and distinct, not merely copies of Song Yu's "Rhapsody on the Goddess."

It is hard to say anything about Ying Yang's 應陽 [ca. 172-217] "Rhapsody on the Goddess" because only six lines are still extant.<sup>16</sup> But the other three are complete. Wang Can's 王粲 [177-217] work mainly describes the beauty of the goddess, and it seems that the author and the goddess are becoming intimate. At the end, however, the mortal in Wang Can's rhapsody decides not to consummate the tryst, reasoning that, "different ideas in my mind fight against each other and finally chastity wins, thus I changed my mind and cut her off myself."<sup>17</sup> Although the goddess takes the initiative, the mortal, the author himself, gives up his desire himself. The works of Chen Lin 陳琳 [d. 217] and Yang Xiu 楊修 [173-217] are even more complicated.

Below is Yang's "Rhapsody on the Goddess" in full. Its ending is ambiguous:

Thinking that the superb girl who is subtle and gentle,  
 she nurtures brightness at the spirit court.  
 Sucking the fragrant liquid of the morning clouds,  
 at her ease she roams around in the Highest clarity.  
 Insisting on righteousness and being secretly inspired,  
 through a dream I connect with her numinousness.  
 Splendidly attired and made up on top of her innate beauty,  
 Glowing with dragon luster and phoenix glory.  
 [Wearing] green garment and colorful wild-chicken coat,  
 And put on fine cape and patterned shirt.  
 Flowing up and down with the wind,  
 sometimes together and sometimes apart.  
 When they drift up as if she is excited,  
 But her jade toes do not move.  
 Carefully examining into her subtlety,  
 In the whole world she is matchless.  
 Her glittering face is bright as jade,  
 Vital as a flowering hibiscus.  
 Her skin texture is fine and stainless like white jade,  
 Her flesh is fresh, and pliant as a goose down.  
 Turning away her shoulders, her garment opens and closes.  
 How beautiful and elegant when she bends down and lifts her face.

16 Yu Shaochu 俞紹初, ed., *Jian'an qi ziji* 建安七子集 [A Collection of the Works of the Seven Masters of the Jian'an Period] (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1989), 174.

17 心交戰而貞勝，乃回意而自絕。Ibid., 103.

Delighting in the lucky union tonight,  
 Obtaining the carriage for women, we share the same expectation.  
 When my emotion is fervent and I long to move further,  
 She is stern, quiet, and respectful.  
 When I subtly satirize her and express my opinion,  
 Her expression becomes happy and agreeable, and she follows me.<sup>18</sup>

Here identifying the subject of the second line from the end is the key to understanding the theme. Gao Qiufeng's interpretation of this work is: "Yang Xiu initiates the tryst while the goddess is passive, but at the very end Yang listens and follows the subtle persuasion and tactful explanations and so does not take the lead anymore."<sup>19</sup> He continues, "Apart from describing the wonder and beauty of the goddess in detail, rhapsodies on the Goddess of the Jian'an period mainly emphasize 'different ideas in my mind fight against each other and finally chaste wins' and 'interpreting the rituals as the guard so as to prevent oneself from falling into lust.'"<sup>20</sup> But Liao Guodong's 廖國棟 interpretation is the opposite of Gao's: "Toward the earnest pursuit, 'my emotion is fervent and long to move further,' the goddess originally keeps a straight face, 'she is serious, at ease, and quietly respectful.'" After the author's amorous advances—following Liao's understanding, after the author "subtly criticizes her and expresses [his] opinion," the goddess blithely completes their tryst: "her expression is happy and agreeable, and she follows me." From this and other examples, Liao concludes that these four other goddess poems from the Jian'an era not only did not mimic Song Yu's "Rhapsody on the Goddess" but followed very different trajectories.<sup>21</sup> Liao's reading of Yang Xiu's rhapsody is apparently closer to the original text, and his conclusion is accurate with respect to the group of rhapsodies on the goddess.

Chen Lin's "Rhapsody on the Goddess" reads:

18 惟玄媛之逸女。育明曜乎皇庭。吸朝霞之芬液。澹浮遊乎太清。余執義而潛厲；乃感夢而通靈。盛容飾之本艷，奧龍采而鳳榮。翠黼翬裳，織縠文褂。順風揄揚，乍合乍離。飄若興動，玉趾未移。詳觀玄妙，與世無雙。華面玉粲，韓若芙蓉。膚凝理而瓊絮，體鮮弱而柔鴻。回肩襟而動合，何俯仰之妍工。嘉今夜之幸遇，獲帷裳乎期同。情沸踊而思進，彼嚴厲而靜恭。微諷說而宣諭，色歡懌而我從。 Chen Yuanlong 陳元龍, ed., *Lidaifuhui 歷代賦彙* [A Collection of Rhapsodies of the Past Dynasties] (Beijing: Beijing tushuguan chubanshe, 1999), 10: 707-708.

19 Gao, "Cong Song Yu 'Shennüfu' dao Jiang Yan 'Shuishang Shennü fu,'" 848.

20 Ibid.

21 Liao, *Jian'an cifu zhi chuancheng yu tuo xin*, 359.

In the thirteenth year of Jian'an of the Han,<sup>22</sup>  
 [People] of the Jing hinterlands stupidly became our enemy.  
 Assisting the royal troops that arrived in the south,  
 We crossed the limpid Han River.  
 Touched by the sighing utterances of the poet,  
 I thought of the goddess who came and roamed around,  
 imagining her indistinct spirit.  
 Through a good dream we connect our feelings.

Watching the waves, which were deep and endless,  
 I saw the spirit subtle and beautiful.  
 The crimson dragon pattern [of her dress] was grand and beautiful,  
 "Ying ying" was the sound of her jade simurgh [bell].  
 I consider that your jade body matches the flowers of the *tiao*,  
 Liken your alluring looks to the ephemeral beauty of the althea.<sup>23</sup>  
 Moved by midspring, the pleasant season,  
 I sighed as the call of the wild goose echoed.  
 Holding the fragrant plant she gave to me,<sup>24</sup>  
 as she invited me to share a feast in a secluded room.  
 Briefly we enjoyed the pleasures of fine union,  
 an eternity cut off from the outside world and flourishing alone.  
 I admired you on account of your gorgeous beauty,  
 and you were pleased at my stamina.  
 Following Heaven and Earth in developing our nature,  
 Why should you have other words to say?<sup>25</sup>

22 Yu Shaochu says that, although the original says *san qi* 三七, this might be a mistake for *shi san* 十三 [thirteenth]. See his *Jian'an qi ziji*, 410.

23 Guo Jingchun 郭景純, "Youxianshi 遊仙詩 [number 7]": "薜榮不終朝, 蜉蝣豈見夕?" See Xiao, *Wen xuan*, 463.

24 *Shenwojiao* 申握椒 should be *Woshenjiao*. *Shenjiao* 申椒 is a kind of fragrant plant. Qu Yuan 屈原, "Li sao": 雜申椒與菌桂兮 [they brought together peppers and cinnamon]. See Jiang Liangfu 姜亮夫 *Chongding Qu Yuan fujiaozhu* 重訂屈原賦校注 [*Revised Qu Yuan's Rhapsodies Collated and Annotated*] (Tianjin: Tianjin gujichubanshe, 1987), 13. David Hawkes renders *shenjiao* as "peppers," but this might not be right. See his *The Songs of the South* (New York: Penguin Books, 1985), 68.

25 漢三七之建安, 荊野蠹而作仇。贊皇師以南假, 濟漢川之清流。感詩人之攸歎, 想神女之來遊。儀營魄於髣髴, 託嘉夢以通精。望陽侯而瀟灑, 睹玄麗之軼靈。文絳糾之弈弈, 鳴玉鸞之嚶嚶。答玉質於苕華兮, 擬豔姿於薜榮。感仲春之和節, 歎鳴鴈之嗶嗶。申握椒以貽予, 請同宴乎奧房。苟好樂之嘉

The structure of the entire work is almost the same as Song Yu's "Rhapsody on the Goddess," but the second half describes a tryst between the author and the goddess. Liao Guodong thinks that the last line of this rhapsody means that, in the Jian'an period, the desire for love, which had been constrained, was, to a certain extent, liberated.<sup>26</sup> We have to say that this rhapsody is truly daring and unconventional, diverging significantly from the others. Thus we can say that in Chinese literature, the "Goddess of Love" never disappeared since she appeared even in the rhapsodies of Jian'an period.

### Cao Zhi's "Rhapsody on the Luo River Goddess" and Zhang Min's "Rhapsody on the Goddess"

While Cao Zhi's "Rhapsody on the Luo River Goddess" is one of the most brilliant and well-liked works on female divinities in Chinese literature, Zhang Min's 張敏 [fl. 317] "Rhapsody on the Goddess" is virtually unknown to modern readers. The reason that these two works are examined together in this study is that, as representative works derived from Su Yu's rhapsodies on the Gaotang goddess, both are important in the history of early medieval Chinese rhapsody and even in the wider history of Chinese literature.

This comparison was raised in the studies of Cao Zhi's "Rhapsody on the Luo River Goddess."<sup>27</sup> Specifically, Hong Shunlong raises the relationship between

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合，永絕世而獨昌。既歎爾以艷采，又悅我之長期。順乾坤以成性，夫何若有辭。(Yu, *Jian'an qi ziji*, 44).

26 Liao, *Jian'an cifu zhi chuancheng yu tuo xin*, 358.

27 Study of "Rhapsody on the Luo River Goddess" has overshadowed the research on goddesses, and it mainly focuses on the context of the text or the author's motivation for writing. Since the 1980s, however, new directions have been taken in the study of the influences of "Rhapsody on the Luo River Goddess." For example, Zhong Laiyin 鍾來因 points out that many words and phrases, such as *luopu* 洛浦, *luoshen* 洛神, *jinghong* 驚鴻, and *youlong* 游龍 appeared frequently in poetry, *ci* 詞 poetry, drama, and novels, having become a widespread literary phenomenon (see his "'Luoshen fu' yuanliu kao lun 洛神賦源流考論 [A Textual Study of the 'Rhapsody on the Luo River Goddess']," *Jianghai xuekan* 5 (1985); Hong Shunlong 洪順隆 conducts detailed research on the influence of "Rhapsody on the Luo River Goddess" on Six Dynasties rhapsodies (see his "Lun 'Luoshenfu' dui liuchao fu tan de yingtou 洛神賦對六朝賦壇的映投 [The Impact of 'Rhapsody on the Luo River Goddess' on the Rhapsodies of the Six Dynasties]," *Xinya xue shuji kan* 13 [1994]); and N. Harry Rothschild's recent book reveals the function of "Rhapsody on the Luo River Goddess" in sanctifying Luo River, elevating Wu Zhao's Divine Capital, and helping her distinctively imprint her political authority upon

Cao Zhi's "Rhapsody on the Luo River Goddess" and Zhang Min's "Rhapsody on the Goddess":

The prototype of the theme of "love between man and goddess" appeared before the Warring States period, but, in the field of rhapsody, it was passed down by Song Yu's "Rhapsody on the Goddess" and Cao Zhi's "Rhapsody on the Luo River Goddess." For this reason, the prototype of the theme of Zhang Min's "Rhapsody on the Goddess" shares the same sequence of ideas as Cao Zhi's "Rhapsody on the Luo River Goddess." . . . In general, the prototype theme, the mode of structure, the nature and habits of the heroine, the supporting roles, and some vocabulary in Zhang Min's "Rhapsody on the Goddess" are indeed similar to their counterparts in Cao Zhi's "Rhapsody on the Luo River Goddess."<sup>28</sup>

As Hong argues, Zhang Min's "On the Goddess" was influenced by Cao Zhi's "Rhapsody on the Luo River Goddess," and in many respects these two works are similar. For example, Zhang's work borrows many words or phrases and mentions the same goddess as Cao Zhi's "Rhapsody on the Luo River Goddess." However, Hong's conclusion overstates the similarities between the two works.

The major difference between "Rhapsody on the Luo River Goddess" and Zhang's "Rhapsody on the Goddess" is at the narrative level, the motif. Structurally, they have different precursors. The former draws on the motif of meeting a goddess, ending in disappointment, while in the latter an erotic hierogamous union between mortal and goddess is successfully concluded. Zhang Min's "Rhapsody on the Goddess" narrates the coupling as follows:

The Emperor [of Heaven] has observed my pure virtue,  
And so I walk into the lofty red building.  
Entering the secret palace by the high stairs,  
I serve the Supreme Ultimate of the solemn purity (Heaven).  
Taking pity on my diligence and seriousness,  
The Emperor [of Heaven] was placing me in the central state.  
Relying on dark quietude, I have dwelt alone,  
So I will be a good partner for you.<sup>29</sup>

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Luoyang (N. Harry Rothschild, *Emperor Wu Zhao and Her Pantheon of Devils, Divinities, and Dynastic Mothers* [New York: Columbia University Press, 2015], 41-59).

28 Hong, "Lun 'Luo shenfu' dui liu chao fu tan de yingtou," 105.

29 皇覽余之純德。步朱闕之崢嶸。  
靡飛除而入秘殿。侍太極之穆清。

These eight lines seem to be an introduction to the goddess from her own mouth. Although she possesses pure virtue, diligence, and seriousness and relies on tranquility to live alone, the author/protagonist is still suspicious. Below is their conversation:

Upon this, the host asked her unhappily:  
 “Are you the Baosi of the Zhou, or Wen Jiang of the Qi,  
 Those kind of evil women and licentious ghosts, come to hide yourselves?  
 Or, are you the roaming goddess of the Han, or E Huang of the Jiang,  
 Who tires of the pleasure of being chaste and serving as immortals?”  
 Upon this, the goddess straightened her clothes and seriously replied:  
 “I am truly a chaste and gentle girl.  
 Why are you suspicious of me?  
 Further, I am eloquent and know proper ritual,  
 Respectfully act in accordance with good norms;  
 With good looks and exceptional gifts,  
 I dress splendidly and to be a model of virtue.  
 With all these to receive your favor,  
 What doubts can you still have?”<sup>30</sup>

Suspicious assuaged, intimacy quickens between man and goddess:

Thus they laid the mattress,  
 And pulled down the decorated curtains.  
 After delectable foods were set out,  
 They enjoy the feast with each other.  
 Smelling slightly the fragrant perfume,  
 His heart agitated and mind restless.

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30 帝愍余之勤肅。將休余於中州。  
 託玄靜以自處。寔應夫子之好仇。  
 於是主人憮然而問之曰：  
 “爾豈是周之褒姒。齊之文姜。  
 孽婦淫鬼。來自藏乎？  
 儻亦漢之遊女。江之娥皇。  
 獸真愆。倦仙侍乎？”  
 於是神女乃斂袂正襟而對曰：  
 “我實貞淑。子何猜焉？  
 且辯言知禮。恭為令則。  
 美姿天挺。盛飾表德。  
 以此承歡。君有何惑爾？”

Upon this, they search for the extreme goodness within the room,  
 and exhaust the joyful love of long night.  
 His mind is ambiguous and indistinct,  
 Thinking of the leftover music of the Northern Ward.  
 Narrating the wonder of this moment,  
 he presents a splendid garment that is spreading.  
 Bowing her head and straightening her clothes, she takes her leave;  
 looking up, she sighs deeply and sobs.  
 Riding the clouds and fogs thereby she transforms;  
 Discarding me far behind, where does she go?<sup>31</sup>

Obviously, this is a work about intimate love between a goddess and a man. Even though the goddess left at the end and the man was disappointed, this happens after they “exhaust the joyful love of long night.” The goddess in this work is forthright and longs for love, like the one in the “Rhapsody on Gaotang,” rather than the divinity in the “Rhapsody on the Goddess,” indicating the impact of the “Rhapsody on Gaotang” on it.<sup>32</sup>

### “Goddesses of Love” in Classical Chinese Tales

Among the rhapsodies, some works have a distinct motif similar to that in “Rhapsody on Gaotang.” Outside that genre, however, many other works can be found that are derived from “Rhapsody on Gaotang,” especially in classical tales, including *zhiguai* 志怪 [account of anomalies] and *chuanqi* 傳奇 [transmission of marvels].<sup>33</sup>

31 爾乃敷茵席。垂組帳。  
 嘉旨既設。同牢而饗。  
 微聞芳澤。心盪意放。  
 於是尋房中之至嫵。極長夜之懽情。  
 心眇眇以忽忽。想北里之遺聲。  
 賦斯時之要妙。進偉服之紛敷。  
 俛撫衽而告辭。仰長歎以歔吁。  
 乘雲霧而變化。遙棄我其焉如。(Yiwenleiju, juan 79).

32 In her attempt to outline the “two branches of goddess depictions,” Jin Cui lists the goddess in Zhang Min’s “Rhapsody on the Goddess” among the goddesses who observe the rituals, concluding that “before consuming the pleasure of love, she discarded her host and departed” (歡情未接，棄主人而去; see Jin, “Gao tang shennü xingxiang yanjiu,” 19–20). It seems that she did not read the entire rhapsody.

33 Zhang Min’s “Shennüfu” was also derived from one of his own tales.

In fact, Zhang Min's "Rhapsody on the Goddess" was written on the basis of a folktale about Xuan Chao 玄超 and the goddess Zhi Qiong 智瓊. The earliest version of this story, only twenty words, is in Cao Pi's 曹丕 [187-226] *Arrayed Marvels* [*Lie yizhuan* 列異傳].<sup>34</sup> In Gan Bao's 干寶 [fl. 335-349] *In Search of the Supernatural* [*Soushenji* 搜神記], it becomes a much longer story. This story narrates that Xuan Chao was sleeping alone at night, and dreamed of a goddess coming to him. She said that she was a jade maiden in Heaven and lost her parents during her childhood. The Emperor of Heaven took pity on her because of her loneliness and allowed her come down to this world to marry a man. The goddess not only was beautiful but also took the initiative.<sup>35</sup>

In addition to the story about Zhiqiong, the tales of the Six Dynasties period (222-589) included many other goddesses who love men in the mortal realm. In *In Search of the Supernatural*, "Du Lanxiang 杜蘭香 and Zhang Chuan 張傳," "Yuan ke 園客," and "Dong Yong 董永" have experiences similar to those in Xuan Chao.<sup>36</sup> We can say that the Goddess of Love was revived in classical tales.

In some tales, the image of a goddess gradually changed into that of a female ghost. In Tao Qian's 陶潛 [365-427] *Sequel to "In Search of the Supernatural"* [*Soushenhouji* 搜神後記], an anthology of tales from the Northern and Southern Dynasties [420-589] features two erotic dream stories, "The Daughter of Xu Xuanfang [Xu Xuanfangnü 徐玄方女]<sup>37</sup> and "The Daughter of Li Zhongwen [Li Zhongwennü 李仲文女],<sup>38</sup> which in many aspects are similar to the story in "Rhapsody on Gaotang." Both works describe a young man, the present governor's son, who dreams of a young girl coming to his room and becoming

34 See Lu Xun 魯迅, "Gu xiaoshuo gouchen 古小說鉤沉 [Collected Lost Old Stories]," in *Lu Xunquanji* 魯迅全集 [*Complete Works of Lu Xun*] (Beijing: Renmin wenxue chubanshe, 1979), 8: 257.

35 Wang Genlin 王根林 et al., ed., *Han wei liuchao biji xiaoshuo daguan* 漢魏六朝筆記小說大觀 [*Grand Spectacle of Han Wei and Six Dynasty Zhiguai Stories*] (Shanghai: Shanghai guji chubanshe, 1999), 287-288. For an English translation, see Kenneth J. DeWoskin and J. I. Crump, Jr., *In Search of the Supernatural: The Written Record* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1996), 16-18.

36 For an English translation, see DeWoskin and Crump, *In Search of the Supernatural*, 13-16. Li Fengmao 李豐楙 has singled out the story of Xuan Chao, the story of Du Lanxiang, and "Adjutant He's Daughter" from the *Soushenhouji* and described their relationship with Daoist myth regarding descended goddesses. See his *Xianjing yu youli: shenxian shijie de xiangxiang* 仙境與遊歷：神仙世界的想象 [*Immortal Land and Traveling: The Image of the World of Transcendents*] (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 2010), 47-81.

37 Wang et al., *Hanwei liuchao biji xiaoshuo daguan*, 456.

38 Ibid., 458.

intimate with him. The girl says that she is the daughter of the previous governor who died young, and since she favors him, she goes to him. But these stories combine with the motif of rebirth; the former has a happy ending, in which the girl is revived, while the latter has a tragic ending, in which the girl fails to be revived because her body is dug up.

The story “Yan Zhi 閻陟” in *The Vast Record of Marvels* [*Guangyiji* 廣異記] is similar to those above:

When Yan Zhi was young, his father was the adjutant of Mizhou. Yan Zhi lived with his father at the official residence. While sleeping in the daytime, he suddenly dreamed that a girl, who was about fifteen or sixteen years old and very beautiful, came to have a liaison with him. This happened repeatedly for several months. Every time he went to sleep, he dreamed of her arrival. One day, he dreamed that the girl had come to take her farewell. Her voice and appearance were both extremely sad. She said that she was the former adjutant's daughter and after she had been died she was buried at the southeastern corner of the city. “You didn't consider me humble and lowly, allowing me to serve you with my pillow and mat. My elder brother will come to take my bones back home tomorrow. Thus we have to part forever. What a pity! Now I have a hundred thousand coins to give you, to show my sentimental attachment to you.” After saying that, she asked a servant girl to put the money under the bed, and then she left. When Yan Zhi awoke and looked under the bed, he found a hundred thousand in [ghost] paper money.<sup>39</sup>

Even though this story does not depict the sexual relationship between Yan Zhi and the young girl in detail, it is still a typical sexual dream. The evidence of the consummation of the relationship in the dream is not ejaculation, as in some Indian stories,<sup>40</sup> but a hundred thousand in paper money.

39 閻陟幼時，父任密州長史，陟隨父在任。嘗晝寢，忽夢見一女子，年十五六，容色妍麗，來與己會。如是者數月，寢輒夢之。后一日，夢女來別，音容淒斷，曰：“己是前長史女，死殯在城東南角。明公不以幽滯卑微，用薦枕席。我兄明日來迎己喪，終天永別，豈不恨恨。今有錢百千相贈，以伸允眷。”言訖，令婢送錢於寢床下，乃去。陟覺，視床下，果有百千紙錢也。Li Fang 李昉, ed., *Taiping guangji* 太平廣記 [*Extensive Recordings from the Taiping Reign Period*] (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1961), 280: 2235.

40 See Wendy Doniger O'Flaherty, *Dreams, Illusion and Other Realities* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984), 66-67.

Apart from the fact that the status of the hero and heroine was much lower than that of a king and goddess, these stories have many similarities with "Rhapsody on Gaotang": A beautiful young girl appears in a man's dream; the girl is revealed to have died and returned from the spirit world; the girl's social status was high before she died; the girl comes to the man on her own initiative; the dream occurs during the daytime; and, most importantly, the man and the girl consummated their love, showing that the motif of a free-spirited and sexual Goddess of Love was indeed prevalent in Chinese literature.

The pre-Qin "Rhapsody on Gaotang" and the later, medieval erotic dream stories share a common narrative model: In the dream, the love affair always occurs between a man and a beautiful woman or, more specifically, a female spirit or ghost. In the dream, the woman is always an independent agent and goes to the man to fulfill her desire for love; what is emphasized is not only the sexual desires of the male dreamer but also the more taboo desire of the woman, especially the woman who died prior to marriage. In other words, the characteristics of Chinese erotic dream stories were established in "Rhapsody on Gaotang." In certain rhapsodies, as mentioned above, and such sex dream tales, we can find definite traces of "Goddesses of Love."

### Conclusion

It is clear that early medieval Chinese literature has two lineages of goddess depictions that derived from, or at least were influenced by, the two masterpieces attributed to Song Yu: "Rhapsody on the Goddess" and "Rhapsody on Gaotang."

Like "Rhapsody on the Goddess," "Rhapsody on Gaotang" had a profound influence on later literature, and its version of the Goddess of Love was never lost, even in the rhapsodies of the Six Dynasties. If we say that "Rhapsody on the Goddess" had more influence on rhapsody and poetry, then we should say that "Rhapsody on Gaotang" had more influence on popular literature in general and tales in particular.

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