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The Imagery of House Geckos and Tokay Geckos in Imperial Era Chinese Literature

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores Chinese literary images of house geckos and tokay geckos. Because house geckos are numerous, widespread, and apt to live close to human beings, they are the lizard species people most often encounter. Literary records of geckos for the two thousand years of the imperial period show that extensive attention has long been paid to them. These citations, however, have focused almost exclusively on the use of dead geckos in magical practices used to determine women's virginity, during which the woman's arms were daubed with either gecko ash or its blood. Accordingly, geckos feature prominently in erotic writings focused on male anxieties about women's sexual experience. Live house geckos, on the other hand, were mentioned only in the context of their role in religious rain-making rituals. They appear in a host of writings as creators of rain (or, less desirably, hail). Tokay geckos, on the other hand, live far from the heartlands of the Chinese world, and thus they came to symbolize travel to remote, exotic regions, where bizarre, unfamiliar creatures made strange, loud noises in the night. Exploring imperial era Chinese writings about house geckos and tokay geckos reveals the extent to which human concerns have been projected onto lizards, to the point that such concerns overshadowed daily observations of these ubiquitous little creatures.

INTRODUCTION

There are dozens of varieties of geckos in China, most of them in extremely remote and inaccessible mountainous regions.¹ So when imperial era literati wrote about geckos, or indeed about lizards in general, it is likely that in most cases they were describing house geckos (*Hemidactylus* sp.).² As the modern common name for house geckos, *bihu* 壁虎 (or “wall tiger”), attests, these creatures share human habitations and have developed in a symbiotic relationship with people.³ However, despite their ubiquitous presence in and around people’s houses, it took many centuries before the

1 For an overview of the gecko species of China, focusing only on endemics, see Shen Shanshan 申姗姗 and Chen Xiaohong 陳曉虹, “Zhongguo bihushu de dili fenbu, xingtaixue he fenzi xitongxue yanjiu jinzhhan” 中國壁虎屬的地理分佈, 形態學和分子系統學研究進展 (*Henan Shifan Daxue Xuebao (Ziran kexueban)* 河南師範大學學報 (自然科學版) 2014.3, pp. 129–135). For a detailed analysis of all the different species of geckos, including invasive species, within the context of the incredible diversity of Chinese lizard varieties, see Bo Cai, Xiang Ji, Yingyong Wang, Dingqi Rao, Song Huang, Yuezhao Wang, Zhaobin Song, Xianguang Guo, and Jianping Jiang, “An Annotated List of Lizards (*Sauria: Squamata*) Recorded from the People’s Republic of China” (*Asian Herpetological Research* 13.1 (2022), pp. 64–74). This lists eleven species of cave gecko, three species of wonder gecko, and fifty other geckos of various kinds, of which seven are different species of house gecko (*Hemidactylus* sp.). Many of these are extraordinarily rare and can only be found in a very limited geographical area.

2 There are a number of different species of house geckos that are common across vast swathes of China. Particularly widespread are the common house gecko (*Hemidactylus frenatus*); Garnot’s house gecko (*Hemidactylus garnotii*); Asian house gecko (*Hemidactylus platyurus*); and Stejneger’s house gecko (*Hemidactylus stejnegeri*).

3 At least ten species of house geckos have an intercontinental range; see Arnold G. Kluge, “The evolution and geographical origin of the New World *Hemidactylus mabouia-brookii* complex (Gekkonidae, Sauria)” (*Miscellaneous Publications, Museum of Zoology, University of Michigan* 138 (1969), pp. 1–78); Fred Kraus, *Alien Reptiles and Amphibians: A Scientific Compendium and Analysis* (Dordrecht: Springer, 2009), 238–255; and C. Caphina et al., “Diversity, biogeography and global flows of alien amphibians and reptiles” (*Diversity and Distribution* 23 (2017), pp. 1313–1322). In some instances, the movement of geckos in modern times has been sufficiently well-documented that their arrival in a particular locale can be correlated with movements of a human population; see for example Ted J. Case and Douglas T. Bolger, “The role of introduced species in shaping the distribution and abundance of island reptiles” (*Evolutionary Ecology* 5 (1991), pp. 272–290); Fred Kraus, “Impacts from invasive reptiles and amphibians” (*Annual Review of Ecology, Evolution, and Systematics* 46 (2015), pp. 75–97); and D.J. Monroe, G.B. Pauly, T.R. Ruppert, and R.E. Spinoza, “Historic and recent range expansion of the Mediterranean House Gecko (*Hemidactylus turcicus*) in the eastern USA” (*Herpetological Review* 51 (2020), pp. 447–453).

nomenclature for different species became fixed. Accordingly, this paper will begin with a discussion of the contentious and complex vocabulary for describing geckos, demonstrating that at least some of this elaboration appears to be the result of the creatures' being considered the epitome of all reptiles. As a result, they appear prominently in literary representations of other species as a fixed point for comparison.

The literary legacy of geckos can be divided into two discrete traditions. One concerns dead geckos, the other live ones. According to legend, dead geckos—whether fed with cinnabar and smelted into an elixir, or crushed to powder and mixed with cinnabar, with the resultant substance daubed on a woman's arm, or exsanguinated—formed an infallible virginity test. Thanks to this magical practice, the subject of fascinated interest to male literati for at least two thousand years, geckos figured prominently in Chinese writings on eroticism and sexuality. However, alongside the many literary representations of dead geckos, there was also an important (but much less well-known) magical tradition focusing on live geckos and their importance in rain-making rituals. Accordingly, the many carefully observed accounts of gecko behavior move seamlessly into a discussion of their importance as magical generators of mist, rain, and hail.

Geckos also served to anchor male literati's experience of travels to distant places and encounters with unfamiliar flora and fauna. Geckos could aid humans with feeling at home in new environments; alternatively, an encounter with a new gecko species—most notably the large and loudly vocal tokay gecko—could serve as a reminder of just how far away one had traveled.⁴ Tokay geckos were the first group to be consistently distinguished in writings about lizards and served to represent the alien qualities of the deep south. Literary representations of live tokay geckos concentrated on descriptions of their vocalizations, which formed part of the background noise of everyday life.

⁴ There are only two varieties of these geckos found within the borders of China: the Tokay gecko (*Gekko gecko*) and Reeves' Tokay gecko (*Gekko reevesii*). Both live only in southern regions.

NAMING GECKOS IN IMPERIAL CHINA

The first reference to geckos in Chinese literature dates to the late Warring States period and can be found in the *Xunzi* 荀子 chapter on rhapsodies (*fu* 賦), in which Master Xun describes the dire state of the world: “*chi* dragons have become geckos; owls have taken the place of phoenixes” (*chilong wei yandian, chixiao wei fenghuang* 螭龍為蝮蜓，鴟梟為鳳凰).⁵ The ill omen associated with owls was established very early on in Chinese literature, but this is the earliest surviving mention of the gecko in the transmitted tradition, so it is impossible to know what cultural connotations it carried in the third century BCE.⁶ Although today *yandian* means “skink” (*Scincidae* species), according to the *Erya* 爾雅 (Approaching Elegance), in antiquity, this word denoted the gecko: “A *rongyuan* is a *xiyi*. A *xiyi* is a *yandian*. A *yandian* is a *shougong*” (螻蝮，蜥蜴。蜥蜴，蝮蜓。蝮蜓，守宮也).⁷ Today, *rongyuan* is the standard term for a salamander; *xiyi* is the word for a lizard; *yandian* is the word for a skink; while

⁵ Wang Xianqian 王先謙, *Xunzi jijie* 荀子集解 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1988), 482 [“Fu” 賦]. This translation follows the commentary by Wang Xianqian 王先謙 (1842–1917) which specifically identifies *yandian* as meaning geckos. Translators of the *Xunzi* have been divided upon this point; John Knoblock, *Xunzi: A Translation and Study of the Complete Works* (Vol. III; Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1994), 203, translates *yandian* not as a binome but as the name of two different creatures, chameleons and geckos, even though chameleons are not native to China. Meanwhile, Eric L. Hutton, *Xunzi: The Complete Text* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2014), 285, gives it as “lizard.” This passage from the *Xunzi* is reechoed in Ban Gu 班固 et al., *Hanshu* 漢書 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1962), 87B:3571, where Yang Xiong 楊雄 (53 BCE–18 CE) states: “Nowadays, people mock the phoenix for the sake of the owl, and grab the gecko while despising the [sacred] turtle and dragon: is that not sick!” (今子乃以鴟梟而笑鳳皇，執蝮蜓而倉龜龍，不亦病乎!).

⁶ See for example Kong Yingda 孔穎達, *Mao Shi zhengyi* 毛詩正義 (Beijing: Beijing daxue chubanshe, 1999), 1258 [Mao 264: “Zhanyang” 瞻卬]: “The wise man builds a city; the wise woman overthrows the city. However admirable the wise woman, she is but an owl, a hooting owl!” (哲夫成城，哲婦傾城。懿厥哲婦，為梟為鴟). Prejudices against owls can also be found expressed in many ancient Chinese texts; see for example Kong Yingda 孔穎達, *Shangshu zhengyi* 尚書正義 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1999), 535 [“Lüxing” 呂刑]. For a discussion of the ill-omened nature of owls; see Chiara Bocci and Roderich Ptak, “The Entries on Birds in Liu Xun’s *Lingbiao lu yi*” (*Bulletin de l’École française d’Extrême-Orient* 102 (2016), pp. 297–352).

⁷ Guo Pu 郭璞 and Xing Bing 邢昺, *Erya zhushu* 爾雅注疏 (Beijing: Beijing daxue chubanshe, 1999), 301 [“Shiyu” 釋魚]. This line has generally been understood to give four names for one creature (*yi wu xingzhuang xianglei er si ming ye* 一物形狀相類而四名也).

shougong or “palace guardian” is an archaic term for gecko. The way in which the *Erya* gives these names suggests that either a vast vocabulary for geckos was subsequently apportioned out to various other varieties of reptiles and amphibians, or that the differences between species were not held to be particularly important in ancient China, and possibly all of these terms were used as generic designations for similar creatures. The impression that writers in early China were not exact in naming these creatures is reinforced by the *Shuowen jiezi* 說文解字 (Explaining Graphs and Analyzing Characters) dictionary of c. 100 CE, which gives some of the same terms as essentially interchangeable: “*Yi*: is the same as *xiyi*, *yandian*, or *shougong*” (易: 蜥易, 蟺蜓, 守宮也).⁸ Another gloss found in the *Shuowen jiezi* suggests that where a distinction was made, it was on the basis of habitat: “*Yan*: on a wall it is called *yandian*, in the grass it is called *xiyi* (蟺: 在壁曰蟺蜓, 在艸曰蜥易).”⁹ The reference to the creature living on walls suggests that the author believed the word *yandian*—at least in some circumstances—to denote geckos. The relevant entry in the *Fangyan* 方言 (Regional Words) dictionary, in which Yang Xiong 楊雄 (53 BCE–18 CE) identifies the various dialect words for gecko, suggests that a wide variety of reptiles and amphibians were grouped in this broad category:

The “palace guardian”: In Qin, Jin, and Xixia they are called “palace guardians,” or *luxi*, or indeed *xiyi*. Those who live in the marshes call them *yiyi*. In southern Chu they are called *sheyi* or also *rongyuan*. In eastern Qi and the Bohai to Taishan littoral they are called *yihou*. In northern Yan they are called *zhuting*. In Guilin, the large geckos that can sing are called *gejie* (Tokay geckos).¹⁰

8 Duan Yucai 段玉裁, *Shuowen jiezi zhu* 說文解字注 (Nanjing: Fenghuang chubanshe, 2007), 801 [“Yibu” 易部].

9 *Shuowen jiezi*, p. 1155 [“Chongbu” 虫部].

10 Qian Yi 錢繹, annot., *Fangyan jianshu* 方言箋疏 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1991), 8:295. The presence of these loud-voiced geckos in the tropical south is also attested to in other texts; for example, Shen Huaiyuan 沈懷遠 (fl. fifth century) in the *Nanyue zhi* 南越志 (Gazetteer for Nanyue) states that: “In Chengyang County there are many arboreal geckos, and the large ones can sing. They call them *gejie*” (成陽縣樹多守宮, 大者能鳴, 謂之蛤蚧); quoted in Li Fang 李昉 et al., comp., *Taiping yulan* 太平御覽 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1960), 946:4200. The *Nanyue zhi* was unfortunately lost in antiquity and survives only in fragmentary quotations such as this.

守宮: 秦晉西夏謂之守宮, 或謂之蠪蠪, 或謂之蜚易。其在澤中者謂之易蜴。
南楚謂之蛇醫, 或謂之蠓蠓。東齊海岱謂之蠃蝮。北燕謂之祝蜓。桂林之中,
守宮大者而能鳴謂之蛤解。

Many of the terms mentioned here by Yang Xiong as regional names for geckos appear nowhere else in Chinese literature. However, he has the distinction of being the first Chinese scholar to distinguish between tokay geckos and house geckos on the basis of size, habitat, and vocalization. Over time, the inadequacy of the vocabulary for geckos caused problems, as people attempting to differentiate between species found that they could only do so by descriptive comparisons. Finally, in the Jin dynasty, Guo Yigong 郭義恭 (fl. 270s) documented the geckos with which he was familiar in the *Guangzhi* 廣志 (Gazetteer on the Guangdong Region):

The “palace guardian” has scales and coloration like a snake, but with four legs. It looks like a *yandian* but is larger than a *yandian*. There are those which live between the walls, there are those in the wilderness, and there are those that live on top of stones.¹¹

守宮, 鱗色如蛇, 而四足。似蠃蜓, 有尺餘蠃蜓。有屋壁間者, 有草野者, 有石上者。

At approximately the same date, Cui Bao 崔豹 (fl. 270s) wrote in the *Gujin zhu* 古今注 (Notes on Things Old and New) of the wide variety of different terms used for lizard species. As with Guo Yigong, he attempted to distinguish between different varieties of gecko on the basis of size and behavior. However, Cui Bao takes this process even further, as he discusses what would later become fixed categories of geckos, lizards, salamanders, and giant salamanders, describing their size and

¹¹ This short passage is quoted in *Taiping yulan*, 946:4200. This lost text, today known only from fragments, remains an important source of information about the flora and fauna not only in southern China, but also in regions that traded with them, as discussed in Sugimoto Naojirō 杉本直治郎, “Kaku Gikyō no Kōshū: Nanboku chō jidai no Hyōkoku shiryō toshite” 郭義恭の廣志: 南北朝時の驃國史料として (*Tōyō shi kenkyū* 東洋史研究 23.3 (1964), pp. 324–343).

coloration. However, all these reptiles and amphibians were still subsumed within the broad category of “gecko:”

The *yandian* is also known as the “palace guardian” or “little dragon,” and it is good at catching cicadas to eat in the treetops.¹² When it is long and thin and has five colors, it is called a *xiyi*; when it is short and fat, it is called a *rongyuan*; or also a *sheyi*.¹³ The longest ones are up to three feet in length, and their color is dark purple. They are good at biting people.¹⁴ They can be called *xuanyuan* or also *yuan yuan*.¹⁵

蠃蜒: 一曰守宮, 一曰龍子, 善於樹上捕蟬食之。其長細五色者, 名為蜥蜴; 其短大者, 名為蝮蝮, 一曰蛇醫。大者長三尺, 其色玄紺, 善[鬼+勿]人。一曰玄蝮, 一名綠蝮。

The prominence given to geckos in any discussion of reptile and amphibian terminology may simply reflect propinquity. People, even city-dwelling members of the literati elite with very limited experience of interacting with other lizard species, might be expected to be familiar with house geckos

¹² Gecko predation of cicadas does not seem to have been the subject of much study, and so it is not clear if this is in fact a major food source for these lizards.

¹³ *Sheyi* literally means “snake doctor.” There is a story to explain this name, which would appear to refer to a house gecko: “A man was wounded by a snake, and he was in such pain that he wanted to die. Then he saw a little child that said: “You should use two knives and sharpen them against each other under water, then drink the water you have sharpened them in, for this is amazingly effective.” Having said this, [the child] disappeared into a hole in the wall. The man took this medicine as instructed and he immediately got better. That is why the *yuan yuan* is known as a “snake doctor” (一人為蛇傷, 痛苦欲死。見一小兒曰: “可用兩刀在水相磨, 磨水飲之, 神效。”言畢, 走入壁孔中。其人如方服之, 即愈。因號綠蝮為蛇醫). See Zhang Dai 張岱, *Ye hangchuan* 夜航船 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 2012), 17:322.

¹⁴ Some editions of the text give *mei* 魅 (to trick or to bewitch) for *shi* 鬼+勿 (to bite); a rare variant form of the character *shi* 蝮.

¹⁵ Cui Bao 崔豹, comp., Mou Hualin 牟華林, annot., *Gujin zhu jiaojian* 古今注校箋 (Beijing: Xianzhuang chubanshe, 2014), 142 [“Yuchong” 魚蟲].

because they shared accommodation with them. Although literati probably did not pay much attention to their gecko companions day-to-day, these formed a useful familiar point of comparison in the event of encountering a new variety of lizard. Furthermore, unfamiliar creatures from exotic regions could be introduced by relating them to the geckos that everyone knew well. This usage can be seen in the *Qiawen ji* 洽聞記 (Record of Wide Learning); a text sometimes attributed to Zheng Sui 鄭遂 (d. 192 CE), which is more likely the work of Zheng Chang 鄭常 (d. 787) in the Tang dynasty.¹⁶ In this text, the author explained the saltwater crocodile of Funan 扶南 (an ancient state straddling the border between what is now Cambodia and Vietnam) to a Chinese readership located far to the north of anywhere where such creatures were to be found:

The kingdom of Funan produces crocodiles. They are three or four yards long, with four feet, and shaped like geckos. They often eat people, so the king of Funan ordered people to catch crocodiles and put them in the moat, where they throw criminals down to them. If they deserve to die, the crocodiles then eat them. If they are not guilty, [the crocodiles] sniff at them and refuse to eat them.¹⁷

扶南國出鱷魚。大者二三丈，四足，似守宮狀。常生吞人，扶南王令人捕此魚，置於塹中，以罪人投之。若合死，鱷魚乃食之。無罪者，嗅而不食。

As will be discussed below, the most popular term for the gecko from the Han to at least the Song dynasty was the highly sexualized *shougong* or “palace guardian.” This word came to be preferred

¹⁶ The textual history of this book and its disputed authorship is discussed in Li Jianguo 李劍國, *Tang Wudai zhiguai chuanqi xulu* 唐五代志怪傳奇叙錄 (Tianjin: Nankai daxue chubanshe, 1993), 252–257. The *Qiawen ji* is a particularly important source of information about cross-cultural contacts; see for example Yu Taishan, “China and the Ancient Mediterranean World: A Survey of Ancient Chinese Sources” (*Sino-Platonic Papers* 242 (2013), pp. 1–268); Luo Guihuan 羅桂環, “Pingguo yuanliu kao” 蘋果源流考 (*Beijing Linye Daxue Xuebao (Shehui kexueban)* 北京林業大學學報 (社會科學版) 13.2 (2014), pp. 15–25); and Tian Chun 田春, “Zhongguo gudai renyu tuxiang yu chuanshuo de hushi yu yanjin” 中國古代人魚圖像與傳說的互釋與演進 (*Meishu xuebao* 美術學報 2015.2, pp. 99–107).

¹⁷ Li Fang 李昉 et al., comp., *Taiping guangji* 太平廣記 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1961), 464:3822.

even in non-sexualized contexts when geckos were under discussion. However, by the Ming dynasty, a new vocabulary for designating the gecko was increasingly coming into popular use: these terms include *bihu* or “wall tiger,” as well as other similar names suggestive of these creatures’ habit of lurking in the interstices of houses. The significance of this shift in nomenclature is not completely understood; however, this was evidently not the result of geckos becoming de-sexualized in literary discourse: “wall tigers” certainly appear in late imperial erotic writings. However, this new vocabulary can be seen in action in the text and notes to the tenth and final song of Sun Lin’s 孫霖 (fl. early eighteenth century?) “Chikan zhuzhi ci” 赤崁竹枝詞 (Fort Provintia Bamboo Branch Songs). Here, the author gives four different names for geckos, while discussing seasonal variations in behavior and quite distinct vocalization patterns based on location. Although “palace guardians” are mentioned, the sexual connotations of this term are not relevant for understanding this description of the fauna of Mainland China, Penghu, and Taiwan:

These weird scaly creatures and weird plants are very hard to name,¹⁸
 Every time we have a cold night the wall tigers sing.¹⁹
 There’s a kind of green hanging parrot that’s wonderful,
 We should praise them for filling the eastern seas with beauty.

庶魚庶草劇難名
 每訝寒宵壁虎鳴

18 This terminology, which equates the flora and fauna of Taiwan with the plants and animals found in ancient myths, is derived from the *Huainanzi* 淮南子; see He Ning 何寧, *Huainanzi jishi* 淮南子集釋 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1998), 372–374 [“Dixing xun” 墜形訓].

19 Most studies of Asian house gecko vocalization demonstrate they have a significant preference for calling on warm nights; see for example Jaimie M. Hopkins, Megan Higgie, and Conrad J. Hoskin, “Calling behaviour in the invasive Asian house gecko (*Hemidactylus frenatus*) and implications for early detection” (*Wildlife Research* 48.2 (2020), pp. 152–162). However, proximity is also sometimes an issue, particularly for geckos that do not produce loud vocalizations; see Teppei Jono and Yoko Inui, “Secret Calls from under the Eaves: Acoustic Behavior of the Japanese House Gecko, *Gekko japonicus*” (*Copeia* 1 (2012), pp. 145–149).

一種綠毛麼鳳好
也誇文采滿東瀛

The *yandian* is the same thing as the “palace guardian,” and there are a lot of them on the Mainland. They are commonly known as the “wall tiger,” while people in the north call them “scorpion tigers.” It is only those that live on Taiwan that can sing, and they make a sound like sparrows. In the summer months they scale the walls; in the winter they go into hibernation. If you cross over to Penghu, even in the summer they do not sing. The hanging parrot looks like a parrot but is smaller; its feathers are brightly colored, with a red collar and green robe, and it climbs trees and hangs on well thanks to its hooked beak and short legs, and long, thin claws.²⁰ By nature, it likes to hang upside down, and at night it sleeps like that: accordingly [Su] Dongpo (Su Shi 蘇軾; 1037–1101) called it a “green hanging parrot.”²¹

蠅蜒即守宮，內地多有之，俗名壁虎，北人呼蠅虎：獨產台灣者能鳴，其聲如雀。夏月緣壁，冬始蟄。過澎湖，雖夏亦不鳴。倒挂鳥似鸚鵡而小，翎羽鮮明，紅衿綠衣，緣樹循繞，鉤嘴短足，爪纖而長，性喜倒挂，夜睡亦然，即東坡所謂『倒挂綠毛麼鳳』也。

The confused nomenclature used in early Chinese literature for geckos, lizards, and other reptiles and

²⁰ The description given here is very strongly reminiscent of the Philippine hanging parrot (*Loriculus philippensis*), specifically the red patch on the throat. Although not found there today, it is entirely possible that the Philippine hanging parrot was known in Qing dynasty Taiwan.

²¹ This poem and its accompanying explanatory note are quoted in Yu Wenyi 余文儀, *Xuxiu Taiwan fuzhi* 續修台灣府志 (Taipei: Datong shuju, 1995), 26:982. Nothing is known of the poet Sun Lin, but this earliest publication of his writings about Taiwan was compiled in 1762–1763. In his song lyric “Xi jiang yue” 西江月 (To the Tune: Moon on the West River), Su Shi wrote of his deceased concubine, comparing her to a hanging parrot; see Fu Cheng 傅成 and Mu Chou 穆儔, *Su Shi quanji* 蘇軾全集 (Shanghai: Shanghai guji chubanshe, 2006), *ciji* 詞集 2:618. This song is translated in its entirety in Ronald Egan, *Word, Image, and Deed in the Life of Su Shi* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1994), 329.

amphibians means that it is often impossible to be sure what creature is intended without the presence of a great deal of supplementary information about location, size, habitat, coloration, and so on. However, it is likely that a great deal of reptilian imagery in pre- and early imperial literature did indeed refer to the house gecko, both because this was the most familiar species for many people, and because it provided a helpful frame of reference. Consistently, throughout the imperial era, when Chinese people encountered a new variety of reptile, they discussed how it compared to the house geckos that they knew well. These two features combined to give geckos the status of the archetypal reptile in Chinese literature, to which all descriptions eventually turn.

SEXUALIZED REPRESENTATIONS OF DEAD GECKOS: AN ENDURING TRADITION

One of the most important ancient names for the gecko in common usage was *shougong* or “palace guardian.” Although modern dictionary definitions suggest that this was because geckos served to keep the palace clear of noxious insects, the term “palace” should be understood as a metaphor for the female body, and specifically female virginity.²² Calling geckos “palace guardians” alluded to the practice of using these lizards as one of the key ingredients in virginity tests as part of a magical belief that would continue to remain current throughout the imperial era.²³ By at least the time of the Western Han dynasty, “palace guardian” seems to have been well-established as the common term for a gecko even

22 For example, Luo Zhufeng 羅竹風 et al., eds., *Hanyu da cidian* 漢語大詞典 (Vol. 3; Shanghai: Hanyu da cidian chubanshe, 1995), 1302, states that: “because they often lie in wait on palace walls and in rooms to catch and eat insects and moths, they were called palace guardians” (因其常守伏於宮牆屋壁以捕食蟲蛾。故名守宮). There is no pre-modern gloss on the term *shougong* that gives such an interpretation of the origins of this name.

23 Qiu Ya 丘雅, “Shougong yuanliu kaobian” 守宮源流考辨 (*Xiandai yuwen* (*Xiaoxun: Yuyan yanjiu*) 現代語文 (下旬: 語言研究) 2010.8, pp. 150–151), argues against this interpretation, but the argument is based upon a profound misreading of classical Chinese texts. This scholar appears to be unable to distinguish references to geckos from literal descriptions of guarding the palace (*shou gong* 守宮) and official titles such as that of the Shougong ling 守宮令 (Director of Palace Stationary). An instance of the former usage can be found in Sun Yirang 孫詒讓, *Mozi xiangu* 墨子閒詁 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1990), 610 [“Haoling” 號令]; the latter title is mentioned in Fan Ye 范曄 et al., *Hou Hanshu* 後漢書 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1965) *zhi* 志 26:3592, where it describes how the holder was in charge of paper and brushes for imperial use.

in contexts completely divorced from any overt sexual meaning. This can be seen from a famous story found in the *Hanshu* 漢書 (History of the Han dynasty), which records how the court jester, Dongfang Shuo 東方朔 (c. 160–c. 93 BCE), correctly guessed that Emperor Wu of the Han dynasty 漢武帝 (r. 141–87 BCE) had secreted a gecko in the palace for a guessing game:

His majesty ordered his diviners to shoot at a hidden target.²⁴ He placed a gecko underneath a bowl, and they shot at it, but none were able to hit it. [Dongfang] Shuo put himself forward, saying: “I have studied the *Book of Changes*, and ask your permission to shoot at it.” Then he set aside his milfoil stalks, laid out a hexagram, and explained it as follows: “I think this is a dragon, but it does not have horns; I could call it a snake, but it has legs. Creeping and crawling it is good at scaling walls, so it is either a ‘palace guardian’ or a lizard.” “Good!” his majesty exclaimed. He bestowed ten lengths of brocade on him. Afterwards he ordered him to shoot other things and every time he hit the target, so he was then the recipient of more silk brocade.²⁵

上嘗使諸數家射覆，置守宮孟下，射之，皆不能中。朔自贊曰：“臣嘗受易，請射之。”乃別著布卦而對曰：“臣以為龍又無角，謂之為蛇又有足。跂跂脈脈善緣壁，是非守宮即蜥蜴。”上曰：“善。”賜帛十匹。復使射他物，連中，輒賜帛。

In his commentary on this passage in the *Hanshu*, Yan Shigu 顏師古 (581–645) explained the meaning of the term “palace guardian” by quoting the earliest recipe for a gecko-and-cinnabar virginity test preserved within the transmitted tradition. This was derived from Zhang Hua’s 張華 (232–300) compilation, *Bowu zhi* 博物志 (Treatise on Marvelous Things). The *Bowu zhi* is a collection of 329 anecdotes, which forms one of the most important early anthologies of *zhiguai* 志怪 (tales of the

²⁴ Shooting at a hidden target was a popular kind of gambling game in early and medieval China, in which an animal of some kind was placed in hiding and then shot at by hunters who could not see it; see Xi Wenqian 郗文倩, “Shefu, shehou he shece” 射覆射侯和射策 (*Gudian wenxue zhishi* 古典文學知識 2017.1, pp. 147–151).

²⁵ *Hanshu*, 65:2843.

strange) materials. In this instance, it preserved an account of how to make a magical preparation from the body of a cremated cinnabar-enriched gecko:

The *xiyi* is also called the *yandian*. If you keep it in a vessel, and feed it with cinnabar, its body will turn completely red. After you have fed it a full seven *jīn* [of cinnabar], then smelt it and pound it ten thousand times. Daub [this powder] on a girl’s limb or body, and for the rest of her life, it will not vanish. It is only if she engages in sexual activity that it will vanish, and that is why [this creature] is called a “palace guardian.”²⁶

蜥蜴或名蝮蜓。以器養之，食以朱砂，體盡赤。所食滿七斤，治禱萬杵。點女人支體，終年不滅。惟房室事則滅，故名守宮。

The *Bowu zhi* describes a magical practice. Daubing someone in gecko ash will have no effect whatsoever; contact with cinnabar (mercury sulfide; HgS), on the other hand, may produce a nasty contact allergic reaction.²⁷ There appears to be no recorded instance of anyone ever actually making and using such a preparation. Instead, it is useful to think of this magical virginity test as a focus of a host of male anxieties about women’s sexuality. The red mark on the arm functioned as a second hymen, that penetration somehow caused to vanish. An important detail to note is that Zhang Hua’s

26 Fan Ning 范寧, annot., *Bowu zhi jiaozheng* 博物志校證 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 2014), 51.

27 The material safety data sheet used by all chemical companies that retail mercury sulfide notes that this is a significant skin irritant. The toxicity of cinnabar in both modern and historical contexts is discussed in Liu J., Shi J.-Z., Yu L.-M., Goyer, R.A., and Waalkes, M.P., “Mercury in Traditional Medicines: Is Cinnabar Toxicologically Similar to Common Mercurials?” (*Experimental Biology and Medicine* 233.7 (2008), pp. 810–817); Park Jung-Duk and Zheng Wei, “Human exposure and health effects of inorganic and elemental mercury” (*Journal of Preventative Medicine and Public Health* 45.6 (2012), pp. 344–352); and Leonardo García Sanjuán, Raquel Montero Artús, Steven D. Emslie, José Antonio Lozano Rodríguez, and Miriam Luciañez-Triviño, “Beautiful, Magic, Lethal: A Social Perspective of Cinnabar Use and Mercury Exposure at the Valencia Copper Age Mega-site (Spain)” (*Journal of Archaeological Method and Theory* (2023) <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10816-023-09631-8>). The research of Abdul Kader Mohiuddin, “Heavy Metals in Cosmetics: The Notorious Daredevils and Burning Health Issues” (*American Journal of Biomedical Science and Research* 4.5 (2019), pp. 332–337), 333, indicates that when cinnabar is used as a dye in tattooing, the skin irritation this causes can last for up to six months.

wording makes it clear that the “palace” envisaged here is a woman’s body and not the habitation of an emperor. There is no reference to the social status of the woman concerned nor the location where these tests are being carried out. The understanding that this was a secret palace technique seems to have developed significantly later, hundreds of years after the earliest descriptions of this practice, as a retrospective explanation for why there should be no known real-life examples of someone using this test.

While the earliest reference in a transmitted text to such virginity testing dates to the Jin dynasty, early Western Han dynasty medical texts excavated from Tomb 3 at Mawangdui 馬王堆 show that it was already known many hundreds of years earlier.²⁸ The *Yangsheng fang* 養生方 (Recipes for Nurturing Life) contains a very badly damaged account of how to formulate a gecko-and-cinnabar virginity test. It is impossible to understand much of this description; however, the text speaks of “catching [palace] guardians” (*qu shou[gong]* 取守[宮]), and then goes on to mention “using it to dye the girl’s arm” (*yi ran nüzi bi* 以染女子臂 [i.e. 臂]).²⁹ A better-preserved recipe from the same text gives a somewhat different account of the process:

Catch a gecko and place it in a new urn, and place cinnabar into the urn [too], so as to make the gecko eat it. Wait for it to die, and then you should immediately smelt it [one character missing in the original text], paint on the girl’s arm or body. When she “plays” with a man it will immediately disappear.³⁰

28 The importance of this find for understanding the early history of the gecko virginity test is discussed in Huang Lijun 黃麗君, “Fangxian tuo shougong: Han Tang zhi jian yi shougong wei fang de yanyinshu” 防閑託守宮: 漢唐之間以守宮為方的驗淫術 (*Shiyuan* 史原 24 (2012), pp. 87–122).

29 Mawangdui Hanmu boshu zhengli xiaozu 馬王堆漢墓帛書整理小組, ed., *Mawangdui Hanmu boshu* 馬王堆漢墓帛書 (Vol. 4; Beijing: Wenwu chubanshe, 1983), 104. Donald Harper, *Early Chinese Medical Literature: The Mawangdui Medical Manuscripts* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998), 337–338, suggests this recipe asks for a liquid preparation to be made from the gecko, into which a cloth was then dipped then wiped on the woman’s arm.

30 Mawangdui Hanmu boshu zhengli xiaozu, ed., *Mawangdui Hanmu boshu*, p. 105.

取守宮置新廳 [甕] 中而置丹廳 [甕] 中, 令守宮食之。須死, 即治, □ 畫女子臂若身。節 [即] 與【男子】戲, 即不明。

Commentators upon this passage have generally agreed that “to play” (*xi* 戲) is a reference to sexual activity, though not necessarily penetrative sex.³¹ The idea that stamping a woman’s arm with a gecko-and-cinnabar mixture would offer infallible visual proof of her chastity would retain considerable power for many centuries. At some point, it seems that gecko blood came to be credited with the same properties as the gecko-and-cinnabar concoction. This is a development seen in writings dated from the Song dynasty onwards, though unless it is very explicitly phrased, this can be somewhat difficult to separate from mentions of the older gecko-and-cinnabar mix. For example, in the poem “Chun gui yuan” 春閨怨 (The Maiden’s Plaint in Springtime) by Yao Lun 姚綸 (*jinsshi* 1478), the line reading: “The ‘palace guardian’ dots her arm with red congealed blood” (*shougong dianwan hongning xue* 守宮點腕紅凝血), is ambiguous, for “red congealed blood” might simply refer to the appearance of the mark created by the gecko-and-cinnabar concoction.³² On the other hand, the *jueju* poem by Wang Shizhen 王世貞 (1526–1590, *jinsshi* 1547) entitled “Gongyuan” 宮怨 (Palace Plaint) specifically supports understanding gecko blood as the key ingredient in this virginity test. Here, the words of the poem are as if spoken by the palace woman concerned, heightening the erotic charge:

Last night, the monarch arrived,
And the “palace guardian” bade farewell to this last patch of blood.
In an excess of pleasure I still knew sorrow,
On the jade steps, I spied the spring moonlight.³³

31 Ma Jixing 馬繼興, *Mawangdui gu yishu kaoshi* 馬王堆古醫書考釋 (Changsha: Hunan kexue jishu chubanshe, 1992), 685; and Li Ling 李零, *Zhongguo fangshu zhengkao* 中國方術正考 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 2007), 314.

32 This poem is quoted in Cao Xuequan 曹學佺, *Shicang lidai shixuan* 石倉歷代詩選 (Vol. 6; Beijing: Beijing tushuguan chubanshe, 1997), 399:348.

33 Wang Shizhen 王世貞, *Yanzhou sibu gao* 弇州四部稿 (Beijing: Beijing tushuguan chubanshe, 1997), 45:568.

昨夜君王來
 守宮辭殘血
 歡至方識愁
 玉堦盼春月

The idea that gecko blood functioned just as well as a gecko-and-cinnabar concoction as indelible proof of virginity can be found in Chinese literature throughout the late imperial era. This is, however, just one small part of an outpouring of literature concerning gecko-based virginity tests, indicative of the extraordinary hold that this magical practice retained over the literati imagination over the course of many centuries. As a result, although “palace guardian” could be used as a term for a gecko in contexts that were not sexual, these creatures consistently figure in erotic writings, in particular those concerned with worries about sexual penetration. Such references crop up everywhere: for example, in the *Mengshu* 夢書 (Dream Book), a passage states: “A ‘palace guardian’ represents a widow when it is sitting on the wall. If you dream that you see a ‘palace guardian,’ it is because you are worried about a widow” (守宮為寡婦，著垣牆也。夢見守宮，憂寡婦人也).³⁴ In this instance, the gecko is mentioned to highlight the no-longer-penetrated status of widows, whose sexual experiences are supposed to have ceased. Alternatively, the Tang dynasty *chuanqi* 傳奇 tale “Gujing ji” 古鏡記 (Record of an Old Mirror), expresses worries about sexual experimentation by unmarried girls. One section of this story describes an ancient gecko capable of shape-shifting—along with a similarly endowed weasel and rat—which is said to have preyed upon a trio of helpless young women, tricking them into engaging in a form of sexual vampirism.³⁵ This is one of many encounters the main characters

³⁴ This is quoted in *Taiping yulan*, 946:4200.

³⁵ The term “sexual vampirism” was coined by Robert van Gulik, *Sexual Life in Ancient China: A Preliminary Survey of Chinese Sex and Society from ca. 1500 BC til 1644 AD* (Leiden: Brill, 1961), 314–316. This describes esoteric sexual practices in which one partner “steals” life essence from the other, thus remaining young and beautiful while their partner is drained of their health and energy. For a discussion of early Chinese texts featuring such sexual arts, see Max Kaltenmark, *Le Lie-Sien Tchouan* (Paris: Collège de France, Institut des Hautes Études Chinoises, 1987), 182–183. See also Paul Goldin, “The Cultural and Religious Background of Sexual Vampirism in Ancient China” (*Theology and Sexuality* 12.3 (2006), pp. 285–307).

of this story have with magical animals that have assumed human form, only to be repelled by the marvelous old mirror:

[Li 李] Jing[shen] said: "My three daughters live in the inner chambers, and every day as dusk falls, they make up their faces and dress in beautiful clothes. After dark, they immediately go to their rooms and put out the light. I have listened to them and can hear them laughing and talking with someone else. The next day they sleep and do not wake up unless someone goes to rouse them. They get thinner by the day and cannot eat. When I order them [not] to make up, they want to hang themselves or throw themselves down the well. I don't know what to do about this." I said to Jing: "Take me to where their chamber is." It had a window to the east. I was afraid the door would be closed, and I would not be able to enter, so during the day, I cut through four of the window bars, and replaced them so they stood upright like before. When it got dark, Jing reported to me: "They have already got made up and entered the chamber." At the time of the first watch, I listened to them, and they spoke and laughed naturally. I took out the bars and held the mirror so it could shine into the room. The three girls screamed: "You've killed our husbands!" Looking down for the first time, I spotted an object, and hung up the mirror where it could illuminate it. There was a weasel there, one foot and three or four inches from nose to tail, without hair or teeth. There was also an old rat there, again without hair or teeth, which was so fat it might weigh as much as five *jinn*. There was also a gecko, as big as a hand, with its body covered in scales shining brightly and multicolored. On its head there were two horns, half a foot long, and its tail was longer than five inches, with white hairs an inch long on the end. They were all lying dead in front of a hole in the wall. After this, [the three girls] recovered from their sickness.³⁶

³⁶ *Taiping guangji*, 230:1766–1767. For a complete translation and study of this tale, see Chen Jue, *Record of an Ancient Mirror: An Interdisciplinary Reading* (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz Verlag, 2010).

敬曰：“三女同居堂內閣子，每至日晚，即靚妝炫服。黃昏後，即歸所居閣子，滅燈燭。聽之，竊與人言笑聲。及其曉眠，非喚不覺。日日漸瘦，不能下食。制之下令妝梳，即欲自縊投井，無奈之何。”謂敬曰：“引示閣子之處。”其閣東有窗。恐其門閉，固而難啓，遂晝日先刻斷窗櫺四條，卻以物支柱之如舊。至日暮，敬報曰：“妝梳入閣矣。”至一更，聽之，言笑自然。拔窗櫺子持鏡入閣照之。三女叫云：“殺我婿也。”初下見一物，懸鏡至明，有一鼠狼，首尾長一尺三四寸，身無毛齒。有一老鼠亦無毛齒，其肥大可重五斤。又有守宮，大如人手，身披鱗甲，煥爛五色，頭上有兩角，長可半寸，尾長五寸以上，尾頭一寸色白，並於壁孔前死矣。從此病癒。

The choice of a gecko as the identity of one of the creatures preying upon these innocent girls is not an accident. Very strongly erotic themes can also be found in contemporaneous poetry about geckos. For example, in the poem by Li He 李賀 (790–816) entitled “Gongwa ge” 宮娃歌 (Song of a Palace Beauty), he states: “The candlelight shines on high, illuminating its silken shade,/ In her floral bower [the maiden] at night pounds her red gecko [powder]” (蠟光高懸照紗空，花房夜擣紅守宮).³⁷ Exactly the same kind of usage can be seen in the poem “Heyang shi” 河陽詩 (A Poem on the North Bank of the Yellow River) by Li Shangyin 李商隱 (813–858): “In the night markets of western Sichuan, [you can find] red gecko [powder],/ In the rear chambers they daub their arms with stripe upon stripe of red” (巴西夜市紅守宮，後房點臂斑斑紅).³⁸ The idea that women could and should be indelibly marked with signs of their sexual status would become a staple of Chinese erotic literature. In one of the many such writings featuring Emperor Xuanzong of the Tang dynasty 唐玄宗 (r. 712–756) as the main protagonist, the *Zhuanglou ji* 妝樓記 (*Record of the Boudoir*) describes him as a lothario who has the hordes of women he has slept with stamped with permanent marks up and down their arms to

37 Wu Zhengzi 吳正子, *Li He geshi jianzhu* 李賀歌詩箋注 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 2021), 88. For an alternative translation of this entire piece, see J.D. Frodsham, *Goddesses, Ghosts, and Demons: The Collected Poems of Li He* (San Francisco: North Point Press, 1983), 74.

38 Liu Xuekai 劉學鐸 and Yu Shucheng 余恕誠, *Li Shangyin shige jijie* 李商隱詩歌集解 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 2004), 1829.

provide a visual record of each sexual encounter.³⁹ This is the mirror image of gecko marking, which served to prove a woman's virginity.

Gecko ash or blood marks are discussed in a wide range of writings about historical women, allowing for prurient speculation about their chastity. In the late Song dynasty, Ai Xingfu 艾性夫 (fl. thirteenth century) wrote in a poem entitled "Zhaojun chusai tu" 昭君出塞圖 (On a Painting of [Wang] Zhaojun Crossing the Border): "The silk of her sleeve still protected the red mark of the 'palace guardian'" (臂紗尚護紅守宮).⁴⁰ This alludes to the famous story that the beautiful Wang Zhaojun 王昭君 (d. 18 CE) refused to bribe the court painter to portray her attractively, and thus it was not until after she had already been promised in marriage to the Xiongnu khan that Emperor Yuan of the Han dynasty 漢元帝 (r. 48–33 BCE) discovered how lovely she was.⁴¹ Mention of her virginity, in this context, serves to emphasize that she was sent by the Chinese state to provide sexual and reproductive services to a foreign monarch. At about the same period, Song Wu 宋無 (1260–1340) would return again and again to the image of a woman with a gecko-and-cinnabar mark indelibly stained on her arm in his poetic representations of neglected Han dynasty palace women. For example, in the poem "Hangong" 漢宮 (The Han Palace) he wrote of how Emperor Wu of the Han dynasty had in his harem: "Three thousand consorts with no hope of being favored,/ They just waste the cinnabar that is fed to 'palace guardians'" (三千嬪御無行幸, 猶費丹砂飼守宮).⁴² Likewise, in "Changmen yuan" 長門怨 (Long Gate Palace Complaint), Song Wu gave voice to the sadness of Emperor Wu's discarded first wife, Empress Chen 陳皇后 (d. 110 BCE), enduring many years alone in her neglected palace: "A red lined robe keeps me warm as I tread on the snowy willow floss,/ Brightly colored silks enclose my seal of 'palace guardian' blood" (紅

39 Zhang Bi 張泌, *Zhuanglou ji* 妝樓記 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1985), 6.

40 Ai Xingfu 艾性夫, *Shengyu* 剩語 (Siku quanshu edn.), A:16a.

41 Wang Zhaojun was married first to the Xiongnu khan Huhanye 呼韓邪 (r. 59–31 BCE), and then to his successor, Fuzhuleiruodi 復株累若鞮 (r. 31–20 BCE). The earliest account of the life of the historical figure can be found in *Hanshu*, 94B:3806–3808. The first reference to the legend that she was a neglected palace woman who failed to bribe the court painter is given in Zhu Zhuyou 朱鑄禹, *Shishuo xinyu huijiao jizhu* 世說新語彙校集注 (Shanghai: Shanghai guji chubanshe, 2002), 565–566 ["Xianyuan" 賢媛].

42 This poem is quoted in full in Chen Zhuo 陳焯, *Song-Yuan shihui* 宋元詩會 (Taipei: Taiwan shangwu yinshuguan, 1986), 73:358.

裊暖踏楊花雪，絳縷閒封守宮血).⁴³ Empress Chen's sexual experiences were supposed to have ended with her divorce, and her forced chastity is emphasized by reference to the gecko mark.

It is striking that so many of these late imperial poetic accounts refer to gecko-based concoctions being pasted onto women's arms in the distant past and within the walls of the imperial harem. This may simply be the result of the term "palace guardian" having been popularized through the account of Dongfang Shuo's divination about what creature Emperor Wu had hidden underneath his bowl, thus establishing an indestructible link between geckos and this dynasty (and indeed this particular emperor). However, it is also possible that imperial era literati understood full well that this was a magical practice, and hence chose to situate descriptions of such tests being produced in a distant time and a top-secret, mysterious place. Imperial connections came to be indispensable for sexualized representations of geckos, as can be seen in Tang Yinji's 湯胤勳 (d. 1468) poem "Shougong" 守宮 (The "Palace Guardian"):

Who taught Qin Gong of love [and took away] a grain of cinnabar?
 It is easy to know when he got his mark, but protecting it was hard.
 His dream of happiness ended sadly, his heart broken,
 The *xiyi* died, but its blood is not yet dry.
 The pomegranate lends its colors to the glittering golden bracelet,
 Madder flowers glow on the cold jade arm-ring.
 When will he try to roll up his perfumed silken sleeve,
 And laughingly ask the Lord of the East to inspect it carefully?⁴⁴

誰解秦宮一粒丹
 記時容易守時難
 鴛鴦夢冷腸堪斷

43 Song Wu's poem is given in Chen Yan 陳衍, *Yuanshi jishi* 元詩紀事 (Shanghai: Shangwu yinshuguan, 1935), 9:157.

44 Qian Qianyi 錢謙益, *Liechao shiji yiji* 列朝詩集乙集 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 2007), 7:2534. The Lord of the East is a respectful term of address for a master, appropriate for use by a concubine or slave.

蜥蜴魂消血未乾
 榴子色分金釧曉
 茜花光映玉鞦寒
 何時試捲香羅袖
 笑語東君仔細看

Here, the reference to Qin Gong sites these events temporally in the Han dynasty: this was the name of Liang Ji's 梁冀 (d. 159) beloved slave, who was involved in a sexual relationship with both him and his wife, Sun Shou 孫壽 (d. 159).⁴⁵ The most remarkable feature of this poem is that the cinnabar-and-gecko blood mark is here attributed to a man, reflecting the fact that the slave—Qin Gong—was a penetrated male, placing him in the same category as the wives and concubines that appear in other references to this practice.⁴⁶ Certainly, the wording of this poem represents the male protagonist in a highly feminized way. In this instance, Liang Ji enjoyed Qin Gong's sexual favors in the 150s, and the poem can be understood as set at this time. In other cases, the historical era in which gecko-and-cinnabar markings were stamped on women's arms is left deliberately vague. Accordingly, in the “Shougong ci” 守宮詞 (Song of the “Palace Guardian”) by Zhang Tingzan 張廷瓚 (*jinsi* 1679), a host of neglected empresses and senior consorts of antiquity are referenced:

Cinnabar is crushed overnight to feed to a baby dragon,
 With tearstains and spots of blood on crimson rouge.

45 Liang Ji, a general and statesman, held extraordinary power in the government thanks to his important position as maternal kin of Emperor He of the Han dynasty 漢和帝 (r. 88–106), and as brother to Empress Liang Na 梁嬪 (116–150; wife of Emperor Shun of the Han dynasty 漢順帝 [r. 125–144]), and Empress Liang Nüying 梁女瑩 (d. 159; wife of Emperor Huan 漢桓帝 [r. 146–168]). His official biography can be found in *Hou Hanshu*, 34:1178–1187. Qin Gong's sexual relationship with Liang Ji and his wife is referenced in *Hou Hanshu*, 34:1180–1181.

46 Ming and Qing era concerns about penetration (as opposed to penetrative homosexual sex) are discussed in Matthew H. Sommer, “The Penetrated Male in Late Imperial China: Judicial Constructions and Social Stigma” (*Modern China* 23.2 (1997), pp. 140–180). Martin Huang, “Male-Male Sexual Bonding and Male Friendship in Late Imperial China” (*Journal of the History of Sexuality* 22.2 (2013), pp. 312–331) also considers the coding of a penetrated male as “feminine.”

In the past when serving her monarch, she wore a smile,
 But in the blink of an eye, twelve years have passed in a flash.
 Having once entered the Long Gate [Palace] it is hard to awaken from one's dream,⁴⁷
 The silk fan meeting with cooler weather bewails the evening breeze.⁴⁸
 And so it happens that the goat-cart in the end never arrives,⁴⁹
 Despite her efforts, she still preserves the "palace guardian" red mark.⁵⁰

丹砂夜搗飼龍子
 玉痕血濺胭脂紫
 曾共君王帶笑看
 闌乾十二秋如水
 長門一入夢難通
 紈扇迎涼泣晚風
 縱使羊車終不到
 殷勤還護守宮紅

47 As noted above, the Long Gate Palace was the abode of Empress Chen, the first wife of Emperor Wu of the Han dynasty, after he divorced her on charges of witchcraft; see *Hanshu*, 97A:3948.

48 This line alludes to the fate of Ban *Jieyu* 班婕妤 (c. 48–c. 2 BCE), a senior consort of Emperor Cheng of the Han dynasty 漢成帝 (r. 33–7 BCE), who became estranged from her spouse and ended up serving in his mother's household; see *Hanshu*, 97B:3983–3988. A poem about an abandoned fan that is attributed to Ban *Jieyu*, often understood as an autobiographical piece, is preserved in the *Wenxuan* 文選 (Selections of Refined Literature); see Li Shan 李善 et al., *Liuchen zhu Wenxuan* 六臣註文選 (Taipei, Zhongzheng shuju, 1971), 31:529. For a translation and study of this piece, in the context of her indubitably genuine works; see David Knechtges, "The Poetry of an Imperial Concubine: The Favorite Beauty Ban" (*Oriens Extremus* 36.2 (1993), pp. 127–144).

49 Supposedly, Emperor Wu of the Jin dynasty 晉武帝 (r. 266–290) had so many women in his harem that he could not keep track of them all, so he would ride around the palace in a goat cart and sleep with whoever lived in the residence where the goats stopped; see Fang Xuanling 房玄齡 et al., *Jinshu* 晉書 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1974), 31A:962.

50 Zhang Tingzan 張廷瓚, *Chuangongtang shiji* 傳恭堂詩集 (Beijing: Beijing chubanshe, 2000), 1:60.

By the late imperial period, with the rise of both women’s literacy and an increasing interest in preserving their works, some of the writings in circulation about geckos and their use in virginity testing were attributed to women. Occasionally, this is possibly correct; for example, the late Ming *tanci* novel *Tianyu hua* 天雨花 (Heaven Rains Flowers) has been ascribed to the authorship of a number of different women including Tao Zhenhuai 陶貞懷 (possibly a pseudonym; fl. 1650s) and Liu Shuying 劉淑英 (1620–c. 1657).⁵¹ This novel includes a description of one character’s trauma at discovering that the loss of her virginity has indeed led to the disappearance of her mark of gecko blood—having always assumed that this was just a story, she is horrified to realize that it is actually true.⁵² However, many works of literature attributed to women that mention this practice are fakes or forgeries. A particularly problematic piece is the following untitled poem:

On the orchid path a lingering perfume marks the passage of the imperial carriage,
Pear blossoms cannot bear to betray the spring winds.
The poor girl is hidden away where nobody can see her,⁵³

⁵¹ The authorship of this novel is discussed in Siao-chen Hu, “The Daughter’s Vision of National Crises: *Tianyuhua* and a Woman Writer’s Construction of the Late Ming,” in *Dynastic Crisis and Cultural Innovation: From the Late Ming to the Late Qing and Beyond*, edited by David Der-wei Wang and Shang Wei (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Asia Center, 2006), pp. 200–234; and Maram Epstein, “Patrimonial Bonds: Daughters, Fathers and Power in *Tianyuhua*” (*Late Imperial China* 32.2 (2011), pp. 1–33). It is now generally agreed that the author of this novel was indeed female.

⁵² Tao Zhenhuai 陶貞懷, *Tianyu hua* 天雨花 (Zhengzhou: Zhongzhou guji chubanshe, 1984), 18:728. “The lovely lady washed her hands in a bronze basin and saw that the gecko mark was still shining brightly, but when she took a silk cloth and rubbed it, it completely vanished. She was secretly frightened and upset; who could have imagined that this would be so amazingly accurate for it was only today that she discovered it really worked!” (玉人洗手金盆內，見守宮一點尚瑩瑩，便把羅巾拭過渾無見，暗暗心驚自忖心，誰知這等多靈驗，今日方知假共真)。

⁵³ *Lüchuan* 綠窗 (literally: “green blinds”) could be a metaphor for any young girl. However, in this case, the poet seems to be referring to the poem “Laments from Qinzhong: Discussing Matrimony” (Qinzhong yin. Yihun 秦中吟. 議婚) by Bai Juyi 白居易 (772–846): “Rich girls in red mansions, / Wear embroidered silk robes encrusted in gold... / Poor girls by green blinds, / Are still alone at past twenty” (紅樓富家女，金縷繡羅襦... 綠窗貧家女，寂寞二十餘); see Xie Siwei 謝思焯, *Bai Juyi shi ji jiaozhu* 白居易詩集校注 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 2006), 154.

She grinds her own cinnabar to feed to a gecko.⁵⁴

蘭徑香銷玉輦蹤
梨花不忍負春風
綠窗深鎖無人見
自碾朱砂養守宮

This particular piece has been attributed to two completely different persons: a fictional consort of Emperor Shun of the Yuan dynasty 元順帝 (r. 1271–1368) named Cheng Yining 程一寧, and a genuine historical personage: Empress Yang of the Song dynasty 楊皇后 (1162–1233). The former attribution can be found in the *Yuanshi yeting ji* 元氏掖庭記 (An Account of the Lateral Courts of the Yuan Dynasty); the latter in the *Erjia gongci* 二家宮詞 (Palace Lyrics by Two Members of the Imperial Family). The process of compiling Empress Yang's oeuvre was long and complex, and the recorded history of this collection begins in the Ming dynasty, when Lang Ying 朗瑛 (1487–c. 1566) published his copy of a very early Ming dynasty manuscript of this collection, dated to 1379. At this stage, the collection did not contain this piece. However, when Mao Jin 毛晉 (1599–1659) published his recension of the text, he had added a number of new poems, including this one—now entitled “Gongci” 宮詞 or “Palace Lyric.”⁵⁵ It is likely that he chose this song as a suitable addition to the works of Empress Yang, and that it was ultimately derived from the *Yuanshi yeting ji*, a compilation of unknown authorship probably dating to the very late Ming dynasty, which has long been incorrectly attributed to Tao Zongyi

54 See Tao Zongyi 陶宗儀, *Yuanshi yeting ji* 元氏掖庭記, in *Shuofu* 說郛, ed. Tao Zongyi et al. (Hangzhou, Wanwei shantang 宛委山堂 woodblock print, 1628–1644), 10b; and Mao Jin 毛晉, *Erjia gongci* 二家宮詞 (Shanghai: Shangwu yinshuguan, 1936), 8.

55 The textual history of this collection is described in detail in Maria Rohrer, *Fiktion oder Wirklichkeit? Die “Funzig Palastlieder der Kaiserin Yang (1162–1232 n. Chr.)” in Kontext der traditionellen chinesischen Dichtung* (Wiesbaden: Harrasowitz Verlag, 2005), 27–34. For concerns about the legitimacy of many of Mao Jin's attributions; see Ronald Egan, “Huizong's Palace Poems,” in *Emperor Huizong and Late Northern Song China: The Politics of Culture and the Culture of Politics*, edited by Patricia Buckley Ebrey and Maggie Bickford (Cambridge: Harvard University Asia Center, pp. 361–394), 375–376.

陶宗儀 (1316–1402?).⁵⁶ That being the case, while this poem has sometimes been interpreted as a genuine work by a Song dynasty empress, or a late Yuan imperial consort, it would be best to understand this highly sexualized piece as having been written by a man. It was ascribed to female authorship for added erotic charge and shock value.

In the Ming dynasty, Feng Menglong 馮夢龍 (1575–1645) collected a number of folk-songs, now preserved in two collections: the *Guazhier* 掛枝兒 (Hanging Branches) and the *Shange* 山歌 (Mountain Songs).⁵⁷ The following piece, from the former collection, is entitled “Menzi” 門子 (The Way In), where a series of insects are described in erotic terms. The lizard on the wall refers to the love-sick girl, closely guarded within the home, and it is penetration by the mosquito that will “rescue” her. Although this song uses allusions which are commonly found in other erotic writings featuring mosquitos, this piece is interesting for its presentation of a female perspective.⁵⁸ Furthermore, there is generally little suggestion, as here, that she welcomes the prospect of receiving the attentions of the parasitic insect/man in question:

The gecko is sick, and sits upon the wall,
 Calling out to the spider—hey you!
 These last few days I haven’t even seen a blue fly go past.
 A dragonfly is far too big,
 A hornet has too many stings,

⁵⁶ For a translation and study of the textual history of this compilation; see Olivia Milburn, *Khitan and Mongol Imperial Women in the Chinese Imagination: Ming Fantasies about Conquest Dynasty Harems* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press [forthcoming]).

⁵⁷ The textual history of this collection is described in detail in Nie Fusheng 聶付生, *Feng Menglong yanjiu* 馮夢龍研究 (Shanghai: Xuelin chubanshe, 2002), 275–300.

⁵⁸ For a study of this feature in the songs collected by Feng Menglong; see Wu Cuncun, “‘It Was I Who Lured the Boy’: Commoner Women, Intimacy and the Sensual Body in the Song Collections of Feng Menglong (1574–1646)” (*Nan Nü* 12.2 (2010), pp. 311–343).

So why can't you send along a mosquito,
To rescue me?⁵⁹

壁虎兒得病在牆上坐
叫一聲蜘蛛我的哥
這幾日並不見他蒼蠅過
蜻蜓身又大
和蜂刺又多
尋一個蚊子也
搭救搭救我

The song recorded by Feng Menglong is particularly interesting, because so little non-elite premodern literature survives. The “Menzi” provides confirmation that geckos had come to be associated with femininity and the experience of penetrative sex not only in elite circles, but also more widely in popular culture. However, in the vast majority of cases, literary representations of geckos in erotic writings focus not on the live animals but on those already dead, incinerated, pounded to ash, or reduced to a bloody mark on a woman’s arm. This magical practice reflected patriarchal control over women’s sexuality, the chastity of widows, and the concerns of men that they might not know about or be able to prevent women from engaging in pre-marital sexual activity. Its ubiquitous presence in imperial era literature reflects just how concerned literati men were about policing women’s bodies.

59 Wei Tongxian 魏同賢 et al. eds., *Feng Menglong quanji* 馮夢龍全集 (Vol. 18; Nanjing: Jiangsu guji chubanshe, 1993), 110. The annotations to this edition incorrectly suggest that *bihuer* 壁虎兒 should be understood as “rat;” this destroys the sexual symbolism implicit within the identification of this creature as a gecko. When this song was translated in Olivia Milburn, “The Chinese Mosquito: A Literary Theme” (*Sino-Platonic Papers* 270 (2017), pp. 1–50), 41–42, the term *bihuer* is incorrectly rendered as “lizard.”

NON-SEXUALIZED REPRESENTATIONS OF LIVE GECKOS: LITTLE DRAGONS

Representations of geckos in early and medieval Chinese literature were nearly entirely directed toward dead creatures. Live geckos appear almost only in the context of trying to distinguish their nomenclature according to appearance. However, by the Song dynasty, this situation was changing, and literati observed living geckos with ever greater attention, in particular recording their hunting behavior. The importance of geckos as a predator of noxious insects like flies and mosquitos was well-understood, thus people welcomed their presence in their houses.

However, it is striking that literary representations of geckos describing their skills as hunters still sooner or later pivot to an interpretation which is every bit as magical as the use of gecko ash or blood in virginity testing. It was believed that geckos produced hail: they could take in a mouthful of water and then by some mysterious internal process spit out a lump of ice. This can be seen, for example, in the interesting poem entitled "Xiehu" 蠍虎 (The Scorpion-Tiger), written by Su Shi 蘇軾 (1037–1101) in 1077 when he was governor of Xuzhou 徐州 in Jiangsu Province.⁶⁰ While the first three couplets are devoted to describing the appearance of a gecko hunting about his home, the second three couplets are concerned with the use of geckos in rainmaking rituals and the belief that they could magically generate hailstones:

The brown chicken pecks at scorpions just like it pecks at grain,⁶¹
 At my window is a "palace guardian" of the sort called a "scorpion tiger."
 In the darkness it waggles its tail as it awaits flying insects,
 Cunning techniques and great skill reside in its waist and back.
 Eyes wide open and claws sharp, it makes my garden into a cemetery.

⁶⁰ Today, this name is used to specifically denote the Asian house gecko (*Hemidactylus platyurus*). This may indeed have been the species of house gecko which Su Shi was observing.

⁶¹ Su Shi's opening line alludes to Li Bai's poem "Nanling bie ertong rujing" 南陵別兒童入京 (Saying Goodbye to the Child at Nanling before Entering the Capital); see Wang Qi 王琦, *Li Taibai quanji* 李太白全集 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1977), 744.

Though of ugly appearance, who has ever cared?
 This year, there has been drought, and so they call for the *xíyǐ*,
 Wildly running about, the children sing and dance loudly.
 They can take into their mouths ditchwater and make hail,
 And just like the dragon, they can call forth clouds and rain.
 The “palace guardians” are hard at work catching bluebottles,
 Next year, if there is another drought, I will have to beg you for help again.⁶²

黃雞啄蠍如啄黍
 窗間守宮稱蠍虎
 暗中繳尾伺飛蟲
 巧捷功夫在腰膂
 睚矚睚鑿圍當塚
 陋質從來誰比數
 今年歲旱號蜥蜴
 狂走兒童鬧歌舞
 能銜渠水作冰雹
 便向蛟龍覓雲雨
 守宮努力搏蒼蠅
 明年歲旱當求汝

In this poem, Su Shi does make mention of the term “palace guardian,” but this is not in the context of an interest in a woman’s sexual experience. “Clouds and rain” (*yunnyu* 雲雨), though a standard metaphor for sex, is here meant literally, and the description of the gecko preying on different kinds of insects does not encourage reading this work as a reflection on women’s sexuality. Instead, Su Shi devotes half his poem to describing a different magical practice involving geckos that focused on their importance as powerful numinous weather-controlling creatures. The belief that geckos could

62 Fu Cheng and Mu Chou, *Su Shi quanji, shiji* 詩集 15:173.

create hailstones seems to have been widespread in this period; for example, in the Southern Song dynasty, Zhou Zizhi 周紫芝 (1083–1155; *jinsshi* 1142) begins his "Zaobao fu" 造雹賦 (Rhapsody on Making Hail) with a realistic account of gecko behavior before going on to consider the significance of this creature in rain-making rituals. More open than Su Shi to acknowledging the sexual connotations of geckos, Zhou Zizhi's rhapsody commences with an acknowledgment of their use in regulating women's sexual behavior and their importance as predators:

"Palace guardians" are but little creatures,
And taking care of things is their profession.
With broken head and powdered body,
They do their very best to prevent fornication and illicit sex.
They move slowly between the walls,
Creeping and crawling,
To catch mosquitos and flies,
They wait in the darkness and hide in cracks.
Jumbled together they will make a full meal,
For it eats and snacks whenever it can.
With a waggle of its tail and a vibrating throat,
It seems to be proud of itself...⁶³

守宮微蟲
以守為職
碎首粉身
僅防淫慝
延緣壁間
跂跂脈脈
捕逐蚊蠅

63 Zhou Zizhi 周紫芝, *Taichang timi ji* 太倉稊米集 (Taipei: Taiwan shangwu yinshuguan, 1985), 41:290.

伺昏潛隙
 雜然一飽
 恣意啗食
 掉尾搖喉
 似有驕色

The remainder of this rhapsody concerns itself with the gecko's role in creating hail. Unlike dew, mist, or rain, which might be welcomed by people, hailstones were always more or less destructive, and so Zhou Zizhi discourses upon the negative aspect of geckos' magical connection with the weather:

For they can—
 Swallow water to make hailstones,
 Which crush tiles and break bricks.
 Mixing in with this sleet and snow,
 To cause disaster and death...⁶⁴

乃能
 含水造雹
 毀瓦破塊
 配此霰雪
 以為虐癘

In the literature about live geckos, a common name such as “palace guardian” was sometimes used, but in many cases they are called *xiyi*. This term first appeared in the *Xunzi*, where it has been understood to denote geckos, but later the word appears to have been used more generally to refer to lizards. As a result, without further information about taxonomy, it is impossible to be sure exactly what creature was meant when Lu Dian 陸佃 (1042–1102) noted in the *Piya* 埤雅 (Expanded “Approaching

⁶⁴ Zhou Zizhi, *Taicang timi ji*, 41:290.

Elegance”) “the old belief that *xiyi* vomit hailstones” (舊說蜥易嘔雹).⁶⁵ When this line is quoted by Tan Zhenmo 譚貞默 (1590–1665; *jinsi* 1628) in the late Ming dynasty entomological anthology *Tanzi diaochong* 譚子雕蟲 (Master Tan’s Carving of Little Creatures), he gives this wording in a much more dramatic form: “*Xiyi*... drink water and spit out hailstones like pellets from a slingshot” (蜥蜴... 飲水吐雹如彈丸).⁶⁶ Tan Zhenmo goes on to quote an interesting text entitled *Bai Yuchan daoyu fa* 白玉蟾禱雨法 (Bai Yuchan’s [1194–1229] Technique for Praying for Rain), which reads as follows:

Catch nine *xiyi* and place them in a jar. Cover this with coarse cloth and roast them in the sun. Order nine little boys, each holding a willow branch, to hit the outside of the jar. They should rush about quickly: do not allow them to stop. The incantation runs: ‘*Xiyi, xiyi*, summon the clouds and spit out mist, let the rains soak everything, for then we will let you go home.’ This way you can obtain rain.⁶⁷

聚晰蜴九頭于缸中。幕以絺麻，暴之日。令小兒九人，各執楊柳枝，擊缸外。急驅，不使住足。咒曰：蜥蜴蜥蜴，興雲吐靄，令雨滂沱，放汝歸去。可得雨。

Exactly the same wording of the incantation had already been recorded in the Song dynasty: according to Peng Cheng 彭乘 (*jinsi* 1012), this was recited on the occasion of a great drought in the

65 Lu Dian 陸佃, *Piya* 埤雅 (Hangzhou: Zhejiang daxue chubanshe, 2008), 11:113.

66 Tan Zhenmo 譚貞默, *Tanzi diaochong* 譚子雕蟲, in *Zihai zhenben bian: Dalu juan* 子海珍本編: 大陸卷, ed. Liu Xinming 劉心明 (Nanjing: Fenghuang chubanshe, 2014), 408. This edition reproduces the sole surviving copy of the *Zhuzutangji* 著作堂集 (Collected Writings from the Hall of Authorship) edition of the text dating to the Chongzhen reign era (1627–1644), now in the collection of the Palace Museum, Taipei. This edition has been quoted in preference over the edited copy of the text published by his descendants as the *Tanshi yishu* 譚氏遺書 (Master Tan’s Surviving Volumes), which has been frequently reprinted.

67 Tan Zhenmo, *Tanzi diaochong*, p. 409. Bai Yuchan was a highly influential Song dynasty Daoist practitioner within the Zhengyi 正一 tradition; see Kristopher Schipper and Franciscus Verellen, eds., *The Taoist Canon: A Historical Companion to the Daozang* (Vol. 3; Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005), 1255–1256. The dating of this piece is commensurate with other accounts of similar practices from the Song.

capital region during the Xining 熙寧 reign period (1068–1077).⁶⁸ However, in the Song dynasty, the *xíyí* seem to have been provided with water in the jar within which they were confined, to give them the wherewithal with which to make rain or indeed hail. Peng Cheng goes on to note that the inhabitants of some wards of Kaifeng were in such a hurry to perform this ceremony they were not able to lay their hands on *xíyí* and had to resort to ‘scorpion tigers,’ and these were not able to bring about the desired miracle. Yuan Ding 袁丁, one of the few people to have studied Song dynasty literature concerning these rain-making rituals, suggests that this means *xíyí* were in fact not geckos but lizards of some other kind; however, it is equally possible that the name “scorpion tigers” pertained only to the Asian house gecko, and the *xíyí* denoted some other species.⁶⁹ Certainly, in late imperial literature geckos were quite unequivocally credited with the ability to produce a wide variety of meteorological phenomena including clouds, mist, rain, and indeed hail. This can be seen from the story “Tiexia bihu” 鐵匣壁虎 (The “Wall Tiger” in an Iron Box) by Yuan Mei 袁枚 (1716–1797, *jīnshǐ* 1739), which is preserved in his collection of supernatural tales entitled *Zi buyu* 子不語 (What the Master Did Not Speak Of). Here an ancient gecko is presented as the mundane form of a powerful dragon water-spirit:

In Yunan, next to Kunming Lake, some peasants digging the ground unearthed an iron box. They could not read the talisman written on top of the box, but the regular script to the side read: “Sealed in the first year of the Zhizheng reign era (1341) by the Perfected Daoist Yang.” The peasants did not know what this could be, so they used cudgels to break the box open, and inside there was a “wall tiger” about an inch long, which was curled up and looked dead, though it was still alive. A child moistened it with water and

68 Peng Cheng 彭乘, *Moke huixi* 墨客揮犀 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1991), 3:17.

69 Yuan Ding 袁丁, “Su Shi dui wushu de maodun taidu” 蘇軾對巫術的矛盾態度 (*Pingdingshan Xueyuan Xuebao* 平頂山學院學報 33:3 (2018), pp. 75–83), 79. For a Qing dynasty discussion of problems in distinguishing the terms *xíyí* and geckos, indicating that this was an ongoing problem for literati, see Zhu Shijie 朱仕玠, *Xiao Liuqiu manzhi* 小琉球漫志 (Taipei: Dehong zixun, 2021), 7:99. “The deputy Lin Linchang (*jīnshǐ* 1670) composed a *Ryukyu Bamboo Branch Song*, which runs as follows: ‘In the silence I hear *xíyí* chirp by the window.’ In his own notes to this piece, he says: ‘*Xíyí* can sing, with a chirp like sparrows,’ which means he’s used the term *xíyí* for wall tigers [i.e. geckos]” (林僉事麟焜使琉球竹枝詞云: “靜聽盤窗蜥蜴聲。”其自注云: “蜥蜴能鳴, 聲如麻雀。”是以蜥蜴為壁虎矣).

then shortly afterwards, this inch-long creature gradually stretched out and grew bigger, scales sprouting all over its body, before it leapt up into the sky and vanished. Then there was a violent storm with lashing rain, heaven and earth grew dark, and they saw a one-horned black serpent fighting with two yellow dragons in mid-air, with hail falling all around them. Countless fields and houses were damaged by this.⁷⁰

雲南昆明池旁農民掘地得鐵匣，匣上符篆不可識，旁有楷書云：“至正元年楊真人封。”農民不知何物，椎碎其匣，中有壁虎寸許，蠕蠕然似死非死。童子以水沃之，頃刻，寸許者漸伸漸長，鱗甲怒生，騰空而去。暴風烈雨，天地昏黑，見一角黑蛟與兩黃龍空中攫鬥，冰雹齊下，所損田禾民屋無算。

There also seems to have been speculation in the writings of Qing dynasty literati that the geckos of Taiwan might be able to bring about rain and hail. In the poem “Bihu neng ming” 壁虎能鳴 (“Wall Tigers” Can Sing) by Zhu Shijie 朱仕玠 (1712–after 1763), which is included in his *Xiao Liuqiu manzhi* 小琉球漫志 (A Desultory Account of Little Ryukyu [Taiwan]), the poet discusses the bizarre flora and fauna of Taiwan, so different from anything he was used to on the Mainland, and expresses uncertainty as to whether local geckos could be expected to make rain fall. As with so many literary descriptions of living geckos, the poet segues straight from a highly factual, carefully observed account of these creatures (here including a most unusual reference to their habit of dropping their tails in the event of attack by a predator) into references to their supposed magical capabilities. The most remarkable feature here is that the poet openly states his skepticism that Taiwanese geckos, living in a very unfamiliar environment, could be expected to possess the same magical properties as mainland creatures:

⁷⁰ Yuan Mei 袁枚, *Zi buyu* 子不語, in *Yuan Mei quanji xinbian* 袁枚全集新編, ed. Wang Yingzhi 王英志 (Hangzhou: Zhejiang guji chubanshe, 2015), 17:356. For an alternative translation of this anecdote; see Paulo Santangelo, *Zibuyu, “What the Master Would Not Discuss,” according to Yuan Mei (1716–1798): A Collection of Supernatural Stories* (Leiden: Brill, 2013), 840.

...It is a master of many methods of attack and every way to kill,
 And it just drops its tail to escape successfully itself.⁷¹
 How can we seek thunder and rain,
 [How can] icy hail rise up from burning ground?⁷²

略饒攻殺技
 蠱尾窮逋逃
 安能覓雷雨
 冰雹興土焦

Skepticism that it was possible for a gecko to bring about rain was increasingly openly expressed in Qing dynasty literature, though this went along with recognition that other means to end a drought were equally ineffective. Despair at the prospect of the failure of rains to fall is eloquently expressed in the poem “Dao yu xing” 禱雨行 (Lay in Prayer for Rain) by the late Qing literatus Song Shusheng 宋書升 (1842–1915, *jinsi* 1892). More than two millennia after Master Xun had first criticized the gecko as an inferior kind of dragon, a Qing scholar returned to this theme, arguing that only dragons were effectively capable of bringing about rainfall. As such geckos could only be a substitute, and as this account makes clear, they were usually an utterly ineffective one:

At the Tiansun Temple,⁷³
 They strike the great drum,

⁷¹ This translation follows the reading given by Liu Liqing 劉麗卿, “Qingdai Taiwan yi yu zhongtu qiyi de wuchan yu yinshi shuxie: Yi shiwen wei kaocha duixiang” 清代台灣異於中土奇異的物產與飲食書寫: 以詩文為考察對象 (*Xingda Renwen Xuebao* 興大人文學報 46 (2011), pp. 31–66), 55.

⁷² Zhu Shijie, *Xiao Liuqiu manzhi*, 7:99.

⁷³ Tiansun is an alternative name for the star Zhinü 織女, that is Vega, and temples dedicated to this deity were located across China. The occasion on which Song Shusheng wrote this poem does not appear to be known, so where these events are supposed to be taking place is unclear.

Filling the whole city with its thudding, to summon the storm.
 As the storm ends, the red sun rises,
 And we see its burning majesty in the skies at noon.
 Government officials pray for rain, but their skills are always inadequate,
 They do not catch *xiyi* or capture “wall tigers.”
 Though they say you can spit out mist and raise up clouds,
 So we beg you in your marshy [homes] to save humankind.
 Oh wall tiger! Wall tiger!
 You have not yet come from the deep mountains or the great marshes,
 Your body has no scales or armor.
 So how can you transform into dragons to bring a stop to this drought?
 The god of thunder is angry, the goddess of lightning laughs,⁷⁴
 For you are even now called “summoners of rain.”⁷⁵

天孫廟
 擊大鼓
 滿城瑟瑟撒白雨
 白雨下時頰日升
 但見炎威赫赫天亭午

74 Leigong, the god of thunder, is a very ancient deity recorded in many early Chinese texts; see for example Hong Xingzu 洪興祖, *Chuci buzhu* 楚辭補注 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1983), 171 [“Yuanyou” 遠游]; and Huang Hui 黃暉, *Lunheng jiaoshi* 論衡校釋 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1990), 294–312 [“Leixu” 雷虛]. His spouse, Dianmu, the goddess of lightning, appears to be a later addition. However, the pairing of nature gods was an important aspect of early Chinese thought; see Jiang Siyu 江斯羽 and Zhan Xuzuo 詹緒左, “Gudai dianji zhong ziranwu xiang de cixiong leibie kao” 古代典籍中自然物象的雌雄類別考 (*Weifang Xueyuan Xuebao* 濰坊學院學報 17.5 (2017), pp. 87–91).

75 This poem is quoted in Xu Shichang 徐世昌, *Wanqingyi shihui* 晚晴簃詩匯 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1990), 178:7789. The term used here for “rain” is *lin* 霖, which, according to the commentary by Kong Anguo 孔安國 (156–74 BCE) on the *Shangshu* 尚書 (Book of Documents), specifically denoted the three days of rain which should fall when a drought breaks; see *Shangshu zhengyi*, p. 248 [“Yueming shang” 說命上].

官吏禱雨術俱窮
 不獲蜥蜴搜壁虎
 云能吐霧與興雲
 浼汝沛澤施下土
 壁虎壁虎
 汝未從深山大澤來
 身無鱗甲
 安能變化為龍弭旱災
 雷公大怒電母笑
 若輩竟號作霖材

Unlike the gecko's importance in virginity testing, their activities as rain and hail-makers have largely escaped scholarly attention, and little is known of the origins of this belief. However, the accounts given here strongly suggest that it was closely related to the understanding that they were minor or lesser dragons. As minor dragons, they were capable of causing enormous damage by making hail instead of rain—an activity which was never welcomed on account of its destructiveness. As lesser creatures, inferior to highly numinous supernatural creatures like dragons (or indeed deities like the god of thunder or goddess of lightning), geckos might also be considered incapable of doing very much at all.

THE CALL OF THE TOKAY GECKO

Although the tokay gecko was first mentioned by Yang Xiong in the Han dynasty, the fact that these geckos lived in areas regarded as pestilential hellholes where no educated person would willingly go ensured that their literary legacy was very limited until the Tang dynasty. When they did at last begin to appear in poetry and prose, some eight hundred years after Yang Xiong's preliminary reference, it was always in the context of hearing their calls. Unlike house geckos, which Chinese literati could watch as they moved around their homes, tokay geckos are large arboreal nocturnal lizards that venture relatively rarely near human habitations, so it would be their remarkably loud vocalizations that

attracted the most attention. The earliest detailed description of a tokay gecko comes from the *Lingbiao luyi* 嶺表錄異 (Account of the Marvels of Ling[nan]) by Liu Xun 劉恂 (fl. late tenth century), dating to the Tang dynasty. Liu Xun served as a senior government official in the administration of Guangzhou during the reign of Emperor Zhaozong of the Tang dynasty 唐昭宗 (r. 888–904), and his writings are exceptionally informative about the natural world in Guangdong Province. Although his book has long been lost, it survives in quotations, such as in the following from the *Taiping yulan* 太平御覽 (Imperial Readings of the Taiping [xingguo] Reign Era, 976–983):

The tokay gecko has a head like a rice frog (*Rana limnocharis*), and its back has fine scales like a silkworm egg. It is brownish yellow in color and has a short body with a long tail. Mostly it nests in trees. Inside the walls of the citadel at Duanzhou, there are those which nest among government offices and lookout towers.⁷⁶ They sing at dawn and dusk, calling themselves: “Gejie.” Some say that one call can last a whole year. The local people collect them and sell them in the market to make medicine, for they can cure lung complaints. Doctors say: “Their medical properties reside in the tail: if the tail is not complete it won’t work.”⁷⁷

蛤蚧: 首如蝦蟆, 背有細鱗如蠶子, 土黃色, 身短尾長。多巢於樹中。端州子墻內, 有巢於廳署城樓間者。旦暮則鳴, 自呼蛤蚧。或云鳴一聲是一年者。里人彩之, 鬻於市為藥, 能治肺疾。醫人云: “藥力在尾, 尾不具者無功。”

From the location and coloration specified in this account, it most likely pertains to Reeves’ tokay gecko (*Gekko reevesii*), which tends to be less brightly colored than the tokay gecko. The use of tokay geckos in traditional Chinese medicine has continued into modern times, though their efficacy

⁷⁶ Duanzhou was a prefecture that existed at various junctures in the Sui-Tang period (589–607; 621–742), within the bounds of what is now the city of Zhaoqing 肇慶 in Guangdong Province.

⁷⁷ *Taiping yulan*, 951:4225.

in treating lung complaints remains highly controversial.⁷⁸ Thanks to the medical use of these creatures, occasional references can be found in imperial era Chinese literature to the consumption of tokay geckos, though it is generally unclear which species were being eaten or where they were sourced from. Accordingly, in the poem “Zhen’an tufeng” 鎮安土風 (The Local Customs of Zhen’an), Zhao Yi 趙翼 (1729–1814; *jinshi* 1761) wrote of his observations as magistrate of Zhen’an in Guangxi Province in the years 1766–1770: “Francolins are added for the flavorful stew they make,/ Tokay geckos are collected because of their medicinal qualities” (鷓鴣羹味薦, 蛤蚧藥材收).⁷⁹ Meanwhile, Bei Qingqiao 貝青喬 (1810–1863), now best known for his patriotic verse written during the First Opium War, recorded his experiences of eating tokay geckos in his poem entitled “Yupingxian” 玉屏縣 (Yuping County). This locale, on the border between Guizhou and Hunan provinces, is today one of the autonomous counties inhabited by the Dong 侗 (Kam) peoples and seems to have possessed a very distinctive cuisine: “Their noodles are eaten with jaggery sludge,/ In their stews you taste the fishy tang of the tokay gecko” (麵啉 桃榔膩, 羹嘗蛤蚧腥).⁸⁰ In this instance, it is not clear whether the supposed medicinal qualities of the tokay gecko were responsible for their consumption, or whether they were simply a readily available source of protein, but this description strongly suggests that eating them would qualify as an acquired taste. However, as scattered references in late imperial literature attest, the tokay gecko in its medicinal uses did not entirely escape the sexualization that afflicted house geckos. For example, Xie Zhaozhe 謝肇淛 (1567–1624; *jinshi* 1592) in the *Wu zazu* 五雜俎 (Five Miscellaneous Collections) states:

78 The use of the tokay gecko in contemporary TCM practice is discussed in Yifu Wang, Pauline C. Dufour, Kit Yi Yeung, Sum Yi Lo, Cherry Cheuk Yiu Cheung, Caroline Dingle, Timothy C. Bonebreak, and Hannah S. Mumby, “Sustainability of medicinal animal products: Tokay geckos and pangolin scales as traditional Chinese medicine” (*Integrative Conservation* 2.4 (2023), pp. 178–186). Counterfeiting of tokay gecko products is rife, making any judgment about medical efficacy moot without prior DNA analysis; see Aaron M. Bauer, “Geckos in traditional medicine: Forensic implications” (*Applied Herpetology* 6 (2009), pp. 81–96).

79 Zhao Yi 趙翼, *Oubei ji* 甌北集 (Shanghai: Shanghai guji chubanshe, 1997), 13:264.

80 Bei Qingqiao 貝青喬, *Banxingyan shi cunqao* 半行庵詩存藁 (Shanghai: Shanghai guji chubanshe, 1995), 3:31. Jaggery is the sugary sap of the areng palm (*Arenga pinnata*), and the use of the term *ni* 膩, implying a greasy thick sludge, really does not suggest the poet enjoyed it.

The tokay gecko (*gejie*) is a monogamous creepy-crawly. The males are called *ge*; the females *jie*. They each call their own name, following each other and never abandoning [their mate]. If it happens that they are caught in the act of mating, they will hold onto each other and not let go right up until they die. People collect lots of them to make aphrodisiacs.⁸¹

蛤蚧，偶蟲也。雄曰蛤，雌曰蚧。自呼其名，相隨不舍。遇其交合捕之，雖死牢抱不開。人多採之，以為媚藥。

From a herpetological point of view, this Ming dynasty account contains various inaccuracies. First of all, while scholars generally agree that many of the names for gecko species in different languages are derived from attempts to approximate their call, including *gejie* for the tokay gecko, females generally make much less noise than males and certainly do not engage in the kind of call-and-response cry described here.⁸² While the mating behavior of tokay geckos seems to be a largely unstudied area—with the exception of a number of research papers demonstrating that, in captivity, these creatures are significantly more comfortable in the presence of a mate—there is no reason to believe they are monogamous.⁸³ However, having provided this bit of misinformation about the sexual

81 Xie Zhaozhe 謝肇淛, *Wu zazu* 五雜俎 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 2021), 11:376.

82 Gender specific calling is discussed in Charles Brillet and Madeleine Paillette, “Acoustic Signals of the Nocturnal Lizard *Gekko gekko*: Analysis of the ‘Long Complex Sequence’” (*Bioacoustics* 3.1 (1991), pp. 33–44); Ye-zhong Tang, Lin-Zhi Zhuang, and Zu-Wang Wang, “Advertisement calls and their relation to reproductive cycles in *Gekko gekko* (Reptilia, Lacertilia)” (*Copeia* 2001.1, pp. 248–253); and X. Yu, Y. Peng, A. Aowphol, L. Ding, S.E. Brauth and Y.-Z. Tang, “Geographic variation in the advertisement calls of *Gekko gekko* in relation to variations in morphological features: Implications for regional population differentiation” (*Ethnology Ecology & Evolution* 23.3 (2011), pp. 211–228). It is worth noting that there are some gecko species that do have important female vocalization patterns; see Nilinda Phongkangsananan, Lin Swchartzkopf, and David A. Pike, “Chatty females and quiet males: Complex vocal communication in the Northern dtella, *Gehyra dubia*” (*Herpetological Conservation and Biology* 9.2 (2014), pp. 285–296). Since all research currently seems focused on the tokay gecko (and Reeves’ tokay gecko remains little understood), it is possible that much important information is lacking.

83 This topic is discussed in Birgit Szabo, “Changes in enclosure use and basking behavior associated with pair housing in Tokay geckos (*Gekko gekko*)” (*Applied Animal Behavior Science* 272 (2024), pp. 1–9). Marie-Ornelia Verger, Maëlle

life of tokay geckos, the *Wu zazu* went on to speak of the constant predation they and other reptiles and amphibians experienced from humankind:

Rice frogs know that people will catch them on the day of the Duanwu festival, so they are certain to flee in all directions. Musk deer know that people want to obtain aromatics, so they will immediately gouge out their own navels.⁸⁴ When tokay geckos are captured by people, they will immediately drop their tails. Snake gallbladders have always been cut from their bodies, so when they see people, they display their bellies to show the scar. Creatures all have this kind of knowledge: it is not only chickens that fear being sacrificed.⁸⁵

蝦蟆於端午日知人取之，必四遠逃遁。麝知人欲得香，輒自抉其臍。蛤蚧為人所捕，輒自斷其尾。蚺蛇膽，曾經割取者，見人則坦腹呈創。物類之有知如此，不獨雞之憚為犧也。

The majority of references in Chinese literature to the tokay gecko, however, do not concern consuming them, whether as a foodstuff, a medicine, or an aphrodisiac. Instead, they speak simply of the noise they made. Accordingly, in the Yuan dynasty, in the fifth poem of his series “Simingzhou” 思明州 (On Simingzhou), Chen Fu 陳孚 (1259–1309) wrote about a place he visited (in what is now Ningming County 寧明縣 in Guangxi Province) while travelling to Vietnam as part of an official embassy in 1292–1293.⁸⁶ In addition to producing a formal account of these events, the *Annan jishi* 安

Devillebichot, Eva Ringler and Birgit Szabo “Sex-specific discrimination of familiar and unfamiliar mates in the Tokay gecko” [*Ecoevxiv* preprint <https://doi.org/10.32942/X2BG8K> (site viewed 24/03/2024)] notes that tokay geckos do appear to favor familiar mates.

84 “Deer’s navel” (*mrganābhi*) was a standard term for musk in Sanskrit; see James McHugh, *Sandalwood and Carrion: Smell in Indian Religion and Culture* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 174. Accordingly, Chinese sources frequently suggested that the navel was the source of the aromatic.

85 *Wu zazu*, 11:375.

86 Chen Fu’s official biography can be found in Song Lian 宋濂 et al., *Yuanshi* 元史 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1976),

南紀事 (Account of Events in Vietnam), he also composed poetry which offers an immediate and intimate portrayal of the flora and fauna of the region. Here, he expressed his fascination and bafflement at the unfamiliar plants, animals, and birds he was encountering on this journey through this remote part of the Chinese world. As a native of Linhai County 臨海縣 (now Linhai City) in Zhejiang Province, the nocturnal vocalizations of the tokay gecko would have been very unlike anything he was used to, but clearly this was just one part of the fascinating and exotic surroundings in which he found himself:

Where the thorny bamboo grows thickest the bitter shoots grow,⁸⁷
 The mountain birds are numberless but I do not know their names.
 The Yuanxiao festival passes at a time when spring seems in full swing,⁸⁸
 The longan flowers bloom and the tokay geckos sing.⁸⁹

刺竹叢叢苦筍生
 山禽無數不知名
 元宵已似春深後
 龍眼花開蛤蚧鳴

Other poets of the late imperial era would also pair the tokay gecko with similarly exotic flora and fauna to highlight the association of these creatures with alien sounds in the night in the remotest southernmost regions of China. For example, the Ming dynasty bibliophile Xu Bo 徐焯 (1570–1645)

190:4338–4440.

87 This line references the names of two different bamboo varieties. Thorny bamboo (*Bambusa blumeana*) is cultivated throughout Yunnan and Guangxi, and as the Chinese name suggests, it is noted for its fearsome spines. Bitter shoots (*Pleioblastus amarus*) is the name of another variety of bamboo cultivated across southern China; a spring delicacy in Chinese cooking once the bitterness has been treated.

88 The Yuanxiao festival is celebrated on the fifteenth day of the first lunar month. In many parts of China, this would take place in very cold weather every year.

89 Wang Sen 汪森, *Yuxi shizai* 粵西詩載 (Taipei: Taiwan shangwu yinshuguan, 1986), 22:375.

would write of how: “The francolin calls to the moon, bringing tragedy to the long night,/ The tokay gecko sings to the wind, saddened [by the approach] of autumn” (鷓鴣叫月悲長夜, 蛤蚧鳴風感素秋).⁹⁰ Alternatively, Liu Dagan 劉大觀 (1753–1834), in his poem entitled “He Pan Ronggao (1740–1830, *jinshi* 1769) yiju sishou zhi si” 和潘榕皋移居四首之四 (The Fourth of Four Poems written with Pan Ronggao on the subject of Moving House), describes how: “The leaves of the areng palm are darkened by pestilential airs,/ As the tokay gecko calls, malarial vapors lift” (桄榔葉映蠻煙黑, 蛤蚧聲呼瘴母開).⁹¹ The behavior of tokay geckos is rarely reported in these late imperial poems. What matters is that they produced strange, loud noises in the middle of the night, in the kind of setting where a poet might reference all sorts of exotic details—rare birds and unfamiliar trees like the banyan fig and longan fruit. The call of the tokay gecko was thus reduced to merely noises in the night, strange and unfamiliar, emphasizing just how far the writer had voyaged from the familiar heartlands.

CONCLUSION

For imperial era literati, house geckos must have been one of the easiest reptiles to observe up close. They live everywhere in China, in large numbers, and they share the same habitation as human beings—indeed they are welcome fellow-residents thanks to their successful predation of various unpleasant, disease-bearing insects. Hence it was possible for writers and poets to watch house geckos quite literally from the comfort of their own homes, with no need to travel to far-flung regions. In spite of this propinquity, however, the vast majority of imperial era writings about geckos concern their importance in magical practices. One major tradition saw dead geckos used in the chastity and virginity testing of women; the other saw live geckos used in rain-making rituals. Neither of these magical practices are in any way predicated upon close observation of gecko behavior, and accordingly, the real living creatures were largely ignored.

In the case of tokay geckos, however, which do not care to live in close proximity to people, their literary legacy is closely connected to their habitat and vocalization. Tokay geckos produce

⁹⁰ Wang Sen, *Yuexi shizai*, 9:127.

⁹¹ Liu Dagan 劉大觀, *Yuqing shanfang shiwenji* 玉罄山房詩文集 (Shijiazhuang: Huashan wenyi chubanshe, 2017), 2:48.

extraordinarily loud calls and live in locations considered wild and exotic by members of the literati elite. As a result, a host of writings about the deep South stress the amazing auditory experience of hearing the geckos’ call in the dark of night. The rest of the tokay geckos’ life cycle was of no literary interest whatsoever—they were consistently reduced to being just strange noises in the night. The image of house geckos and tokay geckos in Chinese literature over the course of two millennia and more has thus been profoundly impacted by the concerns of members of the male literati elite: these lizards were apparently of little interest beyond their role as markers of how men could police women’s bodies, control weather systems, and express their satisfaction—or horror—at venturing into remote foreign parts.

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