

# The Cultural Politics of Old Things in Mid-Tang China

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A cross-generic examination of the discursive representations of a changing relationship to a specific subcategory of things that are observable in writings from early to medieval China, this essay suggests that these representations denote the appearance of a culture of sentimentality about old, worn-out things at the turn of the ninth century. This culture of sentimentality indicates a deep-seated anxiety about the blurred boundary, on a conceptual and ideological level, between humans and things, and bespeaks the complex dynamics in the relationship of self and other at a time of profound cultural and intellectual changes, in which the textual representations of dilapidated ordinary things of daily life participated. It anticipates and yet remains profoundly different from Northern Song antiquarianism, thus showing gaps and fissures in the neat, familiar teleological narrative of the “Tang-Song transition.”

This essay interrogates a particular order of things in medieval Chinese writings: man-made, ordinary, and used things. They serve basic human needs, and occupy an intriguing middle space between objects of nature and works of art. People are surrounded by such objects in daily life, but they largely remain invisible except in certain literary representations.

Speaking of things, we naturally think of “rhapsodies on objects” (*yongwu fu* 詠物賦) and “poetry on objects” (*yongwu shi* 詠物詩). *Wu* 物 is a supple term that can be used to refer to insentient entities as well as sentient beings including animals and even humans,<sup>1</sup> and these *yongwu* writings encompass a wide array of topics consisting of, though not confined to, man-made objects such as a lamp or an incense burner, and natural phenomena or objects, animate or inanimate, such as wind, a bird, a flower, or jade.<sup>2</sup> The earliest *yongwu shi* are often about elegant objects seen at the social gatherings of Southern Dynasties aristocrats, and have left an indelible imprint on subsequent *yongwu* poems.<sup>3</sup> But there is a range of

*Author's note:* The first draft of this essay was presented at “Philology and the Study of Classical Chinese Literature: An International Symposium on the Future of Sinology in the Twenty-First Century in Honor of Paul W. Kroll,” on April 21, 2018, at Boulder, Colorado. Draft versions in Chinese were delivered at Shaanxi Normal University in August 2018 and Hong Kong Baptist University in November 2019. I wish to thank the audience members, the anonymous readers, and Jannis Chen for their feedback. I am particularly grateful to Antje Richter for her productive comments. I affectionately dedicate this essay to Paul W. Kroll.

1. This evokes the English term “thing,” which is likewise elastic in its usage. One may, for instance, say “you poor thing” to another person, in which case “thing” is interchangeable with “creature.” A much later colloquialism for *wu* 物 is *dongxi* 東西, whose etymology is still a topic of debate among scholars. See, for instance, Chen Jiang 陳江, “‘Mai dongxi’ kao” “買東西”考, in *Lishi yanjiu* 1996.6: 50–58; Xu Shiyi 徐時儀, “‘Mai dongxi kao’ xianyi” 〈買東西考〉獻遺, in *Lishi yanjiu* 1998.2: 161–65; Wu Zhaoyang 吳朝陽, “‘Dongxi’ ciyuan de yige keneng” “東西”詞源的一個可能, in *Xiandai yuwen* 2011.2: 147–49.

2. Interested readers may refer to Liao Guodong’s 廖國棟 *Wei Jin yongwu fu yanjiu* 魏晉詠物賦研究, a most comprehensive study of the various topics of *fu* on objects from early through early medieval China (Taipei: Wen-shizhe chubanshe, 1990).

3. See Cynthia Chennault, “Odes on Objects and Patronage during the Southern Qi,” in *Studies in Early Medieval Chinese Literature and Cultural History in Honor of Richard B. Mather and Donald Holzman*, ed. Paul W. Kroll and David R. Knechtges (Provo, UT: Tang Studies Society, 2003), 331–98. I discuss a different mode of writing about objects (i.e., particular rather than categorical) in sixth-century court poetry, although the *kinds* of objects

ordinary household objects that are not normally represented in either *yongwu shi* or *yongwu fu*. These objects belong to the domestic space, the kitchen from which a gentleman was supposed to keep his distance, the sphere of women and servants. These plain items endure everyday wear and tear, yet they stay mostly absent in early medieval elite discourse. However, in tales of the strange as well as in poetry and classical prose in the mid-Tang, they are foregrounded and literally come to life.

Focusing on old and broken man-made things, this essay examines the textual representations of a changing relationship to such things observable in late eighth- and early ninth-century writings. In doing so, I deliberately break away from the generic boxes in which we scholars of Chinese literature sometimes find ourselves. On a general level, literary works, while grown out of a generic tradition, nevertheless do not exist in a generic vacuum. Considering works of different genres together recuperates them from their entrenched segregation in modern-day literary histories and returns them to the social and cultural milieus in which they were created, giving due recognition to the fact that they were elements of what I call a “cultural narrative.” By “cultural narrative” I refer to a “story” that can appear in different kinds of texts across genres and is well known to members of a society, who may or may not be aware of its narrative structure on a conscious level and whose recognition of the narrative structure needs never to be articulated as such. On a specific level, the mid-Tang has been observed to be, in contrast with the Early Tang and High Tang, a period when the concerns in its poetry are also found in its classical tales and nonfictional prose; tales were shared among members of medieval Chinese literary elite who were recorders *and* readers, producers *and* consumers, and these same members of the literary elite were also writers of poetry and prose.<sup>4</sup>

Many earlier studies have addressed the topic of metamorphosis and its broader implications in the Chinese narrative tradition. The present essay differs from them in its concern with a highly specific subcategory of things and a changing attitude toward such things at the turn of the ninth century in a cross-generic examination.<sup>5</sup> The first section of this essay shows how *objects* in *yongwu* writings become *things* in strange tales, and what such shifts signify for things and their human owners, users, and consumers. The second section discusses the anxiety about “old things” and about the blurring boundary between thing and person, not in the sense of a supernatural transformation but on the conceptual, ideological level. The third section observes a changed attitude toward old things in mid-Tang writings in a particular circle of writers and poets. The fourth and final section reflects on the new cul-

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depicted therein do not go beyond the traditional sphere; see my *Beacon Fire and Shooting Star: The Literary Culture of the Liang* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard Univ. Asia Center, 2007), 295–98. More recently, Taiwan scholar Qi Lifeng 祁立峰 gave an insightful discussion of *yongwu* in *Youxi yu youxi zhiwai: Nanchao wenxue ticaixinlun* 遊戲與遊戲以外: 南朝文學題材新論 (Taipei: Zhengda chubanshe, 2015), 41–84.

4. See Stephen Owen, *The End of the Chinese “Middle Ages”: Essays in Mid-Tang Literary Culture* (Stanford: Stanford Univ. Press, 1996), 2. Also see Manling Luo’s discussion of the story-telling elite community and genre-crossing approach in *Literati Storytelling in Late Medieval China* (Seattle: Univ. of Washington Press, 2015), 3–12.

5. For noteworthy discussions of metamorphosis in pre-Tang and Tang narratives, interested readers may refer to Wei Fengjuan 韋鳳娟, “Jingguai ‘renxinghua’ de wenhua jiedu” 精怪「人形化」的文化解讀, in *Zhongguo gudai xiaoshuo yanjiu* 中國古代小說研究 1 (Beijing: Renmin wenxue chubanshe, 2005), 16–27, and Li Pengfei 李鵬飛, “Zhongguo gudai xiaoshuo ‘bianxing’ muti de yuanliu jiqi wenxue yiyi” 中國古代小說「變形」母題的源流及其文學意義, in *Zhongguo gudai xiaoshuo yanjiu* 3 (Beijing: Renmin wenxue chubanshe, 2008), 159–85. The latter also points to a few other notable earlier studies of metamorphosis, including the author’s own as well as Tokura Hidemi’s article, “Bianshen gushi de bianqian” 變身故事的變遷: 從六朝志怪小說到聊齋誌異, in *Guoji Liaozhai lunwenji* 國際聊齋論文集 (Beijing: Beijing shifan xueyuan chubanshe, 1992), 161–97. However, in terms of their focus (on human/animal or plant transformation) and concerns, these writings are quite different from the present study, and they do not go beyond the narrative genre.

ture of sentimentality about old things in the ninth century and how it anticipates yet remains profoundly different from Northern Song antiquarianism.

### 1. FROM OBJECTS TO THINGS

Many pre-Tang poetic writings on inanimate artificial objects present the reader with the ideal object that is exemplary of its kind. As such, it always functions smoothly, embodied by the verbal perfection of the written representation.<sup>6</sup> In strange tales, however, an object typically exceeds, defies, and spectacularly fails its function; it rebels against its human users. In a word, we have stories of, as Bill Brown observes, “objects asserting themselves as things.”<sup>7</sup>

Take the pillow as an example. A fragment of Zhang Wang’s 張望 (fl. fourth century) “*Fu on the Pillow*” (“*Zhen fu*” 枕賦) presents a picture of the Perfect Pillow:

爾乃	Thus,
六安其形	“Peace on six sides” defines its shape;
展輾唯擬	When one tosses and turns, it follows one’s movement.
撫引應適	Stroked or pulled, it suits one’s pleasure;
永御君子	It serves the gentleman forever. <sup>8</sup>

But a pillow can act out of character with the categorical pillow and reveal its idiosyncrasy. Zhang Wang’s contemporary Gan Bao 干寶 (d. 336) records this story in his work of paradoxography, *Soushen ji* 搜神記:

魏景初中，咸陽縣吏王臣家有怪，无故聞拍手相呼，伺无所見。其母夜作倦，就枕寢息。有頃復聞灶下有呼聲曰：“文約，何以不來？”頭下枕應曰：“我見枕，不能往。汝可來就我飲。”至明，乃飯甬也。即聚燒之，其怪遂絕。

In the middle of the Jingchu reign [237–239] of the Wei dynasty, some strange spirit appeared in the household of Xianyang’s county clerk Wang Chen. Out of nowhere the family would hear the sound of hand-clapping and voices calling out to each other, but when they looked around, they found nothing. One night, Wang Chen’s mother, exhausted from working through the evening, lay down on her pillow to get some rest. In a little while, she heard a voice calling out from under the stove: “Wenyue, why aren’t you coming?” The pillow under her head answered, “I am being pillowed on. I cannot go. Why don’t you come to me instead and have a drink with me?” At dawn, [the voice] turned out to come from a rice paddle. They gathered the pillow and the rice paddle and burned them together. From then on, the strange spirits disappeared.<sup>9</sup>

This pillow, which belonged to the Xianyang clerk Wang Chen’s mother in the early third century, also had a name, and thus was a fully individuated pillow in contrast with the categorical Pillow. It uncannily mirrors its human user, a woman exhausted from her evening

6. It is interesting to observe that if a poet wants to write about something in less than perfect condition, he must spell it out in the title of his poem, e.g., “On a Broken Bridge” (“Yong huai qiao” 詠壞橋) or “On a Broken Mirror” (“Yong po jing” 詠破鏡), so that the imperfect condition is built into the defining characteristic of the object and becomes a *categorical imperfection*.

7. Brown, “Thing Theory,” *Critical Inquiry* 28.1 (2001): 4.

8. *Beitang shuchao* 北堂書鈔, comp. Yu Shinan 虞世南 (558–638) (Beijing: Xueyuan chubanshe, 1998; photo-reprint of 1888 edition), 134.9a. All translations are mine unless otherwise noted.

9. Cited in *Taiping guangji* 太平廣記 with variants (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1961), 368.2926. Also cited, as from *Lieyi zhuan* 列異傳, in *Taiping yulan* 太平御覽 (Taibei: Shangwu yinshuguan, 1975), 707.3279, 760.3505. Two early medieval works appear under the name of *Lieyi zhuan* in early bibliographies. One was compiled by Cao Pi 曹丕 (187–226), in the bibliography of *Sui shu* 隋書 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1973), 33.980. The other was compiled by Zhang Hua 張華 (232–300), in the bibliography of *Jiu Tang shu* 舊唐書 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1975), 46.2005.

chores, in that it too yearns for a break from work. Its inability to move mimics the inability of the woman to move her body in her fatigue. But instead of providing peace and comfort, as the ideal Pillow in Zhang Wang's *fu*, this pillow disrupts its human user's sleep and disturbs her rest. The rice paddle, which desperately wants to socialize with the pillow, also challenges its function as a scooper of rice by longing for a drink.

Sometimes a pillow becomes menacing. Guo Jichan's 郭季產 (fl. 420s) *Collection of Marvels* (*Jiyi ji* 集異記) records this story:

宋中山劉玄居越城。日暮，忽見一人著烏袴褶來取火，面首無七孔，面莽黨然。乃請師筮之。師曰：“此是家先代時物，久則為魅，殺人。及其未有眼目，可早除之。”劉因執縛，刀斷數下，乃變為一枕，此乃是祖父時枕也。

During the Song dynasty, Liu Xuan of Zhongshan resided at Yuecheng. At sunset, he suddenly saw a man dressed in a black *kuxi* jacket and pants who came to fetch a light.<sup>10</sup> His head, lacking the seven holes, was faceless. He consulted a diviner, who said, “This is something that has been in your family possession for several generations. After a long time such things can turn into demons and kill people. You must get rid of it as soon as possible, before it grows eyes.” Liu subsequently caught the man, tied him up, and struck him repeatedly with a sword. The man transformed into a pillow. It turned out to be a pillow from the time of his grandfather.<sup>11</sup>

Another story from *A Collection of Marvels* tells of a You Xianchao 游先朝 who ran into a man wearing a red *kuxi* jacket and pants: “He knew it was a demon and whacked it with his sword, and it fell dead. Only after a long time did it transform, and it turned out to be the shoes he wore every day” 知是魅，乃以刀斫之，良久，乃是己常著履也。<sup>12</sup>

There is a sense of eerie menace in these stories exactly because both pillow and shoes are ordinary objects with such a humble existence; they stay close to the human body, and are made to carry the weight of the human body. They are literally being oppressed, and they rise up in rebellion against their human masters.

The broom, usually made of dried bamboo branches and leaves, is another common tool of domestic labor that is regularly featured in strange tales, but perhaps due to its appearance, it is prone to being treated as a phallic symbol. A story from the fifth-century collection of strange tales, *The Garden of Marvels* (*Yi yuan* 異苑), gives a terse account of a maidservant's relationship with an animated broom:

北海徐寔婢蘭，義熙中忽患羸黃，而自拂拭，有異於常。共伺察，見竹掃帚從壁角來趣婢，取而焚之，婢即平復。

Xu Shi of Beihai had a maidservant named Lan. During the Yixi era [405–418], she suddenly began to suffer from gauntness and a sallow complexion. She would also spruce herself up, [acting] in a much different manner from before.<sup>13</sup> The family spied on her and saw a bamboo broom approach her from the corner of the room. They took the broom away and burned it. The maid subsequently recovered.<sup>14</sup>

10. *Kuxi* jacket and pants served as a riding outfit and were often worn by soldiers or laborers.

11. *Taiping guangji* 368.2927. A simpler version with variants is cited in *Taiping yulan* 707.3280.

12. *Taiping guangji* 368.2928. The story is also cited in *Taiping yulan* 698.3246, with variants. The man's name is transcribed as You Xianqi 游先期. For another translation, see Robert F. Campney, *A Garden of Marvels: Tales of Wonders from Early Medieval China* (Honolulu: Univ. of Hawai'i Press, 2015), 9.

13. A contemporary description of an aristocratic young lady having a love affair with her father's staff member uses a strikingly similar sentence: “From this point on, Chong noticed that his daughter spruced herself up splendidly, and that she was quite elated, in a much different manner from before” 自是充覺女盛自拂拭，說暢有異於常. *Shishuo xinyu jianshu* 世說新語箋疏, comp. Liu Yiqing 劉義慶 (403–444), annot. Yu Jiayi 余嘉錫 (Shanghai: Shanghai guji chubanshe, 1993), 35.921.

14. *Taiping yulan* 765.3525. Also in *Taiping guangji* 368.2927, with variants. *The Garden of Marvels* was

Although this story does not spell it out explicitly, in the context of the strange tales tradition the maid most likely saw a human figure instead of a broom.<sup>15</sup> This is clearly stated in another story about an amorous woman and her broom in Liu Yiqing's 劉義慶 (403–444) story collection, *The Record of Worlds Dark and Illuminated* (*Youming lu* 幽明錄):

江淮有婦人，為性多欲，存想不捨日夜。嘗醉，旦起，見屋後二少童，甚鮮潔，如宮小吏者。婦因欲抱持，忽成掃帚，取而焚之。

In the Jiang-Huai region there was a woman who was lusty by nature and would think of sex day and night. Once she was drunk, and upon getting up in the morning, she saw two young men behind her house. They both looked neat and tidy, as junior court officers. The woman went over to embrace them, and they suddenly turned into a broom. She burned it.<sup>16</sup>

This story has a number of interesting features: the woman's lust and drunkenness are narrated in a matter-of-fact manner with a tongue-in-cheek humor, with no condemnation or punishment; we assume two brooms were involved because the woman saw two lads, but the original text is not at all clear on this account due to the lack of singular and plural forms in Classical Chinese, and the ambiguity leaves open a comical possibility that one broom turns into *two* men in the woman's inebriated and lusty state;<sup>17</sup> last but not least, it is ironic that the broom, something to clean and purify the household with, becomes the object of an active sexual fantasy, yet retains a "neat and tidy" look even in its metamorphosis.

What does one do with these unruly things that exceed, defy, and fail their function and prove utterly useless to humans? In most of the stories, the solution is to burn them. This pattern set in the pre-Tang strange tales continued well into the Tang. A story from *Jiyi ji* recounts how an elderly woman was plagued by the spirit of a tilt hammer that appeared as a large bird at night; when the bird pecked at her house, the woman would groan with pain. The woman's son enlisted the help of a hunter, who shot the bird. The next day they found a treadle-operated tilt hammer with blood stains in an old shed. The son burned it, and his mother recovered.<sup>18</sup> A tilt hammer, used to hull rice, is often operated by the elderly, women, or children because it requires skill but not much physical strength. In this story, the hammer's motion of rice-pounding is mimicked in the bird's pecking at the house roof and

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compiled by Liu Jingshu 劉敬叔 (fl. 410s–460s). For a translation of the *Taiping guangji* version, see Campany, *Garden of Marvels*, 100.

15. The *Taiping guangji* version spells out explicitly that the broom went right over to the maid's bed.

16. Cited in *Taiping guangji* 368.2927. For a modern annotated edition, see *Youming lu* 幽明錄, annot. Zheng Wanqing 鄭晚晴 (Beijing: Wenhua yishu chubanshe, 1988), 21. Also see *Youming lu*, coll. Wang Genlin 王根林, in *Han Wei liuchao biji xiaoshuo daguan* 漢魏六朝筆記小說大觀 (Shanghai: Shanghai guji chubanshe, 1999), 736 (this edition is based on Lu Xun's reconstituted version in *Gu xiaoshuo gouchen* 古小說鈎沉). For another English translation, see *Hidden and Visible Realms: Early Medieval Chinese Tales of the Supernatural and the Fantastic*, ed. and tr. Zhenjun Zheng (New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 2018), 33–34.

17. This is similar to what happens in Su Shi's 蘇軾 (1037–1101) famous "Second Rhapsody on the Red Cliff" ("Hou Chibi fu" 後赤壁賦), in which one crane appears as two Daoists in the poet's dream. The discrepancy in numbers bothered some literal-minded readers enough that a textual variant, "one Daoist," emerged in later editions. I discuss this in "Yingzi yu shuiwen: Guanyu qian hou Chibi fu yu liangfu Chibi tu" 影子與水文：關於前後赤壁賦與兩幅赤壁圖, in *Hanmo huicui: Xidu Meiguo cang Zhongguo wudai Song Yuan shuhua zhenpin* 翰墨薈萃：細讀美國藏中國五代宋元書畫珍品 (Beijing: Beijing daxue chubanshe, 2012), 296–311.

18. Cited from *Jiyi ji* 集異記 in *Taiping guangji* 369.2938. There are two Tang tale collections with this title; *Quan Tang wudai xiaoshuo* 全唐五代小說 decides this story is from the *Jiyi ji* compiled by Lu Xun 陸勳 (fl. 871); see Li Shiren 李時人, comp., *Quan Tang wudai xiaoshuo* (Xi'an: Shaanxi renmin chubanshe, 1998), 2: 1232. The other *Jiyi ji* was compiled by Xue Yongruo 薛用弱 (fl. 820s–830s).

bringing pain to the body of the woman living in the house, who might have been operating it during the daytime.<sup>19</sup>

The world of domestic things is occupied by people who perform tedious, repetitive domestic labor: not only women of the household in lower social classes, but also female and male slaves—people whose social and legal status in medieval Chinese society was equivalent to that of things and who were not considered full persons. The commentary in the *Tang Code*, promulgated in 652, states that “male and female slaves are the same as goods” 奴婢同資財.<sup>20</sup> The boundary between persons and things is blurred, and the apprehension about the silent everyday things suddenly rising in arms against their human masters is the mirror image of the apprehension about the underprivileged and marginalized population.

## 2. REFLECTIONS ON THINGS AND PEOPLE

The human being’s uneasy relationship to things—especially to tools designed by humans to enhance productivity and ease labor—is a common phenomenon across cultures and historical periods. In Goethe’s poem “The Sorcerer’s Apprentice,” written in 1797, the hapless young apprentice is overwhelmed by “die ich rief, die Geister”—“the spirits that I called.” One can be overcome by technology, by the very objects—gadgets, computers, robots—that we have invented to help us. But in the premodern Chinese tradition, there was a peculiar form of anxiety about things that deserves our special attention.

In many stories, the objects are familiar things that have been used for a long time. The apprehension about old things harming people had had a long tradition.<sup>21</sup> Confucius, famous for refusing to speak of “the strange, the violent, the deviant, and the supernatural” 怪力亂神, is himself featured as a character in a tale of the strange in the fourth-century collection *Soushen ji*.<sup>22</sup> In the story, set during his predicament in the domain of Chen, Confucius

19. A story that bears certain similarities is recounted in Mo Xiufu’s 莫休符 (fl. 899) *Guilin fengtu ji* 桂林風土記. Shi Congwu 石從武, a military officer, had many family members who suffered from a terrible illness. Late at night, they would see “a man coming in from outside, his body emitting a light. Once this creature arrived, those who were sick would groan more intensely, and no doctor could help them” 每深夜，見一人自外來，體有光耀，若此物至，則疾者呻吟加甚，醫莫能効。Shi Congwu waited for the creature with his bow one night and, when the creature showed up, took a shot at it. “The very first arrow struck the demon, and light and flames scattered like falling stars. Shi Congwu ordered to have candles brought in to look—it turned out to be an old camphor candlestick that the family had used a long time now collapsing on the floor. He split and burned it, and dumped its ashes in the river. After that all of his sick family members recovered” 一發而中，焰光星散，命燭視之，乃家中舊使樟木燈擎，已倒矣，乃劈而燔之，棄灰河中，於是患者皆愈。In this story, the candlestick’s nightly function of illuminating the household is turned into a malevolent effect on the bodies of its human users. *Taiping guangji* 370.2943.

20. Zhangsun Wuji 長孫無忌 (594–659) et al., comp. *Tang lü shuyi* 唐律疏議 (Taipei: Hongwenguan chubanshe, 1986), 17.322. This is the commentary on article 248 in *juan* 17, which details the punishment of the family members and retainers, together with their goods and real estate, of the plotters of the rebellion. The commentary notes that since male and female slaves are treated the same as goods, they are not specially mentioned. See *The Tang Code*, vol. 2: *Specific Articles*, tr. with an introduction by Wallace Johnson (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1997), 241.

21. Wang Chong 王充 (27–ca. 100), *Lun heng* 論衡: “Goblins are the spirits of old things” 鬼者老物精也。See *Lunheng jiaoshi* 論衡校釋, annot. Huang Hui 黃暉 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1990), 22.934. Ge Hong 葛洪 (283–343), *Baopuzi neipian* 抱朴子內篇: “With regard to the myriad things, the spirits of those that have aged can assume a human form to cause confusion to one’s vision and thus test a person” 萬物之老者，其精能假託人形，以眩惑人目，而常試人。 *Baopuzi neipian jiaoshi* 抱朴子內篇校釋, annot. Wang Ming 王明 (Taipei: Liren shuju, 1981), 17.274.

22. The Confucius quote is from the *Analects*. See *Lunyu zhushu* 論語注疏, in Ruan Yuan 阮元 (1764–1849), comp. *Shisanjing zhushu* 十三經注疏 (Taipei: Yiwen yinshuguan, 1955), 7.63.

encountered a man who was nine feet tall; his disciple Zilu 子路, known for his strength and valor, fought and killed the man, who turned out to be a gigantic catfish. Confucius lamented:

此物也，何為來哉？吾聞物老則群精依之，因衰而至。此其來也，豈以吾遇厄絕糧，從者病乎？夫六畜之物及龜蛇魚鼈草木之屬，神皆能為妖怪，故謂之五酉。五行之方皆有其物。酉者，老也。故物老則為怪矣，殺之則已，夫何患焉。

Ah, this thing—why did it come to me? I have heard that when a thing is old, various spirits may inhabit it, and it takes advantage of one's decline. Didn't this thing come to me because I am in a predicament and have no food and all my followers are exhausted? Regarding the Six Animals [i.e., horse, ox, sheep, chicken, dog, pig], as well as turtles, snakes, fishes, tortoises, plants, and trees, their spirits can all turn into demons. We therefore call them the Five *You*, since these creatures exist in all five directions. *You* means old. So when a creature [*wu*] is old, it can turn into a demon. They will only stop when they are killed. Why should one worry about them!<sup>23</sup>

Although he is speaking of a living creature, the attitude applies to inanimate objects. Just as the diviner in the Liu Xuan story says, "After a long time such things can turn into demons [and kill people]."

The attitude toward things is set in glaring contrast with, and thus highlighted by, what is presumed to be the correct attitude toward people. The canonical *Book of Documents* states simply: "With regard to people, we seek the old; with regard to vessels/tools, we do not seek the old, but the new" 人惟求舊，器非求舊，惟新。<sup>24</sup> An anonymous "ancient prelude song" recorded in the tenth-century encyclopedia *Taiping yulan*, classified by the modern scholar Lu Qinli 逯欽立 (1910–1973) under "Han poetry" in his great compendium of pre-Tang poetry, sounds like an axiom:

瑩瑩白兔 東走西顧 衣不如新 人不如故	Lonely is the white rabbit— It runs east and looks west. The best clothes are the new ones, But the best people are old friends. <sup>25</sup>
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The Jin poet Cao Shu 曹摅 (d. 308) affirms his friendship for a departing friend: "It is not that I don't have new associates after my heart; / But with regard to friends, the old ones are the best" 非無新好，人則惟舊。<sup>26</sup> In lines evoking "old friends" 故人/舊人 as this, we always hear the suppressed other half of the statement, "new things being the best." As the poet Tao Yuanming 陶淵明 (365?–427) summarizes in one succinct line: "Things should be new, but friends must be old" 物新人惟舊。<sup>27</sup> The familiarity of the truism about new things/old friends is exactly why the founding emperor of the Southern Qi (r. 479–482) could play with the new/old dialectics by gifting his favorite courtier a set of old clothes: "Now I am sending you a set of my old clothes, which means that even though it is old, it is better than the new" 今送一通故衣，意謂雖故，乃勝新也。<sup>28</sup>

23. Cited in *Taiping guangji* 468.3854. *Xinjiao Soushen ji* 新校搜神記, coll. Hu Huaichen 胡懷琛 (Shanghai: Shangwu yinshuguan, 1957), 19.148. Cf. the story in the same work about Zhang Hua and a one-thousand-year-old fox and a piece of one-thousand-year-old wood. *Xinjiao Soushen ji* 18.138–39.

24. *Shangshu zhushu* 尚書注疏, in Ruan Yuan, comp. *Shisanjing zhushu* (Taipei: Yiwen yinshuguan, 1955), 9.129.

25. Lu Qinli, comp. *Xian Qin Han Wei Jin nanbeichao shi* 先秦漢魏晉南北朝詩 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1983), 292.

26. *Ibid.*, 753. The lines are from "A Poem in Response to Zhao Jingyou" 答趙景猷詩.

27. *Ibid.*, 977. The lines are from "A Poem in Response to Adjutant Pang" 答龐參軍詩.

28. *Nan Qi shu* 南齊書 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1972), 41.727. The gift of something old—rather than something new—appears in the eighteenth-century masterpiece *Dream of the Red Chamber* 紅樓夢, in which the male

There certainly is sentimental value attached to “old things” 故物/舊物 left behind by a departed loved one, and such examples abound in medieval writings. In such cases, however, the value is not conferred on the object by its owner, but by a bereft family member who transfers feelings from the deceased person to the object once owned by that person. For instance, Yan Zhitui 顏之推 (531–ca. 591) mentions a little girl who, upon seeing a screen that was “an old thing” from among her deceased mother’s belongings (平生舊物), wept and died of a broken heart.<sup>29</sup>

Normally, old things do not hold any particular value. They are, generally speaking, to be replaced with new things (*weixin* 維新). The fifth-century collection *Shishuo xinyu* records a revealing anecdote. The Eastern Jin Emperor Cheng 晉成帝 (r. 326–342) once received the gift of a feather fan from a minister. The emperor was displeased with the gift, because he suspected the fan was a used one. A clever minister saved the day by telling the emperor that the fan was presented to the throne “because of its fine quality, not because of its newness” 以好不以新, but the assumption was clear: a used object was not appropriate as a gift.<sup>30</sup> Another anecdote tells of an Eastern Jin general Huan Chong 桓充 (328–384) who was fond of wearing old clothes but ended up being persuaded by his witty wife to put on new clothes after bathing. The story is recorded in the chapter “Worthy Ladies,” clearly in praise of the wife.<sup>31</sup> Both stories presume a positive value associated with new things. Nevertheless, the fate of old things that have lived out their use and are discarded by their owners finds a resonance with the male members of the elite, because in the vessels and tools from the domestic world of women and slaves, they see the image of themselves as the servants of the state and the instruments of their sovereign.

It is well known that from early on in the Chinese tradition, a person possessing a special capacity and fulfilling a useful function is described as a *qi* 器, a vessel and a tool. Confucius regards the famous minister Guan Zhong 管仲 as a “small vessel,” indicating Guan’s lack of a large capacity.<sup>32</sup> When his disciple Zigong 子貢 asked the master what he thought of him, Confucius answered, “You are a vessel.” Not satisfied with the vagueness of the reply, Zigong pressed him, “What kind of vessel?” Confucius said, “A ritual vessel made of fine jade” 瑚璉也.<sup>33</sup> Being a “superb vessel” (*ling qi* 令器) or a “great vessel” (*da qi* 大器) became a commonplace compliment to a talented man. Wang Bao 王褒 (fl. first century BCE) asserts matter-of-factly, “The worthy men are the vessels and tools of the state” 夫賢者國家之器用也.<sup>34</sup> Yet, to excel in one particular function can be a limitation and a constraint. Thus Confucius is also known for saying, “A gentleman is no vessel” 君子不器. For this remark He Yan 何晏 (d. 249) cites the earlier commentator Bao Xian 包咸 (7–65): “Each vessel fulfills one single function; as for a gentleman, he can be applied to all functions” 器者各

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protagonist Jia Baoyu presented two old handkerchiefs to his soul-mate Lin Daiyu, a gift that first led to her bewilderment and quickly to realization, tears, and poetry. This incident takes place in chapter 34 of the novel.

29. *Yanshi jiaxun jijie* 顏氏家訓集解, annot. Wang Liqi 王利器 (Shanghai: Shanghai guji chubanshe, 1980), 6.112. Authors also speak of a general sadness about things left behind by former owners, for example, in Lu Yun’s 陸雲 (262–303) “Fu on Ascending the Terrace” (“Deng tai fu” 登臺賦): “I am touched how all the old things are still here, and saddened the people of old are already gone” 感舊物之咸存兮, 悲昔人之云亡. *Quan Jin wen* 全晉文 100.2033, in *Quan shanggu sandai Qin Han sanguo liuchao wen* 全上古三代秦漢三國六朝文, comp. Yan Kejun 嚴可均 (1762–1843) (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1991).

30. *Shishuo xinyu jianshu* 2.112.

31. *Ibid.*, 19.696.

32. *Lunyu zhushu* 3.30.

33. *Ibid.*, 5.41.

34. From Wang’s “Shengzhu de xianchen song” 聖主得賢臣頌; *Quan Han wen* 全漢文 42.358.

周其用，至於君子，無所不施。<sup>35</sup> Yet, perhaps only a ruler could be expected to achieve comprehensive applicability. *The Record of Rites* states that “the Great Way is no vessel” 大道不器。As Zheng Xuan’s 鄭玄 (127–200) commentary explains: “This means the Way of the Sage is not like a vessel that can only be applied to one thing” 謂聖人之道不如器施於一物。<sup>36</sup> “Sage” is regularly used as an epithet for an emperor or king in *Li ji* and other early writings. But since the majority of men could not be a sage in whichever sense of the word, being regarded as a “great vessel” would be a worthy goal for them.

An ensuing anxiety is that a vessel or tool with its fixed capacity may be found inadequate to performing its task and fulfilling its function. Such an anxiety finds expression in several tales about the “jar-man” from the ninth century. In one story, Li Jin 李璡 (d. 750), the Prince of Ruyang 汝陽, tried to force the famous Daoist master Ye Jingneng 葉靜能 (d. 710) to drink.<sup>37</sup> Ye Jingneng refused but recommended a disciple in his stead, who Ye claimed had a capacity large enough to be the prince’s match. The Daoist adept showed up the next day, conversed with ease on a wide range of topics, and drank away happily. After he finished about five *dou*, he asked to stop. At the prince’s urging he drank another cup, and subsequently collapsed on the floor and turned into a large wine jar that could take five *dou*. The Daoist adept’s name is, suggestively, Chang Chiman 常持滿, “always maintaining fullness [without spilling over].”<sup>38</sup> Although the story is framed as a Daoist master’s playful demonstration of his magic power, the loaded associations of an erudite and eloquent man impressing a prince with his loquacious learning and eventually turning out to be a vessel of limited capacity are unmistakable.

A similar story involves another famous Daoist master, Ye Fashan 葉法善 (d. 720). This story has two versions that intriguingly play off against each other in the characterization of the jar-man. In both versions the narrative suggests that the Daoist master uses magic to conjure up the jar-man in response to the desire of his guest(s). In the first version, the guests yearned for a drink, and a young scholar named Qu 麴生 (“Ferment”), “plump and fair” (*fei bai* 肥白), showed up, talking eloquently and incessantly. The Daoist master told the guests that something was “off” about him and suddenly decapitated him. As Scholar Qu’s head rolled off the stairs, it turned into the lid of a jar, and the scholar himself turned into a jar full of good ale. The guests, shocked and amused, proceeded to drink him up.<sup>39</sup> In the second version, the Daoist master’s distinguished visitor, the famed minister Zhang Yue 張說 (ca. 663–730), expressed a wish for a drinking companion, and the master complied by summoning Recluse Qu 麴處士 (“Ferment”), who could indeed drink copiously but did not talk much. At the end of their gathering, the master scolded Mr. Ferment for being dull: “You cannot converse eloquently and widely, but only indulge in drinking. What use do you

35. *Lunyu zhushu* 2.18.

36. *Li ji zhushu* 禮記注疏, in *Shisanjing zhushu*, 18.656.

37. From Xue Yusi 薛漁思 (fl. 830s), *Hedong ji* 河東記; *Taiping guangji* 72.450–51. Coincidentally (or not), the father of prince Li Jin was none but Li Xian 李憲 (679–742), Emperor Xuanzong’s 玄宗 (r. 712–756) elder brother who had deferred the throne to Xuanzong, and whose original name had been Chengqi 成器 (“becoming a [useful] vessel”). Li Jin was Li Xian’s eldest son and would have been heir to the throne had his father become emperor.

38. A variant reads Chipu 持蒲, which is clearly an orthographic error (see *Quan Tang wudai xiaoshuo* 2.1022–23), for *chiman* is a conventional moral associated with vessels for water or wine. There are too many examples in early writings, the most famous of which is related to a “tilting vessel” 欹器. Placed near the seat of a ruler as a warning about “fullness,” this vessel would tip over if it was filled to the rim. Confucius saw it in the temple of Duke Huan of Lu and commented on it, which prompted his disciple Zilu to ask about “the way of maintaining fullness [without spilling]” 持滿有道乎. See *Xunzi* 荀子 (Taibei: Xuesheng shuju, 1979), 28.147.

39. From Zheng Chuhui 鄭處誨 (834 *jinshi*), *Kai Tian chuanxin ji* 開天傳信記; *Taiping guangji* 368.2931–32.

have?” He then cut off the head of Mr. Ferment, who at that moment turned into a gigantic vat.<sup>40</sup> Here the jar-man is decapitated ostensibly because he is not a good conversationalist, but really because he has already served his purpose (i.e., being a drinking companion for the social occasion). In both versions of the story, whether he only talks or only drinks, the jar-man cannot avoid execution, because it is nothing but an instrument appearing in response to the need of the moment. For a man whose existence is defined by his “use” (*yong* 用), as soon as he outlives his use, his life has lost meaning.

In yet another story, a Mr. Jiang Xiu 姜修, who ran a tavern in Bingzhou 並州, was a free spirit who loved ale, but the people of Bingzhou all avoided him because of his excessive drinking.<sup>41</sup> He finally met his match in a short and stout fellow who called himself Cheng Deqi 成德器 (“Completed Vessel of Virtue”). They drank together happily until the visitor exceeded his drinking capacity, became very drunk, and fell on a rock with a crashing sound—he turned out to be a large wine pot, now broken into pieces.

In all these tales, the jar-man drinks too much and reveals his limitation, which is punished by death: either a literal death, i.e., breaking into pieces, or a symbolic death, i.e., changing back into its true form of a *thing* and losing its most striking human qualities—learning and eloquence. These qualities are what, after all, a male member of the elite is supposed to possess in serving his prince. There is much humor in these tales, but the laughter is uncomfortable: textually, it is echoed by the shocked guests’ nervous laughter upon seeing the decapitated Scholar Qu turn into a jar of ale, disguising an anxiety about the easily blurred boundary between man and thing.

What is a man if he is reduced to his instrumentality? What is left of him when he is revealed to be nothing but a *thing* in carrying out service to his prince? Modern scholars often take note of the objectification of women in classical Chinese poetry, but the objectification of men was a more conscious, and intense, concern for the premodern male authors.

### 3. BURN OR BURY? OLD THINGS AND NEW SENTIMENTS

The anxiety about the blurred boundary between persons and things underlies the pathos of old, worn, and discarded things. At the turn of the ninth century, we begin to see a changing relation to such things, not only in strange tales, but also in poetic and prose writings beyond strange tales. Like many changes in literary history and cultural tradition, the change is gradual, local, co-existing with established forms of representing old things.

A story from Zhang Jian’s 張薦 (744–804) *A Collection of Marvels* (*Lingguai ji* 靈怪集), “Yao Kangcheng” 姚康成, is a marvelous specimen.<sup>42</sup> The Yao Kangcheng story largely fits the “adventure formula” described by Sarah M. Allen, and also contains all the essential elements of a typical “riddling tale” (a human man encountering a group of strangers in human forms, who give hints to their true identities in clever verbal representations).<sup>43</sup> However, an

40. From *Jiyi ji*; *Taiping guangji* 26.172–73.

41. From *Xiao Xiang lu* 瀟湘錄, attributed to Liu Xiang 柳祥 (fl. late ninth century); *Taiping guangji* 370.2943–44.

42. *Taiping guangji* 371.2948. The story has also been translated and discussed by Sing-chen Lydia Chiang in her paper, “Poetry and Personality in Tang Records of Anomalies,” *Tang Studies* 23–24 (2005–6): 95–99. But in it, the story’s author is mistakenly given as Zhang Qian 張騫 and the iron cooking pot in the story is rendered as an “iron spear.” Chiang’s interest in the construction of literati identity in Tang anomaly accounts is not the focus of this present study, and it is debatable whether Yao Kangcheng is represented here as “a poor judge of both poetry and character” (98).

43. Sarah M. Allen, *Shifting Stories: History, Gossip, and Lore in Narratives from Tang Dynasty China* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard Asia Center, 2014), 180–81, 121.

interesting twist at the end manifests an intriguing attitude toward the goblins of old, worn things, which we rarely see in earlier tales.

太原掌書記姚康成奉使之汧隴，會節使交代，入蕃使迴，郵館填咽，遂假邢君牙舊宅，設中室以為休息之所。其宅久空廢，庭木森然。康成晝為公宴所牽，夜則醉歸，及明復出，未嘗暫歇於此。一夜，自軍城歸早，其屬有博戲之會，故得不醉焉，而坐堂中。因命茶，又復召客，客無至者。乃令館人取酒，徧賜僕使，以慰其道路之勤。既而皆醉，康成就寢。二更後，月色如練。因披衣而起，出於宅門，獨步移時。方歸入院，遙見一人入一廊房內，尋聞數人飲樂之聲。康成乃躡履而聽之，聆其言語吟嘯，即非僕夫也。因坐於門側，且窺伺之。仍聞曰：“諸公知近日時人所作皆務一時巧麗，其於託情喻己、體物賦懷，皆失之矣。”又曰：“今三人可各賦一篇，以取樂乎？”皆曰：“善。”乃見一人，細長而甚黑，吟曰：“昔人炎炎徒自知，今無烽竈欲何為。可憐國柄全無用，曾見人人下第時。”又見一人，亦長細而黃，面多瘡孔，而吟曰：“當時得意氣填心，一曲君前直萬金。今日不如庭下竹，風來猶得學龍吟。”又一人肥短，鬢髮垂散，而吟曰：“頭焦鬢禿但心存，力盡塵埃不復論。莫笑今來同腐草，曾經終日掃朱門。”康成不覺失聲大贊其美，因推門求之，則皆失矣。俟曉，召舒吏詢之，曰：“近並無此色人。”康成疑其必魅精也，遂尋其處，方見有鐵銚子一柄、破笛一管、一禿黍穰帚而已。康成不欲傷之，遂各埋於他處。

Yao Kangcheng was in charge of secretarial duties at Taiyuan, and was sent on a mission to the Qian and Long region. It so happened that there was a replacement of military governors, and that the emissary to Tibet was also returning to court. Consequently, post-stations were all filled up. Yao thereupon borrowed the old house of Xing Junya, and used its inner chambers for lodging. The house had been abandoned for a long time, and the trees in the courtyard had grown big and shady. Kangcheng was detained at public banquets during the day, and returned home drunk every night; at dawn he would go out again, and so had never spent any time in the house.

One night, he returned early from the garrison town. Since the officers were having a gambling party, he managed to stay sober. He sat in the hall and ordered tea, and invited some friends. But none came. He then asked the superintendent to fetch ale and give it to all his servants to relieve them from the hardship of traveling. In a little while everyone was drunk, and Kangcheng went to bed. At the second watch, the moonlight was as bright as white silk. Kangcheng threw on some clothes and got up. He went out of the house and paced alone for a long time. Just as he was going back into the courtyard, he saw someone enter a portico. In a little while he heard several people happily drinking and chatting. Kangcheng went over to listen. Judging from the way they were talking, chanting, and whistling, he knew they were not servants. So he sat by the door and peeked.

He heard someone saying, “Dear sirs, you know that when contemporary poets compose poems, they only work at achieving clever prettiness for the moment, but are completely at a loss in terms of lodging one’s feelings [in their works] to express the self and depicting things to enunciate their concerns.” Then he said, “Now why don’t the three of us each compose a poem to entertain ourselves?” Everyone said, “Great.” Then he saw a man who was slender and tall, and of a very dark skin. He chanted:

This one used to be a hot item—  
 only he himself knew it;  
 now there is no fire or stove—  
 what can one do?  
 Alas, the power-handle of the state  
 is completely useless:  
 but it has once seen everyone  
 who failed the grilling.<sup>44</sup>

44. In the third line, *guobing* 國柄, literally “the state’s handle,” indicates the power in handling state affairs, but here puns with the “handle” (*bīng*) of the cooking pot. For the last line, I translate *xiadi* (“fail the examination”) as “fail[ed] the grilling,” for I suspect that the pun here is implicitly on *kaodi* 考第, “determine one’s rank through

Then he saw another man, who was also tall and slender, but had a sallow complexion with many sores on his face. He chanted:

In the old days I had my way,  
 air filling my breast—  
 a song in front of my lord  
 was worth ten thousand gold.  
 Today I cannot even measure up  
 to the bamboo in the courtyard—  
 when wind blows, it can still  
 imitate a dragon's chant.

Another man was fat and short, his temple hair hanging loose. He chanted:

My pate is scorched, my temples bare,  
 only my heart remains;  
 my strength is used up in the dust,  
 but let us speak of it no more.  
 Don't laugh at me  
 for looking like a rotten plant:  
 once I had swept clean  
 the vermilion gate every day.

Kangcheng could not help exclaiming, "Bravo!" He pushed open the door to seek them out, but they had all vanished. He waited till morning and summoned a staff to inquire after them. The staff said, "There are no such people in the neighborhood as the ones you have described." Kangcheng suspected they were some sort of spirits, and looked all over the place. He saw an iron cooking pot with a handle, a broken flute, and a broom with few straws left. Kangcheng did not want to hurt them, so he buried each of them in a separate place.

Each thing laments its current dilapidation in contrast with its former glory. The jab at the contemporary literati's failure to "lodge their feelings [in their poems] to express the *self* and depicting *things* to enunciate their concerns," which would have been an unremarkable piece of criticism, turns out to be comically precise and perceptive when their identities are revealed. Yao Kangcheng proves to be their *zhiyin* 知音, the one who understands and appreciates them. First, merely by listening to their voices he could tell they are no lowly servants; second, he could not help exclaiming at their poetic compositions. At the end of the story, instead of burning the things, Yao Kangcheng buries them; not only does he bury them, but he buries them *separately* rather than lumping all of them in a pit. In the story cited earlier, in which the pillow desires in vain to fraternize with the rice paddle, the things are in fact "burned together," a marked contrast with the separate burial. The unnecessary spending of energy in doing something superfluous is an act of extravagance and significance; it gives value to the things being buried, because each is treated with the kind of dignity and acknowledgment of individual identity befitting a human being.

Working in the History Bureau for twenty years in Dezong's reign 德宗 (r. 780–805), Zhang Jian was deeply knowledgeable about historical and contemporary affairs.<sup>45</sup> His allusion to the contemporary events thickens the reading of the story. Xing Junya 邢君牙 (728–798) had been a capable officer under the command of Li Cheng 李晟 (727–793), famous loyalist general who had recovered the capital Chang'an, where Zhang Jian himself had been trapped, from the rebel army led by Zhu Ci 朱泚 (742–784). Li Cheng was the

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test," *kao* (test) being a homophone of *kao* 烤, to roast/grill. In 788, after ordering thirty-five courtiers to compose poetry at a public banquet, Emperor Dezong had "personally evaluated their poems" 自考其詩 except for those written by the three prime ministers (不加考第). *Jiu Tang shu* 137.3763.

45. See Zhang Jian's biography in *Jiu Tang shu* 149.4024–25.

military governor of Fengxiang 鳳翔 (in modern Shaanxi) from 784 to 787, and during this period he was successful in fending off the attacks from the neighboring Tibetan kingdom. The Tibetans were allegedly so apprehensive about him that they would try to arouse the emperor's suspicion of him by framing him as a co-conspirator. His political rival's vilification of him was also a well-known public event at the time.<sup>46</sup> In the winter of 786, Li Cheng went to court to report to duty and was relieved from military command the next spring, and Xing Junya replaced him as the Fengxiang governor until his death at the post in 798. Several clues in Zhang Jian's story hint that the destination of "Yao Kangcheng" was Fengxiang, and that the event took place when Li Cheng was being replaced by Xing Junya in the spring of 787, which was also the time when Dezong's emissary to Tibet, Cui Han 崔澣, returned to Chang'an.<sup>47</sup> The emperor's mistrust of one of his greatest loyalist generals was well known to Zhang Jian and his elite contemporaries in the capital. The rise and fall of fortune, reflected in a general's overgrown former residence, are good causes for the melancholic mood permeating the poems by the abandoned domestic things.<sup>48</sup>

The place of the Yao Kangcheng story in the "riddling tales" subset of Tang tales has been discussed before.<sup>49</sup> Here it is worthwhile to pause and consider the author of the story, Zhang Jian, and his relationship to a group of writers active at the turn of the century, and how this group shows a crucial tendency to popularize such tales and a new attitude toward used things.

The grandson of the famous Zhang Zhuo 張鷟 (658–730), who had written one of the most remarkable Tang tales, "The Immortals' Den" ("Youxian ku" 游仙窟), Zhang Jian was widely recognized in his own right, as his learning and literary talent are much lauded in his biography in *Old Tang History* and *New Tang History*.<sup>50</sup> What is missing from his official biographies is, however, an attribute singled out for praise by the luminary writer, poet, and intellectual Han Yu 韓愈 (768–824): his sense of humor. In *The Veritable Account of Emperor Shunzong* (*Shunzong shilu* 順宗實錄), Han Yu describes him thus: "he was erudite and skilled at literary compositions; by nature he loved telling jokes" 博學工文詞, 性好談諧.<sup>51</sup> Although hailed as a defender of Confucianism who exerted a significant influence on

46. See Zhang Yanshang's biography and Li Cheng's biography in *Jiu Tang shu* 129.3608, 133.3672.

47. See the chronology of these two events (appointment of Xing Junya; return of the emissary to Tibet) in *Zizhi tongjian* 資治通鑑 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1997), 213.7482, 7484.

48. Li Jianguo also posits that Yao went to Fengxiang in 787, but he believes that Xing Junya moved into a new residence after he became governor; therefore Yao Kangcheng was able to borrow Xing's old residence. See *Tang wudai zhiguai chuanqi xulu* 唐五代志怪傳奇敘錄 (Tianjin: Nankai daxue chubanshe, 1993), 457. However, this hypothetical scenario does not fit the narration in the text: "The house had been abandoned for a long time, and the trees in the courtyard had grown big and shady." The melancholy atmosphere of the overgrown courtyard, strongly evoking a haunted setting and thus perfectly serving the purpose of this story, indicates a long period of disuse, not days or weeks. My speculation is that the overgrown residence alludes to that of Li Cheng, but it would have been less sensitive to use the name of the more innocuous Xing Junya than to make a direct reference to the famous Li Cheng.

49. Li Pengfei summarizes this story and briefly comments on it, stating that it marks the beginning of the self-conscious use of "riddling spirit stories" in mid-Tang. See *Tangdai feixieshi xiaoshuo zhi leixing yanjiu* 唐代非寫實小說之類型研究 (Beijing: Beijing daxue chubanshe, 2004), 61. Sarah Allen observes that riddling tales "are rare before the middle decades of the ninth century, during which they form a small but important subset within the corpus," and the Yao Kangcheng story is posited to be the "earliest of the more complex Tang riddling tales to survive." *Shifting Stories*, 180.

50. *Jiu Tang shu* 149.4023–25; *Xin Tang shu* 新唐書 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1975), 161.4979–82. Zhang Zhuo's "Youxian ku" was lost in China, but has been preserved in Japan, bearing out the statement in Zhang Jian's biography that Zhang Zhuo's writings were prized in Korea and Japan more than in the Tang empire.

51. "He worked in the History Bureau for twenty years, and authored *Biographical Sketches of Prime Ministers*, *An Illustrated Account of the Five Regions beyond the Imperial Center*, *The Record of a Lodger*, and *A Collection*

the development of neo-Confucianism in late times, Han Yu himself was well known for his rowdy humor and indeed had received much criticism for it from some of his more serious-minded contemporaries.<sup>52</sup> Han Yu's humor is particularly associated with his love of telling amusing stories in company; as his friend Zhang Ji 張籍 (ca. 766–ca. 830) disapprovingly indicates, he exhibited a penchant for what James Hightower has translated as “incongruous, baseless talk” 駁雜無實之說.<sup>53</sup> If we take the telling of stories—both hearsay and made-up—as the content of such cheering chit-chat, then those talks, when written down, can certainly be the stuff of Tang *chuanqi* tales.<sup>54</sup> The Yao Kangcheng story exhibits every sign of being an elaborate, self-conscious literary joke along the lines of Han Yu's own “Biography of Mao Ying” (“Mao Ying zhuan” 毛穎傳) and the long narrative preface to the “Linked Verse on a Stone Cauldron” (“Shiding lianju” 石鼎聯句), and would have earned Han Yu's commendation had Han Yu read it—and Han Yu most likely had read it, including, as he did, mention of *A Collection of Marvels* in his sketch of Zhang Jian's life.

Many scholars have discussed “The Biography of Mao Ying.”<sup>55</sup> Here we will only observe that Mr. Mao Ying (lit., “Hairy Tip” or, in Elling O. Eide's translation, Tipp O' Hair) has grown old in his employment by the Qin emperor to the point that his pate was bald, as indeed would be a worn-out writing brush. The emperor said to him, “Master Scriblerus, you are old and bald and no longer of any use to me.”<sup>56</sup> Thereupon Mao Ying retired to his fief, where he died. The biography ends with the “historian's” comment that the Qin emperor was truly wanting in grace and gratitude toward his ministers.

In this piece, the dismissal of an old, worn-out, and useless thing is unequivocally identified with the fate of a courtier who has outgrown his use; we also see, in Mao Ying, the connections with exuberant humor, playfulness, and the sub-set of the *chuanqi* tales about old, broken things. Although Han Yu might have drawn inspiration from an earlier “*Fu* on the Old Brush” (“Gubi fu” 故筆賦), in which a worn-out brush is abandoned,<sup>57</sup> the vocalized compassion for the old thing is missing from the earlier piece, nor is the brush personified. The other side of the personification of a thing is the objectification of a person.

Han Yu is acutely aware of the objectification of a person embodied in his identification with a vessel. In the long poem “The Rapids Clerk” (“Long li” 瀧吏), written during his exile to Chaozhou in 819, a clerk derisively compares him to a jar whose content has exceeded his

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of *Marvels*” 在史館二十年，著宰輔傳略五服圖記寓居錄靈怪集等。 *Quan Tang wen* 全唐文 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1987), 560.5665.

52. See James R. Hightower, “Han Yu as Humorist,” *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies* 44.1 (1984): 5–27.

53. *Ibid.*, 6.

54. The notion that Tang tales are related to the “old-style prose” (*guwen*) espoused by Han Yu began with a very brief essay by Chen Yinke 陳寅恪 (1890–1969), “Han Yü and the T'ang Novel,” published in *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies* 1.1 (1936): 39–43. Liu Kairong 劉開榮 (1909–1973) went much further and connected Tang tales with the mid-Tang “Old-Style Prose Movement” in her *Tangdai xiaoshuo yanjiu* 唐代小說研究 (Shanghai: Shangwu yinshuguan, 1947), acclaimed as the first book-length study dedicated to Tang tales. See a summary of this view as well as a counter-argument in *Tangdai xiaoshuo xueshu dang'an* 唐代小說學術檔案, ed. Cheng Guofu 成國賦 and Cai Yaping 蔡亞平 (Wuhan: Wuhan daxue chubanshe, 2015), 16–18, and 26–28.

55. See William H. Nienhauser Jr., “An Allegorical Reading of Han Yü's ‘Mao-Ying Chuan’ (Biography of Fur Point),” in *Oriens Extremus* 23.2 (1976): 153–74; Elling O. Eide, “Another Go at the *Mao Ying chuan*,” in *T'ang Studies* 8–9 (1990–91): 107–11. Also see Hightower's translation in “Han Yu as Humorist,” 10–14.

56. This is Hightower's translation. “Han Yu as Humorist,” 13.

57. The piece was by Chenggong Sui 成公綏 (231–273). Most of the extant fragment praises the brush as a “great vessel” 偉器; only the last line mentions that it is discarded on the road (卒見棄于行路); *Quan Jin wen* 59.1796.

capacity and brimmed over.<sup>58</sup> The comparison evokes the jar-man stories discussed earlier, and we know what happens to those vessels. The pathos of a used, abandoned thing does not escape Han Yu. His “Song of a Short Candlestick” (“Duan dengqing ge” 短燈檠歌) laments a plain short candlestick being discarded for a more sumptuous long candlestick once its master changes social status:<sup>59</sup>

	長檠八尺空自長	The long candlestick of eight feet, long for no purpose;
	短檠二尺便且光	the short candlestick of two feet, handy and bright.
	黃簾綠幕朱戶閉	Yellow shades are put down, green curtains drawn, red doors closed:
4	風露氣入秋堂涼	the aura of wind and dew comes in, the hall turns chilly in autumn.
	裁衣寄遠淚眼暗	She cuts clothes to send to her man afar, her eyes teary and dim;
	搔頭頻挑移近床	trimming the wick with her hairpin many a time, she moves the candlestick closer to bed.
	太學儒生東魯客	The student of the National University, a traveler from Eastern Lu,
8	二十辭家來射策	took leave of his family at twenty, and came for the examinations.
	夜書細字綴語言	At night he wrote out tiny characters, stitching sentences together,
	兩目眵昏頭雪白	his eyes are blurry with gunk, his hair white as snow.
	此時提攜當案前	At a time like this he carries the candlestick around and moves it up to his desk,
12	看書到曉那能眠	reading all the way till daybreak, how can he sleep a wink?
	一朝富貴還自恣	One day he gains riches and power, and lets himself go,
	長檠高張照珠翠	the long candlestick is raised high, shining on pearl and kingfisher jewelry.
	吁嗟世事無不然	Alas, the affairs of this world always go like this:
16	牆角君看短檠棄	in the corner of the room, against the wall— you will see the short candlestick abandoned.

In this poem the woman and man, seeming to be a separated couple, mirror each other in their sleeplessness, blurry vision, and nightly work of cutting fabric and sewing clothes, stitching words and sentences into a piece of writing. While the short candlestick is a pragmatic everyday object, the long candlestick is a luxury object used for its practical function and as an item of display. Both the man and the woman share a physical proximity and intimacy with the short candlestick: she moves it close to her bed (*jin chuang* 近床) where she keeps working on the clothes, and he carries it around (*tixie* 提攜) and places it right in the

58. *Han Changli shi xinian jishi* 韓昌黎詩繫年集釋, annot. Qian Zhonglian 錢仲聯 (Shanghai: Shanghai guji chubanshe, 1998), 1109.

59. *Ibid.*, 524–25.

middle of his desk (*dang an qian* 當案前). There is no such closeness between the owner and the long candlestick, as it sheds light on the glittering jewels from on high, and it is not immediately clear whether the pearl and kingfisher are a synecdoche for the wife or for a pretty new love. At the change of fortune, the old object is discarded for the new, and the old turns into a thing poignant with its silent retreat and pregnant with meaning. Han Yu's short candlestick and the old candlestick in the Shi Congwu story perform the same function and encounter a similar fate in being abandoned by their human users.

How, then, should one treat a broken, useless thing? Li Guan 李觀 (766–794), a talented writer who had purportedly influenced Han Yu's prose style, made a choice that impressed the young Han Yu so much that he composed the following account.<sup>60</sup>

隴西李觀元賓，始從進士貢在京師，或貽之硯。既四年，悲歡窮泰，未嘗廢其用。凡與之試藝春官，實二年，登上第。行於褒谷，役者劉允誤墜之地，毀焉，乃匣歸埋於京師里中。昌黎韓愈，其友人也，贊且識云：土乎成質，陶乎成器。復其質，非生死類。全斯用，毀不忍棄。埋而識之，仁之義。硯乎硯乎，與瓦礫異。

Li Guan of Longxi, whose courtesy name is Yuanbin, is a gentleman who was presented to the capital to take the civil service examination. Someone gifted him with an inkstone. For four years, through sorrow and joy, hardship and prosperity, he had never even once stopped using it. With it he tried his hand at the Ministry of Rites, and so it was thus for two years before he passed with highest honors. When traveling at Baogu, his servant Liu Yun accidentally dropped the inkstone on the ground and broke it. Thereupon Li took it back in a case to the capital and buried it in the ward where he lived. I, Han Yu of Changli, am a friend. I admired what he did and composed the following lines to memorialize his deed:

Earth provides its substance;  
earthenware has completed it as a vessel.  
It returned to its former substance,  
which is not in the same category of life and death.  
When it was whole, he put it to use;  
in its ruin he did not bear to abandon it.  
He buried it and marked the place:  
that is the principle of benevolence.  
O inkstone, o inkstone!  
It is different from broken tiles and bricks.<sup>61</sup>

This piece makes an unmistakable connection between thing and man. The inkstone has come to Li Guan as a gift. Li Guan himself is described as a “presented scholar” (*jinshi* 進士), sent by the local government to the throne as a tributary gift, *gong* 貢. A memorial to the throne during Empress Wu's reign had proposed that at the grand court assembly on New Year's Day, the “presented men” (*gongren* 貢人) should be positioned before, not after, the “presented goods” (*gongwu* 貢物), so as to underscore the value of men over that of things.<sup>62</sup> The blurred boundary between men and things was nevertheless foregrounded through contestation.

60. For Li Guan's purported influence on Han Yu, see, for instance, Ye Guoliang 葉國良, “Li Guan de guwen jiqi dui Han Yu de yingxiang” 李觀的古文及其對韓愈的影響, in *Yiji yu chaoyue: Tang Song sanwen yanjiu lunji* 憶記與超越：唐宋散文研究論集 (Taipei: Wanjuanlou, 2013), 35–70. The influence, for all we know, may have been mutually intensified, not a simple one-way flow.

61. *Quan Tang wen* 557.5643.

62. Wang Pu 王溥 (922–982), comp., *Tang huiyao* 唐會要 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1955), 76.1383–84. See Linda Rui Feng's nice discussion of this in *City of Marvel and Transformation: Chang'an and Narratives of Experience in Tang Dynasty China* (Honolulu: Univ. of Hawai'i Press, 2015), 12.

Throughout the four years in the capital, the inkstone was always put to use, which means Li Guan himself was always put to use as a man of letters. In the year he passed the civil service examination, however, his servant, whose name is carefully recorded, broke the inkstone. It was dropped on the ground (*zhui zhi di* 墜之地), forming an ironic contrast with its owner's "ascendance to the top rank" (*deng shang di* 登上第). Now ruined and buried, the inkstone "returns to" (*fu* 復) its original substance, i.e., clay, but Han Yu stresses its difference from tiles and bricks because it has been a vessel. Indeed, Li Duan treated it more as a person than as a mere object. Particularly notable is the phrase *xiagui* 匣歸, taking the inkstone back *in a case*, which evokes the practice of taking back the coffined body of a person who has died away from home. Although the inkstone's burial place, *lizhong* 里中, refers to the ward in which Li Guan lived, it brings to mind the common statement about returning the coffined body of a deceased person to his hometown (*sang jiu gui xiangli* 喪柩歸鄉里).

The personification of the inkstone is so heavily accentuated that when we read the statement that "I, Han Yu of Changli, am his/its friend" 其友人也, we are not sure whether the possessive pronoun *qi* here should be rendered as "his [Li Guan's]" or "its [the inkstone's]." If Li Guan had treated his inkstone as a companion, would it not be natural that Han Yu, too, regards the inkstone in the same way? It is because of this that Liu Yun, the servant who broke the inkstone, must be named, because Han Yu is acting as a judge and a historian, obliged to name the perpetrator of involuntary manslaughter in a second-degree murder case.

The piece is known as the "Inscription on the Buried Inkstone/Burying the Inkstone" ("Yi yan ming" 瘞硯銘). Han Yu is commemorating both the inkstone and the act of burying it. The inscription calls to mind the genre of tomb inscription (*muzhi ming* 墓誌銘). In fact, merely two years later, Li Guan died an untimely death at the age of twenty-nine *sui*, and Han Yu composed his tomb inscription, in the same style as the inkstone inscription: its uncharacteristic brevity underscores an emotional intensity.<sup>63</sup>

In "Yi yan ming," what concerns us is the attitude toward a broken, useless thing: instead of destroying or abandoning it, its human master treats it with care and dignity. This is an attitude shared by Lu Tong 盧仝 (790–835), another man befriended and admired by Han Yu.

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| <p>山有洞左頰<br/>拾得玉碑子<br/>其長一周尺<br/>4 其闊一藥匕<br/>顏色九秋天<br/>稜角四面起<br/>輕敲吐寒流<br/>8 清悲動神鬼<br/>稽首置手中<br/>只似一片水<br/>至文反無文<br/>12 上帝應有以<br/>予疑仙石靈<br/>願以仙人比<br/>心期香湯洗<br/>16 歸送錄堂裏</p> | <p>In the cave on the left side of the hill:<br/>that was where I found a Mr. Jade Tablet.<br/>Its length was one full <i>chi</i>,<br/>its width was that of a medicinal spoon.<br/>Its color: the azure sky of the deep autumn;<br/>on the four sides it had square edges.<br/>I tapped it lightly: it emitted the sound of a cold current;<br/>the pure pathos moved gods and ghosts.<br/>I bowed to it, I put it in my hands,<br/>it was just like a section of clear water.<br/>The uttermost patterning has no pattern,<br/>the Supreme God must have a design for it.<br/>I suspected the immortal stone was numinous,<br/>and compared it to an immortal.<br/>I promised to give it a scented bath,<br/>and take it to the Daoist hall when I got back.</p> |
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63. *Han Yu quanji jiaozhu* 韓愈全集校注, annot. Qu Shouyuan 屈守元 and Chang Sichun 常思春 (Chengdu: Sichuan daxue chubanshe, 1996), 3.1214–19.

- 頗奈窮相驢  
 行動如跛鼈  
 十里五里行  
 20 百蹶復千蹶  
 顏子不少夭  
 玉碑中路折  
 橫文尋龜兆  
 24 直理任瓦裂  
 劈竹不可合  
 破環永離別  
 向人如有情  
 28 似痛滴無血  
 勘鬪平地上  
  
 罅坼多齧缺  
 百見百傷心  
 32 不堪再提挈  
 怪哉堅貞姿  
 忽脆不堅固  
 矧曰人間人  
 36 安能保常度  
 敢問生物成  
 敗為有真素  
 為稟靈異氣  
 40 不得受穢污  
 驢罪真不厚  
 驢生亦錯誤  
 更將前前行  
 44 復恐山神怒  
 白雲翳閉嶺  
 高松吟古墓  
 置此忍其傷  
 48 驅驢下山路
- But darn that dumb-looking donkey!  
 It moved like a limping terrapin.  
 In a distance of five or ten leagues,  
 it would stumble a hundred, nay, a thousand times.  
 A man like Master Yan always dies an untimely death,<sup>64</sup>  
 the jade tablet broke midway.  
 Horizontal lines presented omen like cracks on a turtle-shell;  
 vertical streaks would make it fall apart, like a shattered tile.  
 A split bamboo cannot cohere again;  
 a broken ring bespeaks eternal separation.  
 Facing me it seemed to cherish feeling;  
 it appeared to be in pain, even though it dripped no blood.  
 Though I was able to piece the fragments together on the level  
 ground,  
 there were too many fissures and fractures.  
 Every time I looked at it, I felt wounded in my heart,  
 I could not bear carrying it with me any longer.  
 I was surprised how such firm texture  
 suddenly turned brittle, hard and solid no more.  
 How much more so for the mortals of this world—  
 how could they preserve their normal state?  
 I wondered: when a thing was brought to completion,  
 when broken, did it still have its genuine substance?  
 Since it was endowed with a remarkable energy,  
 it could not bear to suffer the filth [of the mortal world].  
 The donkey's crime was truly grave,  
 the donkey's life was misbegotten.  
 I wanted to carry it with me further,  
 but I feared incurring the mountain god's wrath.  
 White clouds, thickly pouring out, closed the ridge;  
 tall pines moaned by an ancient tomb.  
 I placed it there, hardening myself,  
 and urged the donkey on the downhill path.<sup>65</sup>

The stone, referred to as “Mr. Jade Tablet” 玉碑子, closely parallels Lu Tong’s own alias, Master Jade River 玉川子, and is compared to an immortal. When it cracks, the poet feels its suffering as if it were a person. He speculates that its “genuine substance” still remains, and thus it cannot be allowed to be sullied by dirt and filth (ll. 37–40). The broken thing must be treated with respect, just as one would the body of a human being. At the end of the poem, he suggestively places the stone at an ancient tomb surrounded by pines (traditionally planted by a grave). The poem’s title, “Grieving over Mr. Jade Tablet” (“Ku Yubeizi” 哭玉碑子), evokes poems of similar titles lamenting a deceased friend.

Lu Tong is also the author of a series of remarkable “presentation-and-reply” poems exchanged between himself and personified things at a friend’s residence (“Xiao zhai ersanzi zengdashi ershishou” 蕭宅二三子贈答詩二十首). The preface to the series explains the circumstances:

64. Master Yan refers to Yan Hui 顏回, Confucius’s favorite disciple who died at a young age.

65. *Quan Tang shi* 全唐詩 (Taipei: Minglun chubanshe, 1977), 387.4367.

蕭才子修文行名，聞將遷家于洛，賣揚州宅。未售，玉川子客揚州，羈旅識蕭，遂館舊未售之宅。既而，蕭有事于歙州，玉川子欲歸洛，憶蕭，遂與砌下二三子酬酢，說相媿意。俄而二三子有憂宅售心，與其他人手，孰與洛？客以蕭故亦有勉強，不能逆其情，文以見意，遂盡錄寄蕭。天知地知，非苟有所欲，二三子心遠訥君子。蕭乎蕭乎！君歸不得見者，細長三四片者乎？

The talented Mr. Xiao is a man who cultivates his literary learning and pursues fame.<sup>66</sup> I heard that he was about to move his family to Luoyang and planned to sell his house in Yangzhou. I, Master Jade River, was visiting Yangzhou, and got to know Mr. Xiao there. So I became a lodger in Mr. Xiao's unsold house. After a while, Xiao was engaged in some business in Shezhou, and Master Jade River was going to return to Luoyang. The Master missed Xiao and subsequently socialized with the two or three fellows beside the steps, speaking of his feelings of gratitude. The two or three fellows became worried that the house might be sold to some stranger, and felt that they would be much better off going to Luoyang [with Mr. Jade River]. The guest was concerned about Mr. Xiao's feelings and felt hesitant, though in the end he could not go against those fellows' wish. The writings conveyed his intent, and so he copied all of them out and sent them to Mr. Xiao. Heaven and earth both know this: it is not that Mr. Jade River has selfish desire, but simply that the two or three fellows have silently yielded their heart to this gentleman from afar. Ah Mr. Xiao! Ah Mr. Xiao! When you come home, what you will miss seeing are none other than those three and four thin, long slabs. Won't it be so?<sup>67</sup>

The poems consist of pieces presented to the lodger by the rock, bamboo, well, aster, butterfly, and toad, and of the lodger's responses. The things want to leave with the lodger, but the lodger rejects all of them except for the rock. Written in a lively, colloquial style, the poems are hilarious. They show mixed influence from animal/plant parables found in high- and low-brow prose and poetic genres, and from "writing in the voice of/on behalf of" (*daiyan* 代言);<sup>68</sup> they also have a wild, zany quality that is both Lu Tong's own and characteristic of the mid-Tang generation, especially writers close to Han Yu. Many scholars have written about poetic exchange and poets' networking in mid-Tang, with Han Yu's circle forming an important component of their discussions.<sup>69</sup> Lu Tong's series should be considered in this context.

66. Many scholars take this Mr. Xiao to be Xiao Qingzhong 蕭慶中, a friend to whom Lu Tong addressed other poems. See Kong Qingmao 孔慶茂 and Wen Xiuwen 溫秀雯, "Lu Tong xingnian kao" 盧全行年考, in *Nanjing shida xuebao* 1990.4: 99.

67. *Quan Tang shi* 387.4373.

68. For instance, the parables in *Zhuangzi*; early rhapsodies featuring talking animals; the early Tang poet Wang Ji's 王績 (ca. 590–644) poetic set, "Spring Cassia: Inquiry and Response" 春桂問答, with the poet putting a question to a spring cassia tree in a quatrain and the tree responding in another quatrain. *Wang Wugong wenji wujuanben huijiao* 王無功文集五卷本會校, coll. Han Lizhou 韓理洲 (Shanghai: Shanghai guji chubanshe, 1987), 104–5. One scholar cites a comical rhymed text found in Dunhuang, "A Discourse of Tea and Ale" 茶酒論, with the personified Tea and Ale competing for superiority and the spirit of Water attempting to intervene at the end. See Yin Zhanhua 尹占華, "Lun Lu Tong shi de tici quxiang yu yishu fengge" 論盧全詩的題材取向與藝術風格, in *Baoji wenli xueyuan xuebao* 24.6 (2004): 73. Interestingly, this Dunhuang text is usually dated to the Zhenyuan and Yuanhe eras (785–820). See Ji Yuanzhi 暨遠志, "Tangdai chawenhua de jieduanxing: Dunhuang xieben 'Cha jiu lun' yanjiu zhier" 唐代茶文化的階段性：敦煌寫本茶酒論研究之二, in *Dunhuang yanjiu* 1991.2: 101.

69. "Presentation-and-response" poems may be considered as part of the broadly defined *changhe* or exchange poetry. For Tang and especially mid-Tang exchange poetry, see Zhao Yiwu 趙以武, "Tangdai heshi de yanbian lun-lue" 唐代和詩的演變論略, in *Sheke zongheng* 1994.4: 78–83; Yue Juanjuan 岳娟娟, *Tangdai changhe shi yanjiu* 唐代唱和詩研究 (Shanghai: Fudan daxue chubanshe, 2004); Chen Zhongxiu 陳鍾琇, *Tangdai heshi yanjiu* 唐代和詩研究 (Taipei: Xiuwei zixun keji, 2008), which delineates a finer distinction between *zengda* and *changhe* poems (15–19); Anna M. Shields, *One Who Knows Me: Friendship and Literary Culture in Mid-Tang China* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard Asia Center, 2015), 133–99.

Although the things in this series are not all artificially fashioned tools and utensils, there is little substantial difference between the poetry-chanting thing-spirits in the Yao Kangcheng story and those in Lu Tong's poems.<sup>70</sup> The poet exchanges poems with both animate and inanimate things, expressing a particular affinity for the rock and treating it as a good friend. The members of Han Yu's social circle share a fashion of showing empathy for things, especially inanimate things that are broken and useless. These down-and-out things acquired a newfound dignity worthy of a human being; conversely, a human being capable of feeling for lowly inanimate things was distinguished by his or her empathy.

#### 4. "OLD THINGS" 故物 AND "ANCIENT THINGS" 古物: A CULTURE OF SENTIMENTALITY VS. ANTIQUARIANISM

The shift from burning an old thing to burying it was part of a larger phenomenon at the turn of the ninth century. In "The Materiality of the Text and the Material World in the Text," Stephen Owen attributes the enjoyment of ordinary material things to the middle-class "pleasure of possession" as opposed to the early medieval aristocrats' penchant for the finest things only.<sup>71</sup> And yet, anthropomorphism and the pathos of an old thing go beyond the discourse of ownership, as the object of affection and compassion is not always part of one's possessions. From the sympathy for the thing-spirits in the Yao Kangcheng story and Han Yu's empathy for the discarded writing-brush or candlestick, to Lu Tong's gentleness toward a slab of marble, we see a culture of sentimentality that valorizes the investment of feeling into non-feeling things. This sentimentality sets these members of the cultural elite apart from men who lack the finer sentiments to appreciate the things in their employ and treat them with dignity and care. It is no coincidence that Shi Congwu, who burned the old candlestick, was a military officer whose name literally means "follow the martial."

Bai Juyi 白居易 (772–846), only four years younger than Han Yu, is the perfect exemplar of this culture of sentimentality. He walks around his house talking to things, always assuming that they are as gratefully attached to him as he is appreciative of their service. In the following poem, he prides himself on rescuing a stone from mud and using it for propping up his zither.

問支琴石	Asking the Stone that Props My Zither <sup>72</sup>
疑因星隕空中落	I suspect that, because of a meteor shower, you fell from heaven,
歎被泥埋澗底沈	how lamentable you were buried in mud, sinking to the bottom of a ravine.
天上定應勝地上	Being in heaven surely must be better than being on earth?
支機未必及支琴	But propping up the loom does not necessarily beat propping up the zither. <sup>73</sup>
提攜拂拭知恩否	I carry you around, I wipe you clean: do you recognize my grace to you?

70. The modern scholar Gong Pengcheng 龔鵬程 has commented on the similarity between this poetic series and the couplets by the spirits of an old pestle, a lamp stand, a bucket, and a cooking pot in a story written by Niu Sengru 牛僧孺 (780–848). *Wenxue piping de shiye* 文學批評的視野 (Taipei: Da'an chubanshe, 1990), 208.

71. "Wenben de wuzhixing he wenben zhong de wuzhi shijie" 文本的物質性和文本中的物質世界, in *Tang-dai wenshi de xinshiye: Yi wuzhi wenhua weizhu* 唐代文史的新視野：以物質文化為主 (Taipei: Lianjing chubanshe, 2014), 21–33.

72. *Quan Tang shi* 454.5135–36.

73. The Weaving Girl Star uses a stone to prop up her loom.



Bai Juyi's sentimentality spills over to all sorts of domestic things in his household. He has a poem "Parting from My Felt Curtain and Brazier" ("Bie zhanzhang huolu" 別氈帳火爐), in which he assumes the role of a benign imperial ruler surrounded by his loyal thing-subjects. He expresses sadness about parting from them as he comes to the end of the winter, and assures them he will take them out again next winter if he, the aging owner, enjoys continuing good health.<sup>77</sup> A similar poem is entitled "Parting from Spring Brazier" ("Bie chun lu" 別春爐). In this poem, the poet takes the rhetoric up a notch by saying that he would rather have cold weather through all four seasons so that he would never have to part from his brazier. He features himself as a lover who is "full of feelings," thus again obliquely gesturing to Lady Ban's fan poem in which the fan/lady is abandoned by the imperial lover:

暖閣春初入 溫爐興稍闌 晚風猶冷在 夜火且留看 獨宿相依久 多情欲別難 誰能共天語 長遣四時寒	Into the heated alcove spring begins to enter; the mood of the warm brazier is fading a bit. Yet a chill still abides in the evening breeze; so I keep the nightly flames just a little longer. It has accompanied me as I sleep alone; full of feelings, I find parting so hard. Who could put in a word to Heaven: please keep all of the four seasons cold. <sup>78</sup>
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The poetic usurpation of the imperial role can be forgiven only because the poet's relation to his emperor is like that of the thing to himself, so the thing he owns is ultimately his mirror image. This comes out most explicitly in "The Ballad of Wisteria Cane" ("Zhuteng yao" 朱藤謠):<sup>79</sup>

朱藤朱藤 溫如紅玉 直如朱繩 4 自我得爾以為杖 大有裨於股肱	Wisteria, wisteria, gentle as red jade, straight as vermilion rope. Ever since I acquired you as my cane, you have brought great benefit to these arms and legs.
前年左選 東南萬里 8 交遊別我於國門 親友送我于滌水	The year before last, I was sent down to the provinces, and traveled southeast for ten thousand miles. My acquaintances bid me farewell at the gate of the capital city, my relatives and friends sent me off at the Chan River.
登高山兮車倒輪摧 渡漢水兮馬踟躕 12 中途不進 部曲多回	Climbing the high mountains, my carriage collapsed and the wheels ruined, crossing the Han River, my horse trudged on, its hooves split. Midway we could not advance, most of my subordinates turned back.

77. *Quan Tang shi* 44.4980. The poem is translated by Stephen Owen in *The Late Tang: Chinese Poetry of the Mid-Ninth Century (827–860)* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard Asia Center, 2009), 52. Owen makes the point that the poem is a reversal of the famous "fan poem" attributed to Lady Ban of the Western Han, in which the object—the fan figured as a palace lady—speaks to the owner/ruler/lover about its/her fear of abandonment, and that Bai Juyi has "written himself into this imperial role among domestic things." *Ibid.*, 53.

78. *Quan Tang shi* 446.5015.

79. This is one of the "Three Ballads" ("San yao" 三謠), the other two being on an armrest made of twisted wood ("Panmu yao" 蟠木謠), and on an unpainted screen ("Su ping yao" 素屏謠). *Ibid.*, 461.5248.

- 唯此朱藤  
 實隨我來  
 16 瘴癘之鄉  
 無人之地  
 扶衛衰病  
 驅訶魍魎  
 20 吾獨一身  
 賴爾為二
- 或水或陸  
 自北徂南  
 24 泥黏雪滑  
 足力不堪  
 吾本兩足  
 得爾為三
- 28 紫霄峰頭  
 黃石巖下  
 松門石磴  
 不通輿馬  
 32 吾與爾披雲撥水  
 環山繞野  
 二年躡遍匡廬間  
 未嘗一步而相舍
- 36 雖有佳子弟  
 良友朋  
 扶危助蹇  
 不如朱藤
- 40 嗟乎  
 窮既若是  
 通復何如  
 吾不以常杖待爾  
 44 爾勿以常人望吾  
 朱藤朱藤  
 吾雖青雲之上  
 黃泥之下  
 48 誓不棄爾於斯須
- Only this wisteria cane  
 had followed me and pressed on.  
 In the land of pestilence,  
 in uninhabited territories,  
 you supported and defended this sick old man,  
 and drove away goblins and demons.  
 I only had one body,  
 but because of you I had two.
- Sometimes by water, sometimes by land,  
 together we traveled from north to south.  
 The muck was sticky, the snow was slippery,  
 and my feet were failing me.  
 I only had two feet,  
 but with you I had three.
- On top of Purple Vault Peak,  
 under the crag of yellow stones,  
 through the gate of pines, over the rocky stairs,  
 neither carriage nor horse could pass.  
 You and I pushed open the clouds, waded through the currents,  
 walking around the mountains, or meandering in the wilderness,  
 in two years we had walked all over Mount Lu,  
 and never left each other for one single step.
- Even with fine brothers and sons,  
 good friends and companions,  
 when it comes to helping me through difficult terrains, or giving  
 assistance to my limping gait,  
 nothing can compare to the wisteria.
- Alas,  
 if one could be like this in times of hardship,  
 then how much so in times of prosperity!  
 I do not treat you as an ordinary cane,  
 and you, you must not expect me to be an ordinary man.  
 Wisteria, o wisteria,  
 I may soar above the blue clouds,  
 I may sink beneath the yellow mud,  
 I swear I shall not abandon you, even for an instant.

The wisteria is described as “gentle as jade” and “straight as rope,” both being characteristics of a gentleman, *junzi*.<sup>80</sup> Then it is transformed into a cane for the poet, who is metonymically referred to as “arms and legs” (*gugong* 股肱). *Gugong* is a term used in early classics

80. The first is a reference to a couplet from a *Shi jing* 詩經 poem, “Xiao Rong” 小戎: “I think on the gentleman: he is as gentle as jade” 言念君子，溫其如玉。 *Mao Shi zhushu* 毛詩注疏, in *Shisanjing zhushu*, 6.236. The second modifies a line (for the sake of rhyming) from a “children’s ballad” from the Eastern Han: “Straight as a bowstring, one dies by the road; crooked like a hook, one becomes a marquis.” *Hou Han shu* 後漢書 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1965), 7.291.

to describe a minister who functions as arms and legs to the ruler and is a crucial part of the body politic.<sup>81</sup> Later, the cane became the poet's second body and his double; it also became an extension of the poet's body and a prosthesis, a grotesque third foot. There is certainly anthropomorphism here, but the other, dark side of anthropomorphism is the objectification of the human being who literally becomes one with the thing. He may promise to be a good master to his cane, but the poet cannot expect such treatment from *his* lord, as he was sent far away from the capital and experienced all manners of hardship.

That the self is also a thing, an Other, finds its consummate expression in "The Lyric of Fallen Teeth" ("Chiluo ci" 齒落辭):<sup>82</sup>

	嗟嗟乎雙齒	Alas, my two teeth,
	自吾有之爾	ever since I had you,
	俾爾嚼肉咀蔬	I made you chomp on meat and chew on vegetables,
4	銜杯漱水	drink from a cup, and be rinsed with water;
	豐吾膚革	you nourished my flesh and skin,
	滋吾血髓	and nurtured my blood and marrow.
	從幼逮老	From childhood till old age,
8	勤亦至矣	you had truly worked hard.
	幸有輔車	Fortunately you have the cheekbones and the gums,
	非無斷齶	it is not that you do not have the maxilla and mandible.
	胡然舍我	Why did you abandon me,
12	一旦雙落	and fall in a pair one morn?
	齒雖無情	Although my teeth are unfeeling,
	吾豈無情	how can I be unfeeling?
	老與齒別	As I bid farewell to my teeth in my old age,
16	齒隨涕零	my tears fall along with my teeth.
	我老日來	My old age advances every day,
	爾去不回	you go away, never come back.
	嗟嗟乎雙齒	Alas, my two teeth!
20	孰謂而來哉	For what did you come?
	孰謂而去哉	And for what did you go?
	齒不能言	The teeth cannot speak,
	請以意宣	so allow me to convey your thoughts:
24	為口中之物	"We are a thing in your mouth,
	忽乎六十餘年	and suddenly it has been more than sixty years.
	昔君之壯也	In the past, you were in your prime,
	血剛齒堅	your blood rushed forth, your teeth were firm;
28	今君之老矣	now that you are getting on there,
	血衰齒寒	your blood declines, your teeth are cold.
	輔車斷齶	The cheekbones, the gums, the maxilla, and the mandible:
	日削月朘	they are reduced by the day, they are diminished by the month;
32	上參差而下飈臄	those above are uneven, those below are shaky.
	曾何足以少安	How can we ever remain at ease?
	噫, 君其聽哉	Oh, dear sir, listen to us:
	女長辭姥	when a daughter is grown, she takes leave of her mother;
36	臣老辭主	when a minister is old, he takes leave of his ruler;

81. One sees the usage of *gugong* frequently in early classics such as *Shang shu* and *Zuo zhuan*.

82. *Quan Tang shi* 461.5250.

- 髮衰辭頭  
 葉枯辭樹  
 物無細大  
 40 功成者去  
 君何嗟嗟  
 獨不聞諸道經  
 我身非我有也  
 44 蓋天地之委形  
 又不聞諸佛說  
 是身如浮雲  
 須臾變滅  
 48 由是而言  
 君何有焉  
 所宜委百骸而順萬化  
  
 胡為乎嗟嗟於一牙一齒  
 之間  
 52 吾應曰  
 吾過矣  
 爾之言然
- when hair is weakening, it takes leave of the head;  
 when leaves are withered, they take leave of the tree.  
 Be a thing large or small,  
 when the work is done, it departs.  
 Why do you, my dear sir, moan and groan thus?  
 Haven't you heard the Daoist scriptures?  
 My body is not mine,  
 but is given shape by heaven and earth.  
 Haven't you heard the Buddha's teachings?  
 That this body is like floating clouds,  
 and changes and vanishes in an instant.  
 If we speak from this perspective,  
 why should you care?  
 You should simply let go of your whole body,  
 and follow the myriad transformations.  
 Why do you moan and groan  
 about one tooth here, and one tooth there?"
- I respond:  
 "Oh yeah, I was wrong.  
 What you said is absolutely right."

Bai Juyi demonstrates a unique sentimentality about his decrepit teeth, “a thing in [his] mouth” for sixty years. The poet himself is an old thing as well, and the departure of the teeth foreshadows his own, just as an aging minister will take leave of his lord. However, the sense of the self is clearly *not* bound to the aging body. Like the old Zhuangzian question—if the body is a thing that serves “me,” then who is “me”?<sup>83</sup>—the question is left unanswered.

The surge of textual representations of a newfound affection for old things presages, though remaining profoundly different from, the passion for antique collectables in the Northern Song. We may contrast Bai Juyi's poems discussed above with “I Found an Ancient Inkstone” (“Shide guyan” 拾得古硯), composed by his contemporary Yao He's 姚合 (*jinshi* 816):

- 僻性愛古物  
 終歲求不獲  
 昨朝得古硯  
 4 黃河灘之側  
 念此黃河中  
 應有昔人宅  
 宅亦作流水  
 8 斯硯未變易  
 波瀾所激觸  
 背面生罅隙  
 質狀樸且丑  
 12 今人作不得  
 捧持且驚歎  
 不敢施筆墨
- Quirky by nature, I love ancient things,  
 all year long I sought them, but was unable to find any.  
 Yesterday morning, I obtained an ancient inkstone,  
 I found it on the shores of the Yellow River.  
 I thought to myself: in the Yellow River  
 there must have been someone's house once.  
 His house may have become part of the flowing water,  
 but this inkstone has not changed.  
 On its back, where the currents bashed at it,  
 there are cracks and crevices.  
 Its form and substance are plain and homely,  
 modern people cannot produce it.  
 I hold it in my hands and marvel;  
 I don't dare to apply my brush and ink.

83. The question is raised in the *Zhuangzi* chapter, “Qi wu lun” 齊物論 (“Discourse on Thinking of All Things as Being on the Same Level”).

或恐先聖人 16 嘗用修六籍 置之潔淨室 一日三磨拭 大喜豪貴嫌 20 久長得保惜	I wonder if it may have served former sages, who had used it to work on the Six Classics. I place it in a clean and tidy room, every day I wipe and polish it three times. I am pleased it is detested by the rich and powerful, for I get to preserve it and cherish it for evermore. <sup>84</sup>
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In this poem, the poet apologetically refers to his love of “ancient things” *guwu* as an idiosyncrasy. He seeks them, but only encounters a specimen by chance. He observes that the inkstone is rather plain (*pu*) and homely (*chou*), but admires its plainness and homeliness in the same sophisticated way a modern viewer does cavemen’s drawings. Instead of using it himself, he gives it a ritualistic cleansing and puts it away, hoping to preserve it for a long time to come.

The ancient inkstone unburied by Yao He is in every way the opposite of Li Guan’s buried inkstone. The latter is, for Li Guan, an old thing, *gu wu* 故物, with a history of personal use and intimacy; the former is an “ancient thing,” *gu wu* 古物, whose “antiquity” is, just as in the motto of “restore antiquity” (*fugu* 復古) advocated by the Han Yu circle, temporally ill-defined and never specifically located in any clear-cut period or dynasty—it is not something that can be placed in history, and is thus ahistorical and timeless. Ancient things can have great artistic value and commercial value, but merely old things, as the kind of junk one puts out in a “yard sale,” rarely do. One may feel a sense of identification with, and certain affection for, an old thing that one has been using for a long time, but it is hard to get lost in them in the same way one gets lost in one’s obsession with ancient things as a connoisseur and collector. One does not go around seeking and collecting “old things”: they are the vessels and utensils in one’s everyday life, serving their master or mistress silently, unobtrusively, unless they become broken and thus call attention to themselves by malfunctioning; they are around for a long time, become familiar and comfortable, and grow into you, as an old spouse, or an old friend. Yao He’s poem, though about a thing from the past, is really a poem of the future, for it anticipates the Northern Song passion for ancient things, marked and embodied by one of its earliest written manifestations, Ouyang Xiu’s 歐陽修 (1007–1072) *Record of Collected Antiquity* (*Jigu lu* 集古錄), a collection of rubbings of ancient inscriptions on metal and stone.<sup>85</sup> Yet, the divergence between Northern Song antiquarianism and the sentimental attachment to a well-used old thing in mid-Tang writings points to gaps and fissures in the neat, familiar teleological narrative of the “Tang-Song transition.” We are reminded that there are many things about the Tang that would escape our notice if we are too intent on viewing history backward from the lens of an endpoint.

#### CODA

In this essay I have given some preliminary reflections on a striking sentimentality toward old things emerging in the writings of the mid-Tang, an important, unique moment in Chinese literary and cultural history. The sympathy for old things bespeaks the complex dynamics in the relationship of self and other at a time of profound cultural and intellectual changes. The textual representation of this sentiment was not caused by these changes, but rather participated in them and was a noteworthy manifestation.

84. *Quan Tang shi* 502.5708.

85. For a thorough treatment of this work, see Ronald Egan, *The Problem of Beauty: Aesthetic Thought and Pursuits in Northern Song Dynasty China* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard Asia Center, 2006), chap. 1.

In an anonymous “old poem” from the second or third century, the speaker laments:

所遇無故物	I encounter nothing old and familiar everywhere I turn;
焉得不速老	how can I help growing old fast? <sup>86</sup>

The world has changed, which forces the speaker to confront his own aging: seeing no old things around him, he has to become one himself. *Guwu* here is a general reference. But when the great poet Du Fu 杜甫 (712–770) uses the term *guwu* in his poem, it designates something highly specific: the porch by the river at his house in Chengdu, where he had whiled away many delightful hours in happier times. Du Fu had moved into the house in the year 760, left in summer 762 and was compelled by circumstances to stay away for well over a year, and finally returned home in early 764, only to find that the porch had become dilapidated during his long absence. He decided to fix it, and wrote a poem about his decision. At the end of the poem, he tries to justify the repair of a humble porch at a time when the empire itself is teetering and the very city he lives in is often threatened by the breakdown in socio-political order:

人生感故物	But in this life people are moved by old and familiar things;
慷慨有餘悲	and I, stirred, feel a lingering sadness. <sup>87</sup>

Du Fu did not know that, just a few decades after him, this sentiment would take over so many.

86. “Nineteen Old Poems,” no. 11; Lu Qinli, *Xian Qin Han Wei Jin nanbeichao shi*, 331.

87. The poem is entitled “Deck by the Water” (“Shui kan” 水檻); *Quan Tang shi*, 220.2328.