

---

# SINO-PLATONIC PAPERS

Number 292

October, 2019

---

## A Study of Li Yuan's “Zhuanbian Ren”

by  
Ryu Takai

Victor H. Mair, Editor  
*Sino-Platonic Papers*  
Department of East Asian Languages and Civilizations  
University of Pennsylvania  
Philadelphia, PA 19104-6305 USA  
vmair@sas.upenn.edu  
www.sino-platonic.org

# SINO-PLATONIC PAPERS

FOUNDED 1986

*Editor-in-Chief*

VICTOR H. MAIR

*Associate Editors*

PAULA ROBERTS

MARK SWOFFORD

*ISSN*

2157-9679 (print) 2157-9687 (online)

SINO-PLATONIC PAPERS is an occasional series dedicated to making available to specialists and the interested public the results of research that, because of its unconventional or controversial nature, might otherwise go unpublished. The editor-in-chief actively encourages younger, not yet well established scholars and independent authors to submit manuscripts for consideration.

Contributions in any of the major scholarly languages of the world, including romanized modern standard Mandarin and Japanese, are acceptable. In special circumstances, papers written in one of the Sinitic topolects (*fangyan*) may be considered for publication.

Although the chief focus of *Sino-Platonic Papers* is on the intercultural relations of China with other peoples, challenging and creative studies on a wide variety of philological subjects will be entertained. This series is *not* the place for safe, sober, and stodgy presentations. *Sino-Platonic Papers* prefers lively work that, while taking reasonable risks to advance the field, capitalizes on brilliant new insights into the development of civilization.

Submissions are regularly sent out for peer review, and extensive editorial suggestions for revision may be offered.

*Sino-Platonic Papers* emphasizes substance over form. We do, however, strongly recommend that prospective authors consult our style guidelines at [www.sino-platonic.org/stylesheet.doc](http://www.sino-platonic.org/stylesheet.doc).

Manuscripts should be submitted as electronic files in Microsoft Word format. You may wish to use our sample document template, available here: [www.sino-platonic.org/spp.dot](http://www.sino-platonic.org/spp.dot).

All issues of *Sino-Platonic Papers* are free in PDF form. Issues 1–170, however, will continue to be available in paper copies until our stock runs out.

Please note: When the editor goes on an expedition or research trip, all operations may cease for up to three months at a time.

*Sino-Platonic Papers* is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivs 2.5 License. To view a copy of this license, visit <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/2.5/> or send a letter to Creative Commons, 543 Howard Street, 5th Floor, San Francisco, California, 94105, USA.

# A Study of Li Yuan's "Zhuanbian Ren"\*

Ryu Takai

Otani University, Kyoto, Japan

## PREFACE

It has been more than a century since tens of thousands of documents from Mogaoku 莫高窟, Dunhuang 敦煌, were discovered in 1900. Known as the Dunhuang manuscripts, they have influenced various fields of Chinese studies, including history, law, literature, linguistics, astronomy, and knowledge about fortune-telling customs. Of them, the most popularly studied manuscripts in the field of literature are the *bianwen* 變文. The general characteristics of the *bianwen* manuscripts are that each title includes the term *bian* 變 or *bianwen*, words and phrases accompany picture recitations in each, and they are mainly written in prosimetric form, characterized by the alternating use of verse and prose. In literary history, such features place the manuscripts as the source of popular literature of the Song 宋 dynasty and other forms. However, the *bianwen* manuscripts do not exist anywhere other than in the Dunhuang manuscripts, and with very few related resources, there are still many points that remain obscure. For example, while “*bian*” means “transformation,” basic points such as what physical form *bian* takes in these sources are still being debated.

---

\* An earlier version of this paper appeared as “Zhuanbian ren” 轉變人 (A Storyteller with a Picture Scroll), *Xiang Chu xiansheng xinkai bazhi songshou wenji* 項楚先生欣開八秩頌壽文集 (Collection of Papers Presented on the Occasion of Celebrating the Seventieth Birthday of Professor Xiang Chu), ed. Sichuan Daxue Zhongguo Suwenhua Yanjiusuo 四川大學中國俗文化研究所 (Sichuan University Institute for Non-orthodox Chinese Culture) (Beijing: Zhonghua Shuju, 2012), 90–97. I wish to express my deep gratitude to Yoshimura Hiromichi 芳村弘道 (Ritsumeikan University) and Wu Shaowei 武紹衛 (Zhejiang Normal University) for their constructive comments. Responsibility for any remaining errors rests entirely upon the author.

This paper especially focuses on the poem “Zhuanbian ren” 轉變人 by Tang 唐 dynasty poet Li Yuan 李遠 in an attempt to clarify the specific meaning of *bian* by observing the picture recitation called *zhuanbian*, and to further identify the characteristics of the *bianwen* manuscripts. Because much of Li Yuan’s poetry was lost at an early stage, “Zhuanbian ren” has not been taken up in conventional studies until recently. This poem was included in the anthology *Shichaoshi* 十抄詩, which was compiled in the age of Gaoli 高麗 (Goryeo, an ancient Korean kingdom, 918–1392 CE). With the recent progress of studies on this anthology, the poem has finally gained recognition in the field.

In the first section, the paper clarifies the literal meaning of *bian* by using Li Yuan’s “Zhuanbian ren” along with conventional resources regarding *zhuanbian* 轉變. Section two adds some discussion on the era and region in which *zhuanbian* circulated, and section three discusses the relationship between *zhuanbian* and *bianwen* literature, primarily noting their differences. Following the aforementioned analyses, the final part points out the features of *bianwen* unveiled from a new perspective, and the significance of the poetry of Li Yuan in *bianwen* studies.

## 1. LI YUAN AND HIS POEM, “ZHUANBIAN REN”

As very little material connected to Li Yuan is extant, it is difficult to reconstruct a detailed biography. *Tang Caizi Zhuan* 唐才子傳,<sup>1</sup> Li Yuan’s poems, and works written by other poets who interacted with Li Yuan combine to suggest that he received a *jinshi* 進士 degree in Taihe 太和 5 (831), and that he interacted with such famous poets as Du Mu 杜牧 (803–853), Li Shangyin 李商隱 (812–858), Wen Tingyun 温庭筠 (812–?), and Xu Hun 許渾 (years unknown).<sup>2</sup> The poems of Li Yuan enjoyed an

---

<sup>1</sup> *Tang Caizi zhuan jiaojian* 唐才子傳校箋 (Biography of the Talented in the Tang Dynasty with Collation and Commentary), ed. Fu Xuancong 傅璇琮 (Beijing: Zhonghua Shuju, 2000), 7: 217.

<sup>2</sup> Du Mu 杜牧, “Zaochun ji Yuezhou Li shijun Li shanqi aiju qingdi xianya” 早春寄岳州李使君李善棋愛酒情地閑雅 (Sent to Envoy Li of Yuezhou in Early Spring, Li’s Passion for Board Games and Liquor), *Du Mu ji jinian jiaozhu* 杜牧集繫年校注 (Collected Works of Du Mu with Collation and Annotation), ed. Wu Zaiqing 吳在慶 (Beijing: Zhonghua Shuju, 2008), 1: 275–278. Li Shangyin 李商隱, “Huai Qiugu weng” 懷求古翁 (Thinking of Li Qiugu), *Li Shangyin shige jijie* 李商隱詩歌集解 (Collected Poems and Songs of Li Shangyin with Collected Commentary), ed. Liu Xuekai 劉學鍇, Yu Shucheng 余恕誠 (Beijing: Zhonghua Shuju, 1988), 2: 668–672. Wen Tingyun 温庭筠, “Ji Yuezhou Li wailang Yuan” 寄岳州李外郎遠 (Sent to Vice Director Li Yuan of Yuezhou), *Wen Tingyun quanji jiaozhu* 温庭筠全集校注 (Complete Works of Wen Tingyun with

elevated reputation while he was alive, but their fame began to decline over time. By the Song dynasty, there was only one volume of his collected works left.<sup>3</sup> Li Zhiliang 李之亮 has argued that Li Yuan was active during the period of Wu zong 武宗 (r. 840–846) and Xuan zong 宣宗 (r. 846–859), and possibly died in the era of Yi zong 懿宗 (r. 859–873).<sup>4</sup>

*Shichaoshi* consists of ten poems each from thirty poets, including twenty-six written during the Middle Tang (766–835) and Late Tang (836–907) periods, in addition to four poets from the Silla 新羅 period, for a total of three hundred poems.<sup>5</sup> “Zhuanbian ren” is a poem that was newly found in this compilation. Though the year this poem was written is unknown, it can be assumed that it was written in the ninth century, as Li Yuan received a *jinshi* 進士 degree in 831. The poem “Zhuanbian ren” is as follows:

In a luxurious city where the spring rain washes away thin layers of dust,  
Together we saw an elegant woman clasping a *bian* approach.

---

Collation and Annotation), ed. Liu Xuekai 劉學鍇 (Beijing: Zhonghua Shuju, 2007), 672–675. Xu Hun 許渾, “Ji Dangtu Li Yuan” 寄當塗李遠 (Sent to Li Yuan of Dangtu), *Ding Mao ji jianzheng* 丁卯集箋證 (Collected Works of Ding Mao with Commentary and Correction), ed. Luo Shijin 羅時進 (Beijing: Zhonghua Shuju, 2012), 604–605.

<sup>3</sup> *Xin Tangshu* 新唐書 (New Tang History) (Beijing: Zhonghua Shuju, 1975), 60: 1612. *Zhizhai shulu jieti* 直齋書錄解題 (Annotated Record of the Books in Zhizhai’s Studio), ed. Chen Zhensun 陳振孫 (Shanghai: Shanghai Guji Chubanshe, 1987), 19: 571.

<sup>4</sup> *Qin Taoyu shizhu; Li Yuan shizhu* 秦韜玉詩注；李遠詩注 (*Qin Taoyu’s Poems with Commentary; Li Yuan’s Poems with Commentary*), ed. Li Zhiliang 李之亮, (Shanghai: Shanghai Guji Chubanshe, 1989), 1.

<sup>5</sup> Around 1300 notes were added to *Shichaoshi* by a Gaoli (Goryeo) monk called Shi Zishan 釋子山, and the result came to be called *Jiazhu mingxian Shichaoshi* 夾注名賢十抄詩 (Ten Selected Poems of the Talented with Commentary). *Jiazhu mingxian Shichaoshi* 夾注名賢十抄詩 (Ten Selected Poems of the Talented with Commentary), ed. Cha Pingqiu 查屏球 (Shanghai: Shanghai Guji Chubanshe, 2002). Yoshimura Hiromichi 芳村弘道, *Tōdai no shijin to bunken kenkyū* 唐代の詩人と文獻研究 (Study of the Tang Poets and Literature) (Kyōto: Chūgoku Gēmon Kenkyūkai, 2007), 513–571. *Three Hundred Precious and Rare Poems Edited and Annotated by Scholars of the Goryeo Dynasty* 夾注名賢十抄詩, ed. Kukhak Chinhŭng Yŏn’gu Saöp Ch’ujin Wiwŏnhoe 國學振興研究事業推進委員會 (Seongnam: The Academy of Korean Studies, 2009). *Jisshōshi • Kyōchū mēken jisshōshi* 十抄詩 • 夾注名賢十抄詩 (Ten Selected Poems, Ten Selected Poems of the Talented with Commentary), ed. Yoshimura Hiromichi 芳村弘道 (Tōkyō: Kyūko Shoin, 2011).

Her outlandish but fashionable outfit is very beautiful and graceful,  
 And she is wandering alone with an elegant new drawing.  
 The place [for *zhuanbian*] is crowded with the wheels of the nobles;  
 Behind the curtains, ladies open the blinds of brocade embroidery to peek outside.  
 There is no need for a man and woman to “seek for clouds and rain” at Wushan 巫山  
 [the place of legend where King Xiang 襄王 engaged in intercourse with a  
 goddess].  
 Yangtai 陽臺 [a place for men and women to have intercourse] is right at the end of this  
 hill with stone pillars.<sup>6</sup>

This poem is a new and valuable piece of evidence for *bianwen* studies, because it contains information that supports and further advances our conventional understanding of *bianwen*. First, let us take a look at how *bian* is used throughout the poem.

The second line is significant when analyzing the meaning of *bian*. It shows that a woman brings the *bian* from somewhere unknown. This line hints that *bian* is something a woman can carry alone. Therefore, it can be assumed that it is something not too big or heavy. Then, the fourth line indicates that there is a new drawing on the *bian*. We can see here that there is a correlation between the *bian* and drawings, and this is the most important point in understanding what *bian* is. Based on the understanding that there is a correlation, we will then look into a poem by Ji Shilao 吉師老.

Other than the fact that Ji Shilao was a poet of the Middle Tang and Late Tang periods, we have no further information about him. Only four of his poems still exist; one is “Kan Shunü zhuan Zhaojun bian” 看蜀女轉昭君變. This is a poem about a young woman from Shu 蜀, singing the story of Wang Zhaojun 王昭君. Wang Zhaojun was a woman of around the first century BC, who married into a household of the Xiongnu 匈奴 tribe and never returned to China. The tragedy of Wang Zhaojun, with various legends being added over time, became a widely known folktale even among the public. The poem “Kan Shunü zhuan Zhaojun bian” is as follows:

---

6 綺城春雨灑輕埃，同看蕭娘抱變來。時世險妝偏窈窕，風流新畫獨徘徊。場邊公子車輿合，帳裏明妃錦繡開。休向巫山覓雲雨，石幢陂下是陽臺。

Before this charming young girl grew to be a lady,  
 She said her home was “by the bank of Jinjiang 錦江”;  
 Her red painted lips knew everything about what happened over a thousand years  
     before,  
 Her clear words spoke of the far past as if to have lived it herself.  
 The moon of the Chu 楚 nation shone on her penciled eyebrows where they joined.  
 But when she opened her picture scroll, clouds appeared overhead;  
 The young girl speaks, all too well, the regrets of beautiful Zhaojun,  
 Zhaojun communicated her thoughts to the young girl who could very well be Wenjun  
     文君.<sup>7</sup>

The first and second lines show that the young woman says she is from Jinjiang of Shu. This shows that this poem was set in a region other than Shu. The fifth and sixth lines depict her appearance, and it can be seen that she told the story of Wang Zhaojun with a picture scroll. One of the scenes on this picture scroll is the “clouds beyond the northern passes.” This refers to the sky of the northern region of the Great Wall—not the sky of Han 漢 territories, but the sky of Xiongnu lands. In the context of telling the tale of Wang Zhaojun’s life, the reason this story is set beneath the northern sky, where Xiongnu lives, must be that she was already married to King Huhanye Chanyu 呼韓邪單于 before this scene. Therefore, it is likely that the scene shows Wang Zhaojun’s nostalgia for her home country.

With this understanding, the meaning of the title “Zhaojun bian” becomes clear. Zhaojun is Wang Zhaojun. Then, what is *bian*? It has become clear through the observation of “Zhuanbian ren” that *bian* is a word that is related to drawings. The Ji Shilao poem shows that the woman telling the folktale of Wang Zhaojun is holding a picture scroll. From this, it is clear that the title “Zhaojun bian” indicates a picture scroll that tells the life story of Wang Zhaojun.

Going back to the poem of Li Yuan, the second line of “Zhuanbian ren” indicates that a beautiful woman enters the scene with a *bian*. As *bian* here means picture scroll, the second line can be

---

<sup>7</sup> 妖姬未著石榴裙，自道家連錦水濱。檀口解知千載事，清詞堪歎九秋文。翠眉顰處楚邊月，畫卷開時塞外雲。說盡綺羅當日恨，昭君傳意向文君。 *Caidiao ji* 才調集 (Collection of the Talented), in *Tangren xuan Tangshi (shizhong)* 唐人選唐詩 (十種) (Tang Poetry Anthologies by the Tang People) (Beijing: Zhonghua Shuju, 1958), 8: 629.

understood to mean that a woman has brought a picture scroll. It is something a woman can carry by herself, meaning that it is not too heavy. This interpretation agrees with the word “new drawing” in the fourth line. Conventional studies have presented many interpretations of *bian*, as many as its researchers.<sup>8</sup> However, by reading “Zhuanbian ren” and “Kan Shunü zhuan Zhaojun bian” together, the *bian* can be concluded to be a picture scroll. “Zhuanbian ren” is the first source that used the term *bian* to refer to the picture scroll itself, instead of referring to a drawing. It is also the first source that proves the accuracy of interpreting *bian* as drawings.

Many scholars have pointed out previously the validity of interpreting *bian* as “drawings.” As examples, there is an early and detailed study by Umezu Jiro 梅津次郎<sup>9</sup> and a recent study by Karashima Seishi 辛嶋静志.<sup>10</sup> However, these opinions have not yet been widely accepted. There are ongoing discussions debating whether *bianwen* means “changing Buddhist scriptures,”<sup>11</sup> or “changing the literal style.”<sup>12</sup> One of the main reasons for this is that some researchers interpret *bian* as an abbreviation of *bianwen*. Researchers with this interpretation at the core seek for the literal meaning of *bian* in the definition and origin of the two-character word, *bianwen*. However, it is already evident that *bian* is not an abbreviation of *bianwen*,<sup>13</sup> and therefore their opinions cannot be supported here.

---

8 Victor H. Mair, *T'ang Transformation Texts: A Study of the Buddhist Contribution to the Rise of Vernacular Fiction and Drama in China* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1989), 36.

9 Umezu Jirō 梅津次郎, “Hen to henbun — etoki no kaigashi teki kōsatsu sono ni” 変と変文—絵解の絵画史的考察その二 (On Bian and Bianwen), *Kokka* 国華 (Kokka Art Journal) 760(1955): 191–207.

10 Karashima Seishi 辛嶋静志, “Meanings of *bian* 變, *bianxiang* 變相 and *bianwen* 變文,” *Sōka daigaku kokusai bukkyōgaku kōtōkenkyūjo nenpō* 創価大学国際仏教学高等研究所年報 (Annual Report of the International Research Institute for Advanced Buddhology at Soka University) 19 (2015): 257–278.

11 Zhu Qian 朱倩, “Lun Wu Zixu bianwen de xushi yishi” 论《伍子胥变文》的叙事艺术 (On the Narrative Art of “Wu Zixu Bianwen”), *Hubei Hanshou Daxue Xuebao* 湖北函授大学学报 (Journal of Hubei Correspondence University) 29/4(2016): 184–185.

12 Li Xiaorong 李小荣, *Dunhuang bianwen* 敦煌变文 (Dunhuang Transformation Texts) (Lanzhou: Gansu Jiaoyu Chubanshe, 2013), 41–46.

13 Kanaoka Shōkō 金岡照光, “Hen · Hensō · Henbun sakki” 変 · 変相 · 変文札記 (Notes on Bian, Bianxiang, Bianwen) *Tōyōgaku ronsō: Tōyō daigaku bungakubu kiyō* 東洋学論叢：東洋大学文学部紀要 (Bulletin of Orientology) 30 (1977): 1–

Moreover, no specific counter-statements have been made to show why *bian* should *not* be traced back to “drawings,” and there has not yet been substantial discussion on this topic. Though there are still many interpretations of the precise meaning of *bian*, from studying the existing sources, it is most appropriate to interpret it to mean “drawings.” “Zhuanbian ren” is a source which does not require complex interpretation or discussion, and it clearly supports the correlation between the word *bian* and drawings, making this a significant find for the field.

Secondly, it is important to point out the literal meaning of *zhuan* 轉 in “Zhuanbian ren.” Many past researchers have agreed with the idea that *zhuan* 轉 (“turning”) is connected to *zhuan* 轉 (“singing”). As a reference to this, there are two poems written about a woman telling the tale of Wang Zhaojun.

Li He 李賀 — “Xugongzi Zhengji ge” 許公子鄭姬歌

Zhengji unravels the rattan paper, revealing a picture scroll of Zhaojun

When she sings her curious song, her voice is enough to pierce the clouds.<sup>14</sup>

---

33. Rao Zongyi 饒宗頤, “Cong ‘shanbian’ lun bianwen yu tuhui zhi guanxi” 從「睽變」論變文与圖繪之關係 (On the Relationship Between the Pien-wên and the Painting, According to the Sāma-jataka Pien), *Tōyōgaku ronshū: Ikeda Suetoshi hakase koki kinen* 東洋学論集：池田末利博士古稀記念 (Oriental Studies: Essays and Studies Presented to Dr. Ikeda Suetoshi in Honor of His Seventieth Birthday) (Hiroshima: Ikeda Suetoshi hakase koki kinen jigyōkai, 1980), 627–640. Takai Ryū 高井龍, “Hen’ kara ‘Henbun’ e” “変”から“変文”へ (From “Hen” To “Henbun”), *Ajia shakai bunka kenkyū* アジア社会文化研究 (The Journal of Social and Cultural Studies on Asia) 11 (2010): 58–82.

14 長翻蜀紙卷明君，轉角含商破碧雲。 *Li Changji geshi biannian jianzhu* 李長吉歌詩編年箋注 (Collected Works of Li Changji’s Songs and Poems Compiled in Chronological Order with Collation and Commentary), ed. Wu Qiming 吳企明 (Beijing: Zhonghua Shuju, 2012), 52–57.

Wang Jian 王建 — “Guan manji” 觀蠻妓

Telling the story of Zhaojun, her penciled brows are drawn together  
 Her pure voice, laced with varied emotions, sings the painful feelings of Wang Zhaojun.  
 In the spring breeze, a young man makes a small offering, saying: “Very well done!”<sup>15</sup>

These two poems do not use the term *zhuanbian*, but they are about a woman telling the tale of Wang Zhaojun. Furthermore, both of these poems tell us that the method of storytelling included or was in the form of singing. Especially in the Li He poem, Zhengji used a picture scroll, just like the women in the Li Yuan and Ji Shilao poems. By interpreting the *zhuan* of *zhuanbian* as singing, *zhuanbian* would mean singing while telling the stories of drawings in the picture scroll.

This section has revealed the literal meaning of *bian* and *zhuan*, with Li Yuan’s poem “Zhuanbian ren” as a starting point. *Bian* indicates drawings (especially picture scrolls), and *zhuanbian* can be understood as singing and telling the story of the scene on a picture scroll.

## 2. THE ERA AND REGION IN WHICH ZHUANBIAN CIRCULATED

This chapter will look into the era and region in which *zhuanbian* circulated, while analyzing existing *zhuanbian* sources. All existing sources regarding *zhuanbian* are listed below, and the year they were written can be confirmed. That the Li Yuan and Ji Shilao poems were written in the ninth century is as previously stated.

LI HE – “XUGONGZI ZHENGJI GE”

According to *Li Changji geshi biannian jianzhu*, this poem was written in 元和 Yuanhe 4 (809).<sup>16</sup> Li He

---

<sup>15</sup> 欲說昭君斂翠蛾，清聲委曲怨於歌。誰家年少春風裏，拋與金錢唱好多。 *Wang Jian shiji jiaozhu* 王建詩集校注 (Collected Poems of Wang Jian with Collation and Annotation), ed. Zhao Kuifu 趙達夫 (Chengdu: Bashu Shushe, 2006), 385.

<sup>16</sup> *Li Changji geshi biannian jianzhu* (Collected Works of Li Changji’s Songs and Poems Compiled in Chronological Order with Collation and Commentary), 52–57.

was born in 791 and died in 817. It is said that he rose to fame as a poet when he was just fourteen. “Xugongzi Zhengji ge” is a poem that was written under the direct request of Zhengji, the *jinü*, or companion (also often translated as “concubine”), who asked him to make a poem for her when she was taken in by Xugongzi.

WANG JIAN – “GUAN MANJI”

According to *Wang Jian Shiji jiaozhu*, this poem was written in Yuanhe 4 (811).<sup>17</sup> Although the year of Wang Jian’s birth is unknown, he died around 830, and he is therefore presumed to have lived from the late eighth century into the early ninth century.

GAO LISHI WAIZHUAN 高力士傳

The following is referenced as an event from Shangyuan 上元 1 (760).

Every day, the ex-emperor and Gao 高 would make sure that the courtyard was swept and the grass and trees trimmed. Furthermore, while the sutra lectures, discussions of doctrine, and *zhuanbian* performances and storytelling were far from being proper literature, there was hope that in the end they would revive the ex-emperor’s heart.<sup>18</sup>

The ex-emperor mentioned here is Xuan zong 玄宗 (r. 712–756). During the time of this record, he was staying in Shu to escape the An Shi Rebellion 安史之亂 (755–763). This sentence shows that *zhuanbian* was being performed in Shu by 760.

---

<sup>17</sup> *Wang Jian shiji jiaozhu* 王建詩集校注 (Collected Poems of Wang Jian with Collation and Annotation), ed. Wang Zongtang 王宗堂 (Zhengzhou: Zhengzhou Guji Chubanshe, 2006), 466.

<sup>18</sup> 每日上皇與高公親看掃除庭院、芟蕪草木，或講經、論議、轉變、說話，雖不近文律，終冀悅聖情。 *Gao Lishi waizhuan* 高力士外傳 (Unofficial Biography of Gao Lishi), in *Kaiyuan Tianbao yishi shizhong* 開元天寶遺事十種 (Past Incidents in Kaiyuan and Tianbao), ed. Ding Ruming 丁如明 (Shanghai: Shanghai Guji Chubanshe, 1985), 120.

## TANBINLU 譚賓錄

The article described below can be found in *Tanbinlu*.

When Yang Guozhong 楊國忠 was the ruler of Jiannan 劍南, he summoned envoys to go to Lunan 瀘南, very far away. However, since food rations were low and the road was dangerous, often none would return. Each year, the officers of Jiannan would designate Song Yü 宋昱 and Wei Xuan 韋儼 as imperial representatives to recruit troops from the prefectures and district magistrates. People knew that they would surely die, so, not wanting to go, they did not follow orders to enlist. Because of this, the representatives changed their strategy and bribed monks to hold *zhuanbian* performances on the main street to attract crowds. From those who came, they tied up people who had no family or were poor, put them in a closed room, dressed them in cotton clothing, shackled them, and rushed them to the campaigns.<sup>19</sup>

According to *Jiu Tangshu*,<sup>20</sup> Yang Guozhong became the military governor in 751. Therefore, we know that by around the mid-eighth century, people in Shu knew very well about *zhuanbian*, and many gathered when *zhuanbian* was being performed.

## MAOTING KEHUA 茅亭客話

The article below is in *Maoting kehua*:

There was a monk named Ciyuan 辭遠 at the Sanshengyuan 三聖院 in Guangdu 廣都, during the Wei Shu period (後蜀, 925–965), whose surname was Li 李. He was not well

---

<sup>19</sup> 楊國忠為劍南，召募使遠赴瀘南，糧少路險，常無回者。其劍南行人，每歲，令宋昱、韋儼為御史，迫促郡縣徵之。人知必死，郡縣無以應命。乃設詭計，詐令僧設齋，或于要路轉變，其衆中有單貧者即縛之，置密室中，授以絮衣，連枷作隊，急遞赴役。《Taiping guangji 太平廣記 (Extensive Records of the Taiping Era), ed. Li Fang 李昉 (Beijing: Zhonghua Shuju, 1961), 269: 2109.

<sup>20</sup> *Jiu Tangshu 舊唐書 (Old Tang History)* (Beijing: Zhonghua Shuju, 1975), 106: 3243.

educated, but he was very good at recitation. His master Sizao 思鑿 was quite a fool. Ciyuan often belittled Sizao by saying, “What a pity that I am a disciple of this monk!” Ciyuan was always mumbling the “Houtu furen bian” 后土夫人變. The master would try to stop him but that would only make Ciyuan do it all the more. He was completely unsupportive of his master. One day, while he was loudly performing the *zhuanbian*, a person appeared from thin air and grabbed Ciyuan’s ear tightly. For more than twenty years he was not able to hear. He lived in Yijingyuan 義井院 in Chengdu 成都 during the Kaibao period (開寶, 968–976) of the Song dynasty.<sup>21</sup>

It has been determined that the year Ciyuan lost his hearing was just over twenty years before the Kaibao period, around the 940s to 950s. Although this source is somewhat fictionalized, it is an important record for understanding that *zhuanbian* was being performed in Shu in the mid-tenth century.

The above discussion gives every source regarding *zhuanbian* that still exists today. What can be seen here is that all records regarding *zhuanbian* are from after the mid-eighth century. Even the earliest source (*Tanbinlu*) is a record of a time just before the An Shi Rebellion. There is no doubt that national power under the Tang dynasty was critically weakened by the An Shi Rebellion, resulting in significant changes to its political system. However, the direct relationship between this event and the circulation of *zhuanbian* is yet to be discovered. Nonetheless, the spread of *zhuanbian* began after the An Shi Rebellion, and it became a topic among poets in their work after the ninth century. This shows that *zhuanbian* slowly came to be included in poetry at least half a century after gaining a certain amount of recognition in Chinese society.

---

<sup>21</sup> 偽蜀廣都縣三聖院僧辭遠，姓李氏，薄有文學，多記誦。其師曰思鑿，愚夫也。辭遠多鄙其師，云：「可惜！辭遠作此僧弟子。」行坐念《后土夫人變》，師止之，愈甚，全無資禮。或一日大叫轉變次，空中有人掌其耳，遂聵二十餘年。至聖朝開寶中住成都義井院。 *Maoting kehua* 茅亭客話 (Tales of the Guests in a Thatched Pavilion), in *Quan Song biji* 全宋筆記 (Complete Notebooks of the Song Dynasty) (Shanghai: Daxiang Chubanshe, 2006), 2/1: 35.

REGIONS WHERE *ZHUANBIAN* CIRCULATED

Another question arising from the Li Yuan poem that must be addressed is, in what regions was *zhuanbian* circulated? Before analyzing the meaning of the inclusion of “*Zhuanbian ren*” in *Shichaoshi*, the credibility of the *zhuanbian* that circulated in Shu needs to be confirmed.

The woman performing *zhuanbian* in the Ji Shilao poem is from Shu. It can also be presumed that the woman portrayed in Wang Jian has a connection to Shu. This is because *wan* in the title “*Guan wanji*” especially indicates Shu. The statements in *Gao Lishi waizhuan* and *Tanbinlu* are also from Shu. From the tenth century, the source *Maoting kehua* is, again, from Shu. Even given the lack of many existing records regarding *zhuanbian*, there are several indications to show that there was a close relationship between *zhuanbian* and Shu. Nonetheless, *zhuanbian* was widely circulated in regions other than Shu. Supporting evidence can be seen in the next excerpt, from *Benshishi* 本事詩.

The poet Zhang Hu 張祜 was not yet acquainted with Bai Juyi 白居易. Hu came to visit Bai for the first time when Bai was the *cishi* 刺史 [prefect] of Suzhou 蘇州. When they finally met, Bai said, “I have long admired your poetry. I remember your poem about legal interrogation well.” Surprised, Hu asked, “To which poem are you referring?” Bai replied, “Where did you throw the mandarin duck belt? ‘Who did you give the peacock blouse to?’ If this is not legal interrogation, what is it?” Zhang bowed deeply and with a smile, respectfully responded: “I too, remember your ‘*Mulian bian*’ 目連變.” “What is that?” Bai Juyi asked. Zhang replied: “Above through the vast blue yonder and below through the deep underground springs, she was nowhere to be found.’ If this is not ‘*Mulian bian*,’ what is it?” The two enjoyed the rest of the day together with a banquet.<sup>22</sup>

---

<sup>22</sup> 詩人張祜，未嘗識白公。白公刺蘇州，祜始來謁。才見白，白曰：「久欽籍，嘗記得君款頭詩。」祜愕然曰：「舍人何所謂？」白曰：「『鴛鴦鈿帶拋何處，孔雀羅衫付阿誰？』非款頭何邪？」張頓首微笑，仰而答曰：「祜亦嘗記得舍人《目連變》。」白曰：「何也？」祜曰：「『上窮碧落下黃泉，兩處茫茫皆不見。』非《目連變》何邪？」遂與歡宴竟日。 *Benshiji* 本事詩 (True Stories of Poems), in *Benshiji*; *Xu Benshiji*; *Benshici* 本事詩; 續本事詩; 本事詞 (True Stories of Poems, Sequel to True Stories of Poems, True Stories of Ci Poems) (Shanghai:

From this article, it is apparent that scholar-bureaucrats from the ninth century knew “Mulian bian” very well. “Mulian bian” is a tale of Mulian, a disciple of Buddha, who uses his divine power to figure out that his mother is in hell, and goes to help her, with the support of Buddha and other monks. This tale was widely known among the public during the Tang dynasty. The way Bai Juyi and Zhang Hu tease each other shows that “Mulian bian” was widespread, and it was well known by scholar-bureaucrats of the time. As Victor Mair argues, *zhuanbian* was circulating in Shu but was also likely circulating in wide areas across China at the time.<sup>23</sup> Furthermore, the woman in Ji Shilao’s poem mentions that her home is Shu, suggesting that where she currently performed *zhuanbian* was in a region other than Shu. This is more evidence that *zhuanbian* had been circulating beyond Shu.

Based on the information above, evidence that the circulation of *zhuanbian* did not stay only in China is analyzed through Li Yuan’s “Zhuanbian ren.” An important fact here is that “Zhuanbian ren” was included in the edited volume *Shichaoshi*. The editor was able to read “Zhuanbian ren” correctly. He would not have included a poem he could not understand himself in a compilation he was editing. Not only did he understand the poem “Zhuanbian ren,” but it is clear that he thought the poem was worth including in his compilation.

The intellectuals in Gaoli who read *Shichaoshi* at the time must also have understood “Zhuanbian ren.” The fact that “Zhuanbian ren” was understood outside of China in the tenth century must mean that *zhuanbian* was also circulating to the regions surrounding China. As previously shown, written statements regarding *zhuanbian* started to appear from the mid-eighth century, and various poets began to write about *zhuanbian* in the ninth century. *Zhuanbian* circulated widely across China, and as it became widely recognized across China, the editor was aware of *zhuanbian*, and was able to include “Zhuanbian ren” in *Shichaoshi*. Because Gaoli is a region of Korea connected to China by land, it would not be unexpected for people there to know about *zhuanbian*. The fact that “Zhuanbian ren” is included in *Shichaoshi* is another important record demonstrating its wide circulation.

---

Shanghai Guji Chubanshe, 1991), 24.

<sup>23</sup> Mair, *T’ang Transformation Texts*, 158.

### 3. THE CORRELATION BETWEEN *ZHUANBIAN* AND DUNHUANG *BIANWEN* MANUSCRIPTS

This chapter will discuss the ways in which *zhuanbian*, which circulated throughout China, is correlated to the Dunhuang *bianwen* manuscripts.

People who perform *zhuanbian* in the poems of Li Yuan, Ji Shilao, Li He, and Wang Jian are all women of the lower class. None of these poems mention that these women were reading words when performing *zhuanbian*. During the Tang dynasty, there existed *jinü*, or companions (also translated as “concubines”), who created poems, for example, Xue Tao 薛濤 (768–831) and Yu Xuanji 魚玄機 (844–868?). However, they became famous because this was uncommon. Generally, whether they were men or women, the number of people able to learn to read and write was extremely limited, and therefore it was unusual for companions to be literate. Women who performed *zhuanbian* were often companions; this shows that *zhuanbian* was not seen as a cultured performance in their society. As can be seen in the fifth to eighth lines of Li Yuan’s poem, *zhuanbian* in fact had a connection to ill-famed locations.

However, what needs to be taken into consideration is that many stories told by the companions began to be written down, to be fictionalized. This can be confirmed, as *chuanqi* 傳奇 was published based on *jinü*’s stories during the Tang dynasty.<sup>24</sup> The Dunhuang *bianwen* manuscripts were also hypothetically scripts made by the widespread circulation of its *zhuanbian*, which slowly became accepted by scholar-bureaucrats, then documented as reading material. For example, many *Mulian bian* manuscripts brought up in conversation between Bai Juyi and Zhang Hu have been found in the Dunhuang *bianwen* manuscripts. Furthermore, *Wang Zhaojun bian* mentioned in many *zhuanbian* poems can also be found in the Dunhuang *bianwen* manuscripts. These points in common are very important, as they indicate the connection between *zhuanbian* and the Dunhuang *bianwen* manuscripts. On the other hand, their considerable differences cannot be ignored.

First of all, the Dunhuang *bianwen* manuscripts are from the tenth century. This is known

---

<sup>24</sup> Sibuya Yōichirō 渋谷誉一郎, “Tōdai no kōshō bungaku—setsuwa to hyakugi no kankē wo chūshin ni shite” 唐代の講唱文学——「説話」と「百戯」の關係を中心にして (Prosimetric Literature in the Tang Dynasty—Focusing on the Relationship between Storytelling and a Hundred Entertainments), *Gēmon kenkyū* 藝文研究 (Journal of Arts and Letters) 61(1992): 75–97.

because every *bianwen* manuscript with dates recorded on it is from the tenth century.<sup>25</sup> This fact proves that the period at which *zhuanbian* circulated and that at which the Dunhuang *bianwen* manuscripts were created does not match. Another significant difference between the two is that the Dunhuang *bianwen* manuscripts were not used for companion storytelling, but rather more as fictional stories or for sutra lectures. For example, the “Xiangmo *bianwen*” 降魔變文 that used to be owned by Hu Shi 胡適 states “if anyone reads this and sees a part that is incorrect, I pray that he will correct it forthwith.” This is clearly a manuscript that was intended for others to read. Furthermore, focusing on *kongge* 空格 (a single space to show respect to the emperor) in P.2553 “Wang Zhaojun *bianwen*,” Kin Bunkyo 金文京 points out the characteristics of the manuscript as material meant for reading as follows:

The manuscripts of *bianwen* may have been based on an actual folktale, which was distributed in text as a reading material with its contents being advanced rhetorically. On “Wang Zhaojun *bianwen*,” Emperor *Xiao'ai* is written as “孝哀 皇帝” where there is a space between the name “*Xiao'ai*” and “Emperor,” and this can be understood to mean that they followed the rules of the manuscripts of the time so many people could read this.<sup>26</sup>

This point is extremely significant. It strongly underlines that there was a difference in character between P.2553 “Wang Zhaojun *bianwen*” and the folktale of Wang Zhaojun told by the companions. *Kongge* can also be seen in S.4398 “Xiangmo *bianwen*.”

---

<sup>25</sup> *Chugoku kodai shahon shikigo shūroku* 中國古代寫本識語集錄 (*Collected Colophons of Ancient Chinese Manuscripts*), ed. Ikeda On 池田温 (Tōkyō: Daizō Shuppan, 1990). Kin Bunkyo 金文京, “Chūgoku no katarimono bungaku—sesshō bungaku” 中国の語り物文学—説唱文学 (Chinese Narrative Literature—Prosometric Literature), *Chūgoku tūzoku bungō heno shiza—shin sinology • bungaku hen* 中国通俗文芸への視座—新シノロジー・文学篇 (Perspectives on Popular Chinese Literature and Art – New Sinology and Literature) (Tōkyō: Tōhō shoten, 1998), 85–124. Arami Hiroshi 荒見泰史, *Dunhuang bianwen xieben de yanjiu* 敦煌變文寫本的研究 (Study on the Manuscripts of Dunhuang Transformation Texts) (Beijing: Zhonghua Shuju, 2010), 108–183.

<sup>26</sup> Kin Bunkyo 金文京, “Ōshōkun henbun kō” 「王昭君變文」考 (A Study of the Dun-huang Text Wang Zhao-jun Bian-wen), *Chūgoku bungaku hō* 中國文學報 (Journal of Chinese literature), 50 (1995): 81–96.

As mentioned above, the Dunhuang *bianwen* manuscripts were developed as pieces to be read or used for sutra lectures, but they were not items that could be used by illiterate women. This understanding agrees with one of the common characteristics of *zhuanbian* sources. As mentioned in section two, there are *zhuanbian* sources from the eighth to tenth centuries, though none of these sources hint at a correlation between *zhuanbian* and text documents, or describe anyone reading out the words when performing *zhuanbian*. Also, these sources use the term *zhuanbian*, but the term “*zhuan bianwen*” is never used. The Dunhuang manuscripts are originally temple documents, and they were mainly used by monks or people studying in temples. They were not by any means used by people such as illiterate companions. Although the Dunhuang *bianwen* manuscripts are a kind of literature that contained popular vocabulary or presentation style, they cannot be seen as equivalent to *zhuanbian*. By comparing *zhuanbian* and existing Dunhuang *bianwen* manuscripts, the differences in their features are visible. This is the point we must clearly understand and accept when analyzing the characteristics of either *zhuanbian* or the Dunhuang *bianwen* manuscripts, or both.

One related point requires careful attention, and that is the general absence from related sources of the term “*zhuan bianwen*.” That is, there are no sources at all that use the term *zhuanbian ren*, other than the poem of Li Yuan. Because of this, we cannot be certain whether the term *zhuanbian ren* was known or used by the population at the time, or if by coincidence Li Yuan coined this phrase independently. To resolve this problem, further research is required, and the discovery of new sources is to be anticipated.

## CONCLUSION — ABOUT LI YUAN

This paper discusses the meaning of *zhuanbian* and its circulation, as well as its relationship with the Dunhuang *bianwen* manuscripts, focusing on Li Yuan’s “*Zhuanbian ren*,” a newly found poem in the *Shichaoshi*. Not only is this poem an asset to *bianwen* research, it also contains information that will advance the understanding of other *zhuanbian* sources; it is a poem that should not be overlooked in future research.

Finally, this paper ends with a comment on Li Yuan. As stated previously, by the Song dynasty, only one volume of his poems remained. However, as was recorded in *Tang Caizi Zhuan*, he was a poet

with a relatively high degree of recognition while he was alive. The fact that his works were listed in *Shichaoshi*, which was edited in the tenth century in Gaoli (Goryeo), can be seen as evidence of this. More than being valued only in the Tang dynasty, this shows that Li Yuan must have been recognized throughout China at the time. Today, there are only a limited number of sources showing the popularity of Li Yuan in the Tang dynasty, making this source highly valuable.

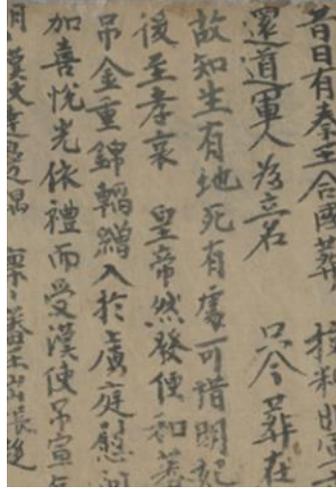


Fig. 1 P.2553 Kongge in *Wang Zhaojun Bianwen* (line 4)<sup>27</sup>

---

<sup>27</sup> Retrieved April 7, 2019, from <http://idp.bl.uk/>.

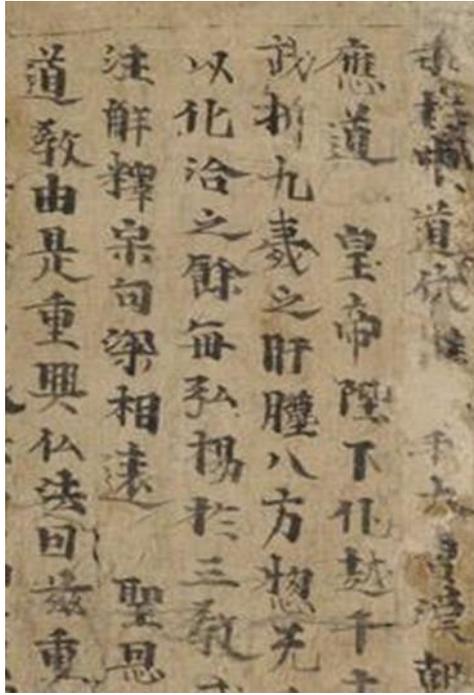


Fig. 2 S.4398 Kongge in *Xiangmo Bianwen* (line 2)<sup>28</sup>

---

<sup>28</sup> Ibid.

All issues of *Sino-Platonic Papers* are accessible to readers at no charge via our website.

To see the complete catalog of *Sino-Platonic Papers*, visit  
[www.sino-platonic.org](http://www.sino-platonic.org)