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Tropes of entanglement and strange loops in the "Nine Avowals" of the *Chuci*

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Abstract
The literary form and rhetorical structure of ancient Chinese poems have not been sufficiently studied. The "Jiu zhang" 九章 (Nine Avowals) attributed to Qu Yuan 屈原 contain distinctive formal features which are highly suggestive for interpretations of Qu Yuan's life and works. At the level of rhetoric, the protagonist frequently describes his own mental state using metaphors of knots and entanglement. At the level of form, the internal structure of the poems, and "Chou si" 抽思 (Unravelled Yearnings) in particular, involves series of overlapping, cross-referencing units that recall the "strange loop" discussed by Douglas Hofstadter as a model of human consciousness. Reading these poems is not just a matter of reconstructing their historical contexts but also of understanding their intended effects on the reader, who is effectively transported into a simulation of Qu Yuan's mind.
Keywords: Chuci, Nine Avowals, Strange loops, Ancient Chinese poetry, Tropes of entanglement

> Everybody reads the *sao*, yet not one man has ever *read* the *sao*.
> 莫不讀騷者，而卒未嘗有一人讀騷也。
>
> Huang Wenhuan 黃文煥 (*jinshi* 1625)[1]

> Consciousness is not immediate, but mediate; it is not a source, but a task, the task of becoming more conscious.
>
> Paul Ricoeur (1913–2005)[2]

Qu Yuan 屈原 was the man "entangled in the Xiang river" (*Xiang lei* 湘纍),[3] whose cares and frustrations were swept into oblivion by its currents. This retrospective comment hints at a trope that is already common in *Chuci* 楚辭 itself,

* I presented a preliminary version of this study at the annual meeting of the Western Branch of the American Oriental Society on November 2, 2012, at Arizona State University. I am grateful for the feedback and encouragement of the participants there.
1 From the "Comprehensive summary" 合論 of his *Chuci tingzhi* 楚辭聽直 (*Xuxiu siku quanshu*), 1a.
2 *The Conflict of Interpretations: Essays in Hermeneutics,* ed. Don Ihde (London: Continuum, 1989), 320.
3 From Yang Xiong's 揚雄 (53 BC–AD 18) "Rebutting the 'Li sao'" 反離騷, *Han shu* 漢書 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1962), 87A.3516.

and particularly in the "Jiu zhang" 九章 (Nine Avowals) poems,[4] which deal most directly with Qu Yuan's biography. The speaker in these poems frequently tells us how his mind is tangled up in worry, how he is encumbered by loyalties to his prince, how his journey of exile has left him running in circles. His mental state is repeatedly depicted throughout the "Nine Avowals" in terms of these tropes of entanglement, suggested by the very title of the fourth poem: "Chou si" 抽思 (Unravelled yearnings).[5]

These poetic tropes – deformations of language that call attention to their own literariness – are replicated at a structural level as well. For his words themselves begin to repeat themselves, and the poems adopt recursive structures: Qu Yuan first tells us that he is going to make a plaint to his prince, then sings of his frustration, then tells us again how he will make another plaint – but is not the very poem we were reading already the plaint we are expecting? The first poem in the "Nine Avowals" concludes with the line, "I would like to multiply my yearnings and estrange myself" 願曾思而遠身.[6] The poet's exile from his own kingdom forces him into bounteous composition, in a poetic form that is no longer simply a linear narrative of his story, but instead seeks to "multiply yearnings", with each expression of feeling repeated in self-reflexive ways.

The poems frequently adopt recursive forms that turn back upon themselves, suggesting the protagonist's self-conscious reflections on his state. This kind of structure bears some resemblance to what Douglas Hofstadter has called a "strange loop" (or a "paradoxical level-crossing feedback loop").[7] Computer programs operate by recursion, repeating small modules over and over again with incremental variation, and Hofstadter suggests that human minds also involve similar kinds of feedback loops, possessing this special property of being "paradoxical" and "level-crossing". That is, in the process of repeating

4 *Chuci buzhu* 楚辭補注, compiled by Hong Xingzu 洪興祖 (1090–1155), punctuated by Bai Huawen 白化文 et al. (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1983, 2002), 4.120–62. In addition to the specific sources quoted below, Wang Jiaxin's 王家歆 *Chuci jiuzhang jishi* 楚辭九章集釋 (Taipei: Shangwu yinshuguan, 1980, 2007) has been a helpful reference throughout my readings of the "Nine Avowals". I render *zhang* 章, which could also simply mean "piece", as "avowal" to reflect Wang Yi's 王逸 gloss as *ming* 明, "to declare, to avow". Implicitly he is also glossing it as a loan for *zhang* 彰. In general, *zhang* means "to make clear, to publicize", as in the *Book of Documents*: "The superior men will then become prominent" 俊民用章. See *Shang shu zhengyi* 尚書正義, in *Shisanjing zhushu* 十三經注疏 (Taipei: Shangwu yinshuguan, 1965), 12.23a. Cf. also its use in "Si meiren" 思美人, l. 52: "Ah! But in spite of my wretched abode my reputation is *illustrious*" 羌居蔽而聞章 (*Chuci buzhu,* 4.149).

5 My rendering of this title is admittedly tendentious, but reflects one of the possible meanings of the title and helps to focus attention on the actual content of the poem. Some alternatives would be "Unspooling my thoughts" or "Unravelling my longings". Unfortunately there is no single English word that can convey the dual meaning of *si* as both the neutral contents of the mind and intense longing for another person.

6 *Chuci buzhu* 4.127 (1/88) (citations of the "Nine Avowals" will be given in this format, including first *juan* number and page, then in parentheses the poem number within the "Nine Avowals" and line number within that poem).

7 For this definition of strange loop, see Douglas R. Hofstadter, *I Am a Strange Loop* (New York: Basic Books, 2007), 102. More generally on the significance of the strange loop or "tangled hierarchy" see Hofstadter, *Gödel, Escher, Bach: An Eternal Golden Braid* (New York: Basic Books, 1979).

the loop, the mind has the ability to move up to a higher level of generality before returning to its initial state. Since Hofstadter finds some of his most compelling examples in the oeuvre of Johann Sebastian Bach, it is not surprising that literary works should exemplify the concept also.[8] Indeed, Wolfgang Iser has shown how Hofstadter's notion of the recursive nature of consciousness has direct relevance to the general problem of textual interpretation.[9] It might be seen as a generalization of the hermeneutic circle: the reflexive quality of reading texts, for which there can be no independent and stable starting point outside of the reading process, is just a special case of the recursive nature of consciousness itself.

There is a very simple but effective example of a strange loop in the later Chinese textual tradition:[10] Ouyang Xiu's 歐陽修 (1007–72) "Biography of a recluse with six unique possessions" 六一居士傳,[11] actually a dialogue between the recluse and a guest.[12] The six unique possessions, the recluse says, are his collection of books in ten thousand fascicles; his collection of rubbings from ancient inscriptions in one thousand fascicles; his qin; his chess set; and his bottle of wine, always available. But then, the guest points out, the recluse has only named five possessions: what is the sixth? The sixth possession is the recluse himself, uniquely human. In a literary epiphany we are transported from the level of physical possession to that of human individuality, yet the individual is counted within the number of possessions, thus returning us to the initial level at the same time.

The essay satisfies Hofstadter's definition of "strange loop". To begin with, it amounts to a paradox of enumeration: counting the numerous books and inscriptions as single things, when they can also be subdivided, means that the total "six" is equivalent to one thousand, ten thousand, etc. This is not unlike Zeno's paradox of dichotomy, in which a single span of distance can be subdivided in halves an infinite number of times. Paradox is a defining characteristic of a strange loop because it contains contradictory strata. This paradox also

8 One of Hofstadter's simplest examples comes in his verbal description of the content of M.C. Escher's lithograph "Print Gallery" (*Gödel, Escher, Bach,* 715): "What we see is a picture gallery where a young man is standing, looking at a picture of a ship in the harbor of a small town, perhaps a Maltese town, to guess from the architecture, with its little turrets, occasional cupolas, and flat stone roofs, upon one of which sits a boy, relaxing in the heat, while two floors below him a woman – perhaps his mother – gazes out of the window from her apartment which sits directly above a picture gallery where a young man is standing, looking up at a picture of a ship in the harbor of a small town, perhaps a Maltese town – What? We are back on the same level as we began, though all logic dictates that we cannot be."

9 Iser, "The recursive loop", in *The Range of Interpretation* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2000), 99–133.

10 Another example, suggested by a reviewer for this article, might be the formulaic poetry of the *Shijing,* as studied by Wang Ching-hsien in *The Bell and the Drum: Shih ching as Formulaic Poetry in an Oral Tradition* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1974). Certainly the *Shijing* is full of formulaic repetition and circular structures. But it seems to me generally to lack the reflexive elements (Hofstadter's "level-crossing" and "paradoxical") which I find more evident in certain *Chuci* poems.

11 *Ouyang Wenzhong gong wenji* 歐陽文忠公文集 (*Sibu congkan*), 44.7a/b.

12 Is the recluse fictional, or autobiographical? Here the two amount to the same thing: autobiography is a trope of fiction.

implies a kind of recursion: if the five objects are possessed by the recluse, they could also be counted along with the recluse; depending on how one counts the objects and divides the book, one could continue adding up possessions indefinitely. In this sense we get a hint of a recursive feedback loop, and the account is also a level-crossing, because it crosses the boundaries between planes of referentiality, counting the possessor among the objects possessed. Thus it is a miniature example of a paradoxical level-crossing feedback loop, the "strange loop" that Hofstadter illustrates with M.C. Escher's print of "Drawing Hands", Bach's "Crab Canon", and Gödel's incompleteness theorem, *inter alia*. In each case, the feedback loops help to elucidate the self-referential quality of human consciousness: "… recursive looping makes accessible what is otherwise hidden from view; it provides insight into the inner workings of systems that cannot be seen".[13]

The strange loops in the "Nine Avowals", while lacking the economy of Ouyang Xiu's essay, share some of its formal structure, and it is only by considering this formal structure that we can appreciate the poems properly. The results of this investigation may have some bearing on the perennial question of authorship for the poems attributed to Qu Yuan. As both Hu Shi 胡適 (1891–1962) and James R. Hightower (1915–2006) pointed out in different ways, too much ink has been spilt on questions of Qu Yuan's biography and too little on the artistry of his poems.[14] To redirect attention towards formal features of the poems is by no means to reject traditional scholarship on the *Chuci* in the manner of Hu Shi's polemic, however. Traditional accounts of Qu Yuan's authorship sometimes show greater sophistication than the twentieth-century debunkers. Even Wang Yi's 王逸 (*c*. 89–*c*. 158) introduction to the "Nine Avowals", which begins with a seemingly straightforward affirmation that the poems were "composed by Qu Yuan" 屈原之所作也, concludes by discussing their reception. After Qu Yuan's death, says Wang Yi, "the people of Chu felt chagrin and lamented him, and all the world discussed his words, thereby passing them on" 楚人惜而哀之，世論其詞，以相傳焉.[15] For Wang Yi, Qu Yuan's composition marks the beginning of a process in which the people of Chu and indeed later transmitters, presumably including Wang Yi himself, were all involved.

Other premodern scholars also focused on the poetic craft of the "Nine Avowals", not just their historical context. Fang Renjie 方人傑 (Qing dynasty) commented on "Regretting Past Days" 惜往日: "There is fictional representation within the truthful narrative; there is circuitous representation within the forthright words" 實敘中有虛致，直言中有婉致.[16] Even more strikingly, in making sense of "Grieving at the Whirlwind" 悲回風, Chen Benli 陳本禮

13 Iser, *The Range of Interpretation*, 128.

14 Hu Shi, "Du *Chuci*" 讀楚辭, in *Dushu zazhi* 1, 1922, 2–3; James Robert Hightower, "Ch'ü Yüan studies", in *Silver Jubilee Volume of the Zinbun-Kagaku-Kenkyusho* (Kyoto: Kyoto University, 1954), 192–223.

15 *Chuci buzhu* 4.120–21.

16 On "Xi wang ri" 惜往日. See his *Chuci duben* 楚辭讀本 (1772; rpt. in *Chuci wenxian congkan* 楚辭文獻叢刊, ed. Huang Linggeng 黃靈庚 (Beijing: Guojia tushuguan chubanshe, 2014), vol. 48), 302.

(1739–1818) argues that the main body of the poem describes the journey of Qu Yuan's soul after death (and hence that previous commentators' attempts to tie it to real events were futile).[17] While premodern readers relied on assumptions of Qu Yuan's authorship in their interpretations of the poems, they were also willing to set these aside to recognize the artistry of the poems when appropriate. In focusing our attention on the rhetoric and structure of the "Nine Avowals", then, we can build on traditional scholarship while also offering new interpretations.

The "Nine Avowals" are the least homogeneous of all the poems in the *Chuci.* Zhu Xi 朱熹 (1130–1200) already recognized that they were composed at different times, and modern Chinese scholars have speculated that several were not composed by Qu Yuan at all.[18] One of the most original solutions was offered by Okamura Shigeru 岡村繁 (1922–2014).[19] By tabulating textual parallels and rigorously comparing the structures of the works, Okamura has confirmed the insight of earlier Chinese scholars that the "Nine Avowals" are at least somewhat heterogeneous in origin. At the same time, Okamura's conclusions about which poems are earliest in the corpus, or which could not have been composed by Qu Yuan, do not quite satisfy the demands of logical rigour to which he aspires.[20] Although shared lines are important, appreciating their implications requires careful thought and consideration, and they are never a direct indicator of copying or allusion.[21] Thus, rather than rejecting the traditional attributions of *Chuci* poems wholesale, we would do best to harmonize them, as much as possible, with our knowledge of the internal functioning of the poems. There is much evidence of a set of shared phrases and poetic devices not unlike those of oral poetry, regardless of how the texts were composed, and we should read each poem with attention to the formal devices of *Chuci* poetry as a productive

17 See his *Qu ci jingyi* 屈辭精義 (Jiaqing edition; rpt. in *Xuxiu siku quanshu*, vol. 1302), 4.24a. Tellingly, modern commentator Wang Jiaxin rejects this interpretation in favour of historical reconstruction (*Chuci jiuzhang jishi,* 302).

18 See *Chuci jizhu* 楚辭集注 (Shanghai: Shanghai guji chubanshe, 2001), 4.72; for sceptical modern scholarship, see, e.g., Lu Kanru 陸侃如 and Feng Yuanjun 馮沅君, *Zhongguo shishi* 中國詩史 (1931; rpt. Hong Kong: Guwen shuju, 1961), 1:127; and Wen Yiduo's 聞一多 posthumously published article, "Lun 'Jiu zhang'" 論九章, *Shehuikexue zhanxian* 1981.1: 217–23. More recently, however, the trend has been to accept Qu Yuan's authorship of all poems in "Nine Avowals".

19 See "Soji to Kutsu Gen – hīrō to sakusha to no bunri ni tsuite" 楚辭と屈原—ヒーローと作者との分離について, *Nihon Chūgoku gakkai hō* 18, 1966, 86–101, and "Soji bungaku ni okeru 'Shūshi' no ichi" 楚辭文学における「抽思」の位置, *Tōyōgaku* 16, 1966, 9–18. The latter article, in particular, first alerted this author to the internal complexity of the "Nine Avowals".

20 For instance, after a sophisticated discussion of textual linkages in the *Chuci*, Okamura argues that the "Li sao" and "Lamenting Ying" must have been composed by different authors, simply because of stylistic differences he has observed – as if a single poet could not vary his methods! Thus the most sophisticated critics of the *Chuci* inevitably come to rest on the most naïve of readings. See "Soji to Kutsu Gen", 98.

21 Li Rui 李鋭 has a valuable discussion of the various potential implications of repeated lines in ancient texts: "'Chongwen' fenxifa pingxi" "重文"分析法評析, *Qinghua daxue xuebao (Zhexue shehui kexue ban)* 23.1, 2008, 127–34.

system, leaving in abeyance questions of historical authorship.[22] Tropes of entanglement and strange loops are two formal devices that lend themselves to analysis, and may also be useful for future ventures in comparative poetics.

Tropes of entanglement

Tropes of entanglement are a signal feature of the poetic language of the "Nine Avowals".[23] They consist of poetic imagery or euphonious binomes, frequently arranged in parallel or chiastic configurations, conveying the sense of entrapment and entanglement faced by the poet. The poems of the "Nine Avowals" address the situation of Qu Yuan, the courtier exiled on the basis of slander, whose counsel has been rejected by his king, and these tropes are used to depict both his political predicament and emotional state, as we see in the opening passage:[24]

惜誦以致愍兮	Rueful remonstrance has resulted in my misery – [25]
發憤以抒情	Now I vent this frustration by expressing my feelings.
所作忠而言之兮	Whether my actions have been loyal, I will speak of them – [26]
指蒼天以為正	Let Azure Heaven be my judge!

This is the definitive statement of the purport of these poems. Where remonstrance has failed, only poetry holds out the possibility of vindication. The work of poetry is to *fa* 發 ("vent", "emit") and to *shu* 抒 ("express") pent-up emotion. The nine poems of the "Jiu zhang" present different renderings of these emotions, originating in different places. Although they were probably written separately and then compiled, for the most part they form a coherent set, devoted to Qu Yuan's self-presentation or *zhang* 章 (which can also, of course, be understood simply as an individual "piece").

22 Gregory Nagy's version of oral-formulaic theory, as laid out in comparative terms in *Poetry as Performance: Homer and Beyond* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), is helpful for thinking about how poetry is composed and re-composed within a tradition.

23 As with so many important points in the study of Chinese poetry, this has already been discussed by Qian Zhongshu 錢鍾書 (1910–98): see *Guanzhui bian* 管錐編 (Beijing: Shenghuo, dushu, xinzhi sanlian shudian, 2001), 940–44.

24 *Chuci buzhu* 4.121 (1/1–4).

25 Glosses on *xi* 惜 here vary among "begrudge", "pity", and "regret", a range hard to cover with a single English word. I take the sense to be that the speaker feels conflicted between sympathy for his lord, and frustration at his own situation. For *song* 誦, see *Shijing* 191/10: "I, Jiafu, have made this *song*/To lay bare the king's disorders" (following James Legge, *She King* (Hong Kong: London Missionary Society, 1871), 314; and also *Guoyu jijie* 國語集解 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 2002), 1.11: "… The bards with blind pupils offered their *song* …" 矇誦, with *song* glossed as "words of remonstrance and advice" 箴諫之語. Thus a *song* is on one hand simply a recitation, like a *fu*, but it tends to be a politically motivated one.

26 Huang Linggeng 黃靈庚 points out that *suo* 所 (for which there is a variant *fei* 非) can be read conditionally. See *Chuci zhangju shuzheng* 楚辭章句疏證 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 2007), 5.1266–67.

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The nine titles of the "Nine Avowals" suggest different points of a spectrum between "remonstrance" against the sovereign and "frustration" of the courtier himself:

1.	"Xi song" 惜誦	Rueful Remonstrance
2.	"She jiang" 涉江	Crossing the River
3.	"Ai Ying" 哀郢	Lamenting Ying
4.	"Chou si" 抽思	Unravelled Yearnings
5.	"Huai sha" 懷沙	Embracing the Sand
6.	"Si meiren" 思美人	Longing for the Fair One
7.	"Xi wangri" 惜往日	Regretting Past Days
8.	"Ju song" 橘頌	Encomium to the Tangerine
9.	"Bei hui feng" 悲回風	Grieving at the Whirlwind

Though the poems do frequently address political matters in the elliptical manner of the "Li sao", they tend to concern themselves primarily with the poet's own feelings. But it would be overly simplistic to say that the state of those feelings is simply sad, or melancholy, or any other single adjective. Rather his heart has taken on a configuration the poet can describe with some precision (in "Lamenting Ying"):[27]

心嬋媛而傷懷兮　My heart lingers in longing and wounded reminiscence –
眇不知其所蹠　Half-blinded I cannot tell where I have trod.[28]

Qu Yuan's heart (or mind, or heart-mind) finds itself attached to the target of longing from which it is displaced, causing a sense of trauma. This spiritual displacement is mirrored in the befuddlement of senses, the kind of correlation so effectively conveyed by the Chinese poetic couplet.[29] Qu Yuan is blinded and bewildered, continuing his journey but without any particular aim.

"Lingers in longing" emulates the alliteration of *chanyuan* 嬋媛 (**dran-wan*).[30] Many of the tropes of entanglement in the "Nine Avowals" take the form of descriptive binomes, often possessing phonetic patterning in the form of assonance or consonance. Though descriptive binomes also played a large role in the epideictic rhetoric of the Han *fu*, this should properly be seen as just one of their functions in early Chinese poetry.[31] These binomes do not

27 *Chuci buzhu* 4.134 (3/17–18).

28 Huang Linggeng points out that this line is parallel to line 28 of "Rueful Remonstrance": "But I have gone astray and cannot find the gate to his favour" 迷不知寵之門. So *miao* 眇 has a sense close to *mi* 迷, "confused". See *Chuci zhangju shuzheng,* 1408–9.

29 Cheng Yu-yu 鄭毓瑜 has written recently about the way that the poet's sorrow is physicalized in the *Chuci*. See *Yinpi lianlei: wenxue yanjiu de guanjianci* 引譬連類：文學研究的關鍵詞 (Taipei: Lianjing, 2012), 88–99.

30 Reconstructions are based on William H. Baxter, *A Handbook of Old Chinese Phonology* (Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter, 1992), as modified in Axel Schuessler, *ABC Etymological Dictionary of Old Chinese* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2007).

31 David R. Knechtges discusses the use of descriptive binomes in the Han *fu*, and the problem of translation, in the preface to *Wen xuan, or Selections of Refined Literature,* Volume Two: *Rhapsodies on Sacrifices, Hunting, Travel, Sightseeing, Palaces and Halls, Rivers and Seas* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1987), 2–13.

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necessarily belong to some pre-determined *langue* of their period, but may be used in creative ways according to the demands of the *parole* of their particular text.[32] George A. Kennedy analysed the use of binomes in the *Shijing* and hypothesized that they were "in most cases invented to suit a particular requirement in an Ode".[33] The particular usage of *chanyuan* here can thus be seen as a trope, a poetic deformation of language, as suggested in Wang Yi's awkward elaboration: "His heart is tugged and drawn until it hurts" 心中牽引而痛. We can sense the physical "tugging" here in another occurrence of the same phrase, in "Grieving at the Whirlwind":[34]

依風穴以自息兮	I lodge in a cavern from the storm to rest myself –
忽傾寤以嬋媛	But I turn over awoken by lingering longings.

Apart from the pull of desire, *chanyuan* might also be related to *chan* 纏 (**dran*), "to bind", which is homophonous with the first element of the binome. The sensation is not of being pulled in a particular direction, but of being pushed alternately this way and that, in different directions that conflict and oppose one another. The poet's sensations and thoughts are knotted and twisted around themselves.

Throughout the poems Qu Yuan cannot decide where to go next; he is torn between longing to go back, and his will to move forward. His emotional confusion has left him totally indecisive, both psychologically and geographically entangled. For instance, in "Rueful Remonstrance" he exclaims:[35]

欲橫奔而失路兮	I'd like to race across but have lost the path –
堅志而不忍	Firm in my ambition though I cannot bear it.
背膺胖以交痛兮	My spine and chest are divided, but share in the pain –
心鬱結而紆軫	My heart is knotted in woe and sorrow-tangled.

Qu Yuan's confusion does not mean that he feels weak or loses his fundamental sense of purpose. His will remains firm and he continues on his journey, even though he is not continuing in any particular direction but in an endless loop. Meanwhile his whole body is consumed by contradiction, split into complexes incompatible with one another.

32 In this light I have found useful the revisionist study Shen Huaixing 沈懷興, *Lianmianzi lilun wenti yanjiu* 連綿字理論問題研究 (Beijing: Shangwu yinshuguan, 2013). Shen points out difficulties with the dogma of recent Chinese linguistics that *lianmianzi* are disyllabic simple-morpheme words. In many cases this cannot easily be demonstrated. Shen even criticizes the conventional twentieth-century interpretation of "butterfly" (p. 258). Whichever view one takes on particular words, the point is that these issues cannot be settled by the adoption of an *a priori* solution at a theoretical level that ignores the variation of individual contexts.

33 "A Note on Ode 220", *i Studia Serica Bernhard Karlgren Dedicata* (Copenhagen: Ejnar Munksgaard, 1959), 190–98, rpt. in *Selected Works of George A. Kennedy,* ed. Tien-yi Li (New Haven: Far Eastern Publications, 1964), 463–76, at 475.

34 *Chuci buzhu* 4.159 (9/77–78).

35 *Chuci buzhu* 4.127 (1/77–80).

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The final line in this passage modifies its topic "heart" with a striking chiasmus: *yujie* 鬱結 (*ʔut-kît*) – *yuzhen* 紆軫 (*ʔwa-tenʔ*). *Jie* 結 and *yu* 紆denote different forms of entangling, their semantic range signified by the silk classifier.[36] Though *yu* 鬱 has various meanings in early poetry, in this compound it means "woe" and hence is synonymous with *zhen* 軫. Thus these four words construct the chiasmic pattern *sorrow-entangle-entangle-sorrow*, itself a formal entangling of the two concepts. The presence of phrases, lines, and stanzas with this kind of elaborate structure, that elevate the material of the "Nine Avowals" from the simple plaint of an abused courtier to a literary construct whose purport, extends beyond its original circumstances.

The collocation of *yujie* and *yuzhen* recurs in "Embracing the Sand", though imbued with new significance by the succeeding lines:[37]

鬱結紆軫兮	Knotted in woe and sorrow-tangled –
離愍而長鞠	I meet with disaster and am ever frustrated.
撫情效志兮	Consoling my passions I examine my will – [38]
冤屈而自抑	I am wronged and abused, and must restrain myself.
刓方以為圜兮	Whittling the square to make it round –
常度未替	The enduring measure still has not changed.
易初本迪兮	To change from the beginning, to betray the source – [39]
君子所鄙	Is what the gentleman disdains.

The poet starts in the state of confusion, finding himself trapped and frustrated, but then asserts his determination and resistance to any compromise or change in direction.

Another passage from "Lamenting Ying" also elaborates on the emotive configuration of the poet with reference to the directionless journey:[40]

順風波以從流兮	Riding wind and waves, I follow in the current –
焉洋洋而為客	As if a traveller who drifts without direction.
淩陽侯之氾濫兮	Crossing the wild tumult of Lord Yang –
忽翱翔之焉薄	Suddenly set to drift without direction, where will I end up?
心絓結而不解兮	My heart is tied up in knots that cannot be unwoven –
思蹇產而不釋	My yearnings, gnarled and snarled, cannot be enodated.

36 While Wang Yi glosses *yu* 紆 as "crooked" (*qu* 曲), Hong Xingzu more precisely identifies it as "entangled" (*ying* 縈). See *Chuci buzhu* 4.127.

37 *Chuci buzhu* 4.141–2 (5/7–14).

38 Zhu Xi glosses *xiao* 校 as *he* 覈 (*Chuci jizhu* 4.86).

39 A variant omits *chu* 初. Huang Linggeng argues that *ben di* 本迪 should be read as *bei you* 伾（倍）由, "to betray the source" (*Chuci zhangju shuzheng,* 1497–1500). This is the most parsimonious emendation that makes sense of both text and Wang Yi's commentary. The graph *bei* 伾 appears frequently in Mawangdui and Guodian manuscripts.

40 *Chuci buzhu* 4.134 (3/19–24).

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Again the poem proposes implicit parallels between the poet's outer and inner states. Outwardly, the world around him is in a state of utter confusion, without any sense of the proper direction to go. Inside, his emotions are embroiled and entangled, as described in two evocative binomes: *guajie* 絓結 (**kwreh-kre?*) and *jianchan* 蹇產 (**krian-sran?*).[41] Indeed, "Lamenting Ying" contains even more imagery along these lines:[42]

慘鬱鬱而不通兮	Misery pent-up inside, it cannot be expressed –
蹇侘傺而含慼	Hobbled by bewildering despair, I repress my melancholy.

Again the accumulation of binomes deepens the effect: "pent-up inside" *yuyu* 鬱鬱 (**ʔut- ʔut*) parallel with *chachi* 侘傺 (**drak-tshrat*). The hero's feeling cannot be disclosed or released (*bu tong* 不通) but persists in this state of knotted perplexity.

Binomes are used throughout the "Nine Avowals" primarily to evoke mental states, to achieve deeper levels of interiority. The near impossibility of translating them should not distract us from their true significance, which is precisely to lead us further into the tangles of the mind. The opening of "Unravelled Yearnings", for instance, uses binomes immediately after the words "heart" and "thought" (here rendered "yearning" for consistency within the poem).[43]

心鬱鬱之憂思兮	My heart is shadowed and shrouded by anxious yearning –
獨永歎乎增傷	Alone, my unending sighs deepen the hurt.
思蹇產之不釋兮	Yearnings, gnarled and snarled, cannot be enodated –[44]
曼遭夜之方長	But ever meet the night that is without end.

This parallelism in the unrhymed lines between "heart [binome]" 心鬱鬱 and "yearnings [binome]" 思蹇產 is so exact as almost to fulfil the function of a rhyme complementary to the phonologically rhyming lines. Feelings and thoughts are not declarative statements or logical propositions, but correlations between external and internal experiences, best expressed by means of binomes that are flexible in meaning. These four lines combine the binomes we have seen above, *yuyu* and *jianchan*, with an additional negative, *bu shi* 不釋 "cannot be enodated". The tangling and knotting metaphors are thus consistently associated with darkness as well as dark emotions. The mental knots of the hero replicate themselves outside in a state of confusion without end.[45]

41 Wang Niansun 王念孫 points out that these are both binomes (alliterative and rhyming, respectively) in *Dushu zazhi* 讀書雜誌, ed. Xu Weijun 徐煒君 et al. (punctuated ed., Shanghai: Shanghai guji chubanshe, 2015), 2652.

42 *Chuci buzhu* 4.135; "Lamenting Ying" 3/47–8.

43 *Chuci buzhu* 4.137 (4/1–4).

44 This line is exactly the same as one quote above from the same poem – *Chuci buzhu* 4.134 (3/24).

45 Note that Wang Yi implicitly comments on the trope of entanglement by glossing the first line of the poem (which would seem to lack it) as "It means that grief and anger are knotted and gnarled, anxious about trouble and abuse" 哀憤結絹，慮煩冤也.

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The poem "Grieving at the Whirlwind" also uses a number of tropes of entanglement:[46]

愁鬱鬱之無快兮	Pent-up despondency leaves me no relief –
居戚戚而不可解	Abiding in bitter melancholy which cannot be removed.[47]
心鞿羈而不形兮	My heart is curbed and bridled, and cannot take on form –
氣繚轉而自締	My energies are entangled and knot themselves up.

And just a few lines later:[48]

藐蔓蔓之不可量兮	Spreading out so far off that it cannot be measured –
縹綿綿之不可紆	Out in the vastness of space where it cannot be entangled:
愁悄悄之常悲兮	My sorrow silently screams in its endless melancholy –
翩冥冥之不可娛	Soaring the profound void, I am still not pleased.

These lines reverse the trope of entanglement with a series of negatives. The subject of the first couplet appears to be the poet's sorrow itself.[49] Indeed, in the "Grieving at the Whirlwind" in particular, the topic of the poem seems to shift from Qu Yuan himself towards Qu Yuan's psychological state.

By the final couplet of "Grieving at the Whirlwind", the last poem in the "Nine Avowals", though, the terms used to describe the poet's mindset remain constant, employing terms identical to those quoted from "Lamenting Ying" above:[50]

心絓結而不解兮	My heart is tied up in knots that cannot be unwoven –
思蹇產而不釋	My yearnings, gnarled and snarled, cannot be enodated.

That the state of the poet's mind should be the same at the conclusion of the series suggests a lack of dramatic event in the "Nine Avowals", although this is actually unfair to the set as a whole. "Crossing the River", "Lamenting Ying", "Chou si", and "Embracing the Sand" each have "Luan" 亂 codas that mark definite and dramatic endpoints to the composition.[51] "Grieving at the Whirlwind", by contrast, is steeped in a kind of self-regarding melancholy that fails to advance in any particular direction. This is one of the features

Interestingly, Wang Yi also employs the compound *jiegu* 結縎 in one of his own poems in the *Chuci* (see *Chuci buzhu* 17.317).

46 *Chuci buzhu* 4.158 (9/57–60).

47 *Jie* 解 "removed" can also mean "untie, unweave".

48 *Chuci buzhu* 4.159 (9/65–8).

49 Wang Yi identifies it as his "minute and subtle thoughts" (*xiwei zhi si* 細微之思).

50 *Chuci buzhu* 4.161–2 (9/109–10).

51 This is a point that Okamura emphasizes in arguing that these pieces are all relatively old ("Soji to Kutsu Gen", 96), but of course an envoi section would be as easy for an imitator to copy as any other feature of the "Li sao", so the point is not decisive.

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that has been used to suggest it was composed later than the earlier group of poems.[52]

The title of "Grieving at the Whirlwind" itself speaks of the "whirlwind" (*huifeng* 回風), the gale that turns back upon itself in a centripetal vortex.[53] Wang Yi identifies *huifeng* with *piaofeng* 飄風, with its symbolic referent the "petty men" who slander Qu Yuan. But not all the allegorical meaning of the *Chuci* works according to Wang Yi's scheme. An occurrence of the whirlwind in the "Li sao" itself is ambiguous, but other references in the *Chuci* are positive or even triumphant.[54] Thus the whirlwind is an ambiguous symbol of power and force, not the simple token of Wang Yi's reductive scheme.

The title of the poem is taken from the opening couplet:[55]

悲回風之搖蕙兮	I grieve at the whirlwind that wastes the melilotus –
心冤結而內傷	My heart is knotted up in anger, myself wounded within.

The entangled sorrows inside the poet's mind seem to mirror the external world, depicted here in the unusually violent image of the whirlwind devastating one of the poet's floral emblems. In the same poem we have another variant of the entanglement trope, in which it is the poet himself who weaves his anguish into art:[56]

糾思心以為纕兮	Braiding heart's yearnings to make a bracelet –
編愁苦以為膺	I weave my bitter woes to make a baldric.
折若木以蔽光兮	I snap a branch of the Ruomu tree to block out the light –
隨飄風之所仍	Follow the whirlwind wherever it may drift.

Here the entanglement is not an aspect of Qu Yuan's mortifications, but is the conscious transfiguration of them into art. The next couplet parallels this aesthetic production with the poet's cosmic journey, first snapping off a branch

52 Okamura, "Soji to Kutsu Gen", Wen Yiduo, "Lun 'Jiu zhang'", and Lu and Feng, *Zhongguo shishi,* 127. Likewise David Hawkes writes of it as "clearly inspired by *Li sao*, from which several of its lines are borrowed". See *Songs of the South: An Ancient Chinese Anthology of Poems by Qu Yuan and Other Poets* (London: Penguin, 1985, 2011), 179.

53 Wang Yi's gloss is *piao* 飄, merely a great gale, but Zhu Xi makes clear that the sense is that of a whirlwind (*xuanzhuan zhi feng* 旋轉之風). See *Chuci jizhu* 4.97.

54 The "Li sao" includes these lines: "The whirlwind gathers itself up and then disperses – Leads the clouds and coronas and drives them forth" 飄風屯其相離兮，帥雲霓而來御 (*Chuci buzhu* 1.29 [l. 203–4]), and Wang Yi glosses *piao* 飄 as *huifeng* 回風. Qu Yuan meets a whirlwind while riding through the sky upon a phoenix, but it is not clear from the poem itself whether the storm is a bad omen or perhaps propels him higher upwards. By contrast, "Riding on the whirlwind I will roam faraway" 乘回風而遠遊 in "Seven Remonstrances" (*Chuci buzhu* 13.249) is clearly positive, and another reference to *huifeng* in "Lesser Controller of Destinies" 少司命in "Nine Songs" (*Chuci buzhu* 2.72) probably so.

55 *Chuci buzhu* 4.155 (9/1–2).

56 *Chuci buzhu* 4.157 (9/33–6).

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from the Ruomu tree at the western extremity of the universe, then following the whirlwind in its celestial roaming.[57]

In a number of passages Qu Yuan describes his primary ambition as the weaving together of words to make a statement to his sovereign. A number of passages in the "Nine Avowals" link entanglement and composition, showing that entanglement is not incidental to the poems as coherent entities. In the opening of "Longing for the Fair One" the poet regrets his inability to weave together his message:[58]

思美人兮	Yearning for the Beautiful One –
攬涕而佇眙	I wipe away my tears, standing still and agape.
媒絕路阻兮	My matchmaker is thwarted and my path blocked –
言不可結而詒	I cannot weave my words together to be conveyed.[59]
蹇蹇之煩冤兮	All my honest counsel incurs only trouble and abuse –
陷滯而不發	Tripped up and trapped in, I cannot even transmit it;[60]
申旦以舒中情兮	Awake until the dawn, releasing my inner feelings –
志沈菀而莫達	My will is inundated and entangled, and attains nothing.

Or from "Rueful Remonstrance":[61]

心鬱邑余侘傺兮	My heart is steeped in sadness, myself dejected and despairing –
又莫察余之善惡	There is none to perceive the good and ill inside me.[62]
固煩言不可結詒兮	Indeed my tumultuous words cannot be intertwined to transmit –
願陳志而無路	I wish I could relate my will but there is no way hence.

The following passage from "Regretting Past Days" presents another version of the same trope. The feelings of the poet, if only they could be set forth plainly in the light of day, would then shine as brightly as the stars laid out in the sky:[63]

願陳情以白行兮	I would like to relate my feelings and to clarify my acts –
得罪過之不意	Suffering this punishment was not what I expected;
情冤見之日明兮	That my feelings and my wrong would be visible as daylight –
如列宿之錯置	To be arrayed in order like the various constellations.

57 These images also appear close together in the "Li sao", at *Chuci buzhu* 1.28 (l. 197) and 1.29 (l. 205) respectively.
58 *Chuci buzhu* 4.146 (1–6).
59 Cf. "Unravelled Yearnings", lines 11–12.
60 Following Jiang Liangfu, I understand line 5 here parallel to "Li sao", line 41, with *jian-jian* 蹇蹇 a loan for *jianjian* 謇謇.
61 *Chuci buzhu* 4.124 (1/37–40).
62 Following Zhu Xi, I amend 中情 to 善惡 to fit the rhyme and based on the parallel line in "Li sao", *Chuci buzhu* 1.36.
63 *Chuci buzhu* 4.152 (7/63–6).

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This is the inverse of the customary trope of entanglement used to make the same point: the same sense of space-filling complexity, but suddenly filtered and arranged so as to avoid any overlapping or entanglement at all, presenting simply the stars of heaven arrayed in their distinct points of brilliance.

Throughout the "Nine Avowals", the poet-speaker describes his psychological states using a number of verbs and symbols that relate to the theme of entanglement. Used systematically in this way, the device becomes a trope, consistently relating the emotive and expressive faculties of the poet to threads that are knotted together, entangled so that they cannot easily be untied and shown in their original nature. Thus tangled emotions are a paradoxical consequence of the straightforward loyalty the poet states as his ideal, and the combination of the two forms his identity as a poetic speaker and also inspires the tension that of the poetic narrative. We should not be surprised to find that the poems simulate this tangled structure at higher levels of organization as well. For "poems trope their own schemes, allegorize their own arrangements";[64] the trope of entanglement is one kind of rhetorical statement about mind and experience, and the strange loop of poetic complexes yet another.

Strange loops

The works in the *Chuci* in general, but especially the "Li sao", "Nine Avowals", and "Nine Suasions" poems, contain a great deal of repetition and internal cross-reference. This phenomenon is often interpreted as a sign of multiple authorship, each reiteration understood as a borrowing or theft from a previous author, or even as the unconscious effect of oral tradition. Without confining our interpretations to any single theory of the genesis of the *Chuci* poems, though, we still ought to consider the cumulative effect of these literary devices. However they originated, they have supplied their meaning to countless interpreters, and still convey meaning to readers today. Again, premodern *Chuci* commentators were not oblivious to these problems. As Qu Fu 屈復 (b. 1668) wrote in the editorial principles for his commentary to the *Chuci*, with particular reference to the "Li sao": "There are some identical lines, but the meaning in each case varies, and this is decidedly not repetition" 句有同者，意自各別，並非重複.[65] Qu Fu wisely recognizes that each repetition is also variation.[66]

To suggest a kind of conceptual translation of these structures into a modern idiom, we might think of Hofstadter's "strange loop", a reflexive pattern in which "by moving upwards (or downwards) through the levels of some

64 See John Hollander, *Melodious Guile: Fictive Pattern in Poetic Language* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1988), ix.

65 Qu Fu, *Chuci xinzhu* 楚辭新注 (*Guanzhong congshu*), "Fan li" 凡例, 2a.

66 This point has not always been appreciated by students of oral-formulaic theory, though in Chinese studies it has been stated clearly by C.H. Wang, e.g., "The protean character of the basic meaning of a *Shih Ching* word also illuminates the individual compositional art in formulaic vogue when the tradition was ripe". In other words, the technical sense of "formulaic" is entirely different from the pejorative sense of the word in colloquial English. See *The Bell and the Drum:* Shih Ching *as Formulaic Poetry in an Oral Tradition* (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1974), 96.

hierarchical system, we unexpectedly find ourselves right back where we started".[67] The strange loop is not just a logical paradox, in Hofstadter's view, but significant as a model for the way that human consciousness itself is structured out of self-mirroring feedback loops. Taking into consideration the existence of these strange loops, we can appreciate that one of the literary dimensions of the *Chuci* – its repetition and self-reference – is not necessarily a defect created by errors in transmission, but may in fact be a virtue, because of the way that it captures some elements of normal human thought processes.

Even one of the more isolated poems with relatively few textual parallels to other pieces in the *Chuci*, the "Ju song" (#8 in the "Nine Avowals") or "Encomium to the Tangerine", lends itself to an allegorical reading, as in Tseng Chen-chen's essay "An allegory on allegory: reading 'Ju song' as Qu Yuan's *Ars Poetica*".[68] Tseng argues that the poem "contains a symmetrical bipartite structure of an enclosed circle with the end coiled back to the beginning; the closure, once completed, reopens itself".[69] The first half describes the fine aesthetic qualities of the tangerine tree; the second then describes the exquisite virtue of the poet. The poem as a whole thus forms an "allegory" of how a tangible symbol comes to represent conceptions of virtue. The second half of the poem leads the reader back to the first half, pointing back to the fruit itself and creating the circular effect.

As fruitful as such a reading may be, other poems in the "Nine Avowals" exhibit similar structural features on a larger scale. The most explicitly self-referential and cyclical structures are present in the "Unravelled Yearnings", with its four distinctly labelled sections: Main Text (40 lines) – Lesser Song (4) – Aria (22) – Coda (20). Aside from the first section, each of these sections is given an explicit title. The first three sections are in the "Li sao" metre with a couplet divided by the character *xi*, while the Coda is in the "Ju song" metre, basically tetrasyllabic but with *xi* at the end of each couplet. This is a striking and unique organization. Okamura Shigeru has argued that "Unravelled Yearnings" is a composite of two original poems, dividing it after the Lesser Song.[70] He has shown, in particular, how the first half, according to his division, stands in close historical relationship to the "Li sao" and "Lamenting Ying".

But his view does not do justice to the balanced and coherent structure of the entire "Unravelled Yearnings" in its present form, particularly how it is unified by self-referential and recursive tropes. The three section markers we have noted

67 Hofstadter, *Gödel, Escher, Bach*, 10. The essential insight derives from Kurt Gödel's (1906–78) 1931 paper "On formally undecidable propositions of *Principia Mathematica* and related systems". Gödel's proof relies on a remarkable device, showing that mathematical propositions can be reconceptualized through a self-referential enumeration, then using this property to identify certain undecidable ones.

68 Tseng, "An allegory on allegory: reading 'Ju song' as Qu Yuan's *Ars Poetica*", *Dong Hwa Journal of Humanistic Studies* 1, 1999, 98.

69 Tseng, "An allegory on allegory", 98.

70 E.g. Okamura Shigeru 剛村繁 has argued that "Chou si" 抽思 is a composite of two pieces in "Soji bungaku ni okeru 'Shūshi' no ichi" 楚辭文学における「抽思」の位置, *Tōyōgaku* 16, 1966, 9–18. Okamura's exquisitely precise analysis was a direct inspiration to my arguments here, even though my conclusions differ radically from Okamura's.

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belong to this category, as does the line from which the title derives, but there are also at least seven explicit references to speech in the poem. Though the latter half indeed seems quite different in both form and content from the first half, it also concludes with a poignant expression of inability to communicate. Specifically, the hero asks who he will be able to find to listen to his speech. Having expressed his entire complaint, then, and relieved his own mind momentarily, he asks whether it has reached its audience, or whether he will have to repeat it all once again.

The three terms that identify different sections of "Unravelled Yearnings" seem to have musical significance. That is certainly true of "Lesser Song" and "Air". *Luan,* "coda", is more complicated. Guo Moruo argued that this was actually an error for *ci* 辭, which it graphically resembles.[71] That is an appealing solution, even if not conclusive, because the term *ci* plays such a large role throughout the *Chuci*: in the title of the anthology itself, and also in the text of "Unravelled Yearnings" and other poems, as when the hero refers to his principal activity as *chen ci* 陳辭. We may render this as "presenting my speech", addressed to the king.

The title "Chou si" 抽思 is highly distinctive. Like the second, third, and eighth poems in the "Nine Pieces", the title is not simply drawn from the first hemistich, and this creative selection bespeaks a certain artistry and self-awareness in the composition of the poem. Curiously, a closely related phrase does appear at the opening of the "Lesser Song" (line 41): "Though I unravel my resentments to the Fair One" 與美人抽怨兮. Zhu Xi's text, moreover, includes the variant *chou si*抽思 for *chou yuan* 抽怨 for this line, so it is possible that the title was drawn from this line, or alternatively that the original title of the poem was "Unravelled Resentments" 抽怨.[72] It is also possible that this "Lesser Song" was the kernel from which the poem emerged. All this shows that philological arguments can cut both ways, historically speaking. Though it is often assumed that the more coherent and better-crafted poems are authentic productions of Qu Yuan, an alternative hypothesis might be that it is the more elaborately reworked poems, that include structural elements like envois and titles independent of the main text, which are the later reworkings of rougher originals by Qu Yuan or his contemporaries.

For the purposes of this argument, however, I would prefer to remain agnostic on these questions of historical origins and instead focus on artistry, beginning with the memorable title "Chou si". This phrase has the same structure as "Li sao" (in its most common interpretations as either "Encountering Sorrow" or "Departing Sorrow"), VO with a verb and a noun conveying melancholy. The sense of *chou* (OC * *t-hliu*) here is unusual, and Yang Xiong's *Fa yan* provides an interesting clue, glossing the word as *du* 讀 "to read".[73] We could translate it as "unreeling", in a sense similar to "reading out loud", as if the poet is thinking out loud, simultaneously composing and also reading his own thoughts. The phrase refers specifically to making

71 See "Qu Yuan yanjiu" 屈原研究, originally published in 1942, rpt. in *Guo Moruo quanji: lishi bian* 郭沫若全集：歷史編 (Beijing: Renmin chubanshe, 1982), 4: 41.

72 As Jin Kaicheng 金開誠 et al. argue in *Qu Yuan ji jiaozhu* 屈原集校注 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1996), 521, citing Yuo Guoen 遊國恩.

73 See *Fang yan jiaojian* 方言校箋 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1993), 13.8a.

one's plea to the sovereign, which is what the poem is all about, so the "thoughts" to be conveyed are specifically the speaker's "yearnings".

Below I present a complete translation of the "Unravelled Yearnings" to facilitate examination of the poem's structure. The poem is divided into stanzas according to rhyme, and into seven subsections A_1, A_2, A_3, B, C_1, C_2, and D, based on content as well as well as the quadripartite structure mentioned above.

Unravelled Yearnings 抽思

A_1

心鬱鬱之憂思兮　My heart is shrouded by dismay and yearning –
獨永歎乎增傷　Long sighs of loneliness that greaten the hurt.
思蹇產之不釋兮　Yearnings knotted and gnarled, which I cannot enodate –
曼遭夜之方長　I ever meet the night that is without end.

悲秋風之動容兮　I grieve at the autumn wind that perturbs and palpitates –
何回極之浮浮　At how the Pole [of Heaven] is askew, and drifts off course.[74]
數惟蓀之多怒兮　Again I think of Lord Iris, so easily angered –
傷余心之慢慢　Further wounding my heart, so steeped in melancholy.

A_2

願搖起而橫奔兮　I would like to rise up at once and to rush across – [75]
覽民尤以自鎮　To observe the troubles of others and to compose myself.[76]
結微情以陳詞兮　*I tie together my inner feelings to set forth in words* –
矯以遺夫美人　I lift them up to present to the Fair One.

昔君與我誠言兮　Long ago my lord spoke to me words of sincerity –
曰黃昏以為期　Saying our rendezvous would be at twilight.
羌中道而回畔兮　But oh! in the middle of the passage he broke faith –
反既有此他志　And reversing course, took on this other aspiration.

憍吾以其美好兮　He scorned me from his excellence and goodness –
覽余以其脩姱　He looked upon me out of his exquisite loveliness,
與余言而不信兮　He spoke to me words that were not true –
蓋為余而造怒　And at last turned angry on my account.

願承閒而自察兮　I would rather take the chance to examine myself –

74 *Dong rong* 動容 is a rhyming binome that describes how the autumn wind lays waste to green leaves and other growing things. The second character is also written *rong* 溶 or 搈. See Tang Bingzheng's 湯炳正 illuminating discussion in *Chuci leigao* 楚辭類稿 (Chengdu: Ba Shu shushe, 1988), 332. The sense of the line as a whole is similar to that of the famous opening of the "Nine Suasions".

75 The unusual sense of *yao* 搖 as "rapidly" here is attested in *Fang yan* 方言, as shown by Wang Niansun in *Dushu zazhi*, 2653. A variant has 遙赴 for 搖起.

76 I take this line to be a concise summation of Chinese political theory. Understanding the troubles of the people or state as a whole must proceed in tandem with self-cultivation and the attainment of individual self-control on the part of the ruler. Peace and contentment in the society at large can be attained only when the rulers are themselves at peace, self-composed, having achieved harmony between their own desires and the world around them.

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心震悼而不敢　　But my heart trembles with sorrow and I dare not.
悲夷猶而冀進兮　　I dally in grief and hope to advance –
心怛傷之憺憺　　My heart is sorely wounded, anxious and uneasy.

A_3

25 茲歷情以陳辭兮　　*Now the sorrows I have suffered, I would set forth in words* –
蓀詳聾而不聞　　But Lord Iris feigns deafness and will not hear.
固切人之不媚兮　　Surely incisive men do not flatter –
眾果以我為患　　So the many treat me as their ruin.

初吾所陳之耿著兮　　*What I had related from the first was clear and right* –
30 豈至今其庸亡　　So why now has it all been forgotten?
何毒藥之謇謇兮　　*Why do they treat honest speech as a poisonous herb?* –
願蓀美之可完　　I only wish to complete the perfection of Lord Iris.[77]

望三五以為像兮　　I look towards the Three and the Five as my models – [78]
指彭咸以為儀　　I aim at Peng and Xian as my companions.[79]
35 夫何極而不至兮　　What aim, then, can I not achieve? –
故遠聞而難虧　　Though my repute travels far I cannot easily be hurt.

善不由外來兮　　Goodness cannot be made to come from outside –
名不可以虛作　　And fame cannot be manufactured falsely.
孰無施而有報兮　　Who without exertion meets with reward? –
40 孰不實而有穫　　Who is not true and yet reaps a harvest?

B

少歌曰　　The Lesser Song:

與美人抽怨兮　　Though I unravel my yearnings to the Fair One –
并日夜而無正　　Day and night I have no way to prove it.
憍吾以其美好兮　　He scorned me from his excellence and goodness – [80]
敖朕辭而不聽　　*He contemns my words and will not hear.*

C_1

倡曰　　The Air:

45 有鳥自南兮　　There is a bird that comes from the South –
來集漢北　　It comes to perch north of the Han.
好姱佳麗兮　　Noble and lovely, splendid in its beauty –

77 Here I decline to adopt Hong Xingzu's variant text 何獨樂斯之謇謇兮，願蓀美之可光. Though the variant improves the rhyme, this is not dispositive since it is common in early poetry for nasal endings to cross-rhyme. For more on Lord Iris see the discussion below.

78 Wang Yi identifies these as the Three Kings and Five Hegemons.

79 Peng Xian is identified by Wang Yi as a Shang courtier from antiquity, but in fact both Peng and Xian occur frequently in mythological terms and as the names of shamans. Peng is also mentioned in the *Analects* and other texts as a model of longevity. Modern scholars have distinguished them as two separate sage-heroes of antiquity, as in Jiang Liangfu 姜亮夫, *Qu Yuan fu jiaozhu* 重定屈原賦校注, rev. ed. (Tianjin: Tianjin guji chubanshe, 1987), 29–30.

80 Identical with line 17.

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	牉獨處此異域	It abides apart and alone in the foreign land.
	既惸獨而不群兮	It persists alone, and will not form alliances –
50	又無良媒在其側	Moreover lacks trusty matchmakers by its side.
	道卓遠而日忘兮	The way is distant and daily forgotten –
	願自申而不得	*I would like to put myself forth but cannot.*
	望北山而流涕兮	Gazing at the northern hills, I stream forth tears –
	臨流水而太息	And overlooking the flowing waters, heave a deep sigh.

C_2

55	望孟夏之短夜兮	Awaiting the first month of Summer and the short nights –
	何晦明之若歲	How the night's dawning seems to last a year!
	惟郢路之遼遠兮	Thinking of the path to Ying, that stretches far off –
	魂一夕而九逝	My soul in one evening departs nine times.
	曾不知路之曲直兮	I did not know if the road would be crooked or straight –
60	南指月與列星	Southward I recognized the moon and serried stars.
	願徑逝而未得兮	I would follow the path away but cannot find it –
	魂識路之營營	My soul recognizes the road and hurries along it.
	何靈魂之信直兮	How faithful and honest is the numinous soul! –
	人之心不與吾心同	But the hearts of other men are not like my heart.
65	理弱而媒不通兮	My messenger is weak and the matchmaker cannot pass –
	尚不知余之從容	They cannot even comprehend my deeds and demeanour.[81]

D

	亂曰	Coda:
	長瀨湍流	Through great rapids and jetting currents
	泝江潭兮	I climb back up the Jiang and its pools –
	狂顧南行	Gazing wildly behind, I journey southward,
70	聊以娛心兮	To entertain my heart a while –
	軫石崴嵬	Boulders square as chariot-frames tower above,
	蹇吾願兮	Obstructing my desire –
	超回志度	Having strayed and been diverted from the rule I strive for,
	行隱進兮	As I advance I am too miserable to make progress –
75	低佪夷猶	I dither and dally, loiter and tarry,
	宿北姑兮	Sojourning in Beigu – [82]
	煩冤瞀容	Wounded by worries, my countenance in turmoil,
	實沛徂兮	Truly must I hasten hence –

81 *Congrong* 從容 most commonly means "relaxed and leisurely", but also has a second meaning of "behaviour, appearance, deportment". See Wang Niansun, *Guangya shuzheng* 廣雅疏證 (Nanjing: Fenghuang chubanshe, 2000), 6A.34b–35a.

82 The location of Beigu has generally been treated as an unsolvable mystery, but Jao Tsung-i 饒宗頤 suggested that it refers to Pugu 蒲姑, a.k.a. Bogu 薄姑 (located in modern Boxing 博興 county, Shandong), in the state of Qi. This is very plausible, particularly as Qu Yuan is said to have travelled on embassies to Qi, and the phonology is passable – Beigu is OC *bâkkâ, Bogu is OC *pɔkkâ. See Jao Tsung-i, *Chuci dili kao* 楚辭地理考, rpt. in *Rao Zongyi ershi shiji xueshu wenji* 饒宗頤二十世紀學術文集 (Taipei: Xin wenfeng chuban, 2003), 16: 103–5.

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	愁歎苦神	Melancholy sighs torment my spirit,
80	靈遙思兮	And my dream-soul yearns for what is far away –
	路遠處幽	The road is far and this place is dark,
	又無行媒兮	And I have not even a go-between –
	道思作頌	*My yearnings thus far I have made this orison,*
	聊以自救兮	Something that might save myself –
85	憂心不遂	My anxious heart cannot be satisfied,
	斯言誰告兮	*For to whom may I tell these words of mine? –*

In the translation of the poem, self-referential lines referring to its composition or performance are given in italics. Apart from the emotional or political content of the poem, another thematic strand is concerned expressly with its own production. It is in this light that the third part, the "Air" (C), can be better seen not as an interpolation or accidental insertion, but a self-conscious display of poetic virtuosity in accord with the explicit theme of expression.

The torrent of words so distinctly represented in "Unravelled Yearnings" made an impression on Wang Yi, who says in his comment after the poem:[83]

> In this piece [Qu Yuan] explains that the cause of his many sorrows is that his lord trusts in flattery and regards himself as a sage; he is dazzled before reputation and reality, blind to service and reward. Though the author himself is loyal and honest, there is nowhere he may go to make his plaint. So he repeats his words over and over, that he may relieve his sadness and yearning.
>
> 此章言己所以多憂者，以君信諛而自聖，眩於名實，昧於施報，己雖忠直，無所赴愬，故反復其詞，以泄憂思也。

This technique of repetition and restatement, *fan fu qi ci* 反復其詞, is essential to the effect of "Unravelled Yearnings". Already in the eleventh line of the poem the protagonist states: "I tie together my inner feelings to set forth in words (*ci*)". The poem is a project of interlacing different speeches and different forms of expression into a multipartite whole.

Section I presents the distress of the speaker who longs to unravel the anguish that afflicts him. The trope of entanglement is set forth clearly in the first stanza, as we have already discussed above. The term Lord Iris (*sun* 蓀), whose precise meaning is not entirely clear, and may have had some religious significance prior to the composition of these poems, occurs only five times in the *Chuci*: once in the Nine Songs, three times in this poem alone, and in the "Li sao" once.[84] The "Unravelled Yearnings" is a comprehensive statement of the Qu Yuan story, as these figures suggest. In section A_2, the hero begins to describe what he wants to say to Lord Iris, which seems to mark a second beginning for the poem, another opening statement. In section A_3 he reiterates the honesty and

83 *Chuci buzhu*, 4.141.

84 Okamura speculates that it represents a divinity to whom a shaman could offer complaint, in distinction to the gods with whom one consorts in the "Nine Songs". See "Soji bungaku ni okeru 'Shūshi' no ichi", 13.

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value of the message he would like to send. Then, before anything has happened besides hearing about the message, or the dialogue that the hero would like to take place, we have the "Lesser Song". The "Lesser Song" (B) repeats a line from A_2 (ll. 17, 43): "He scorned me from his excellence and goodness" 憍吾以其美好兮. The "Lesser Song" as a whole thus recapitulates the sense of the poem up to this point, recursively pointing back to an early point in the sequence. Is this "Lesser Song" the message the hero is preparing for his lord? It is at least a partial summation of the plaint, concluding with a comment on its own failure: "He contemns my words and will not hear" (l. 44).

The next section is an abrupt transition: the "Air" begins with the image of the noble bird in exile.[85] Throughout the second half of the poem we do not see explicit linguistic parallels to the first half. On the other hand, the bird is an allegorical representative of Qu Yuan, and the second half of the "Air" (section C_2) likewise presents an allegorical parallel of the earlier message, about the flight of the soul back to Ying, a flight in which the body and earth-bound soul of the hero cannot follow, so the whole "Air", section C, does echo sections A and B. It is like a compressed version of a summons to the soul, the shamanistic ritual that forms the content of two other *Chuci* poems. The significance of the bird may not be coincidental, since there is evidence both elsewhere in the *Chuci* and in excavated materials for a potent religious symbolism surrounding the phoenix, particularly as a symbol for the soul's journey after death.[86]

Finally the coda recapitulates this theme explicitly in the metre of the "Summons" poems, XXXX/XXXY, where Y is in this case the keyword *xi* 兮. Throughout this section the hero is wandering without a guide, roaming in a dark land without any go-between to help him find a master. The second half of "Unravelled Yearnings" thus elaborates on this theme of the lost soul (the *poète maudit*) in multiple interrelated forms. The poet represents himself as a bird, making a soul-journey like a shaman, his soul lost on the long road to Ying; and then again more explicitly in the "Summons" metre, describing the journey on which he "dithers and dallies, loiters and tarries" without direction. Then finally the voice of the poet himself reasserts itself, the maker of this song explaining its own purpose. Thus through the course of the poem we weave in and out, passing from different levels of concreteness, from the experience of the courtier, to literary symbols, to a spiritual journey of the soul, and back down again to the words themselves.

Even in these poems which are normally considered the more historical, autobiographical works of Qu Yuan, one cannot ignore the element of word-magic prevalent in the *Chuci.* Liu Xie 劉勰 (*c*. 465–*c*. 521) identifies the "Zhao hun" 招魂 (Summons to the soul) as a *zhuci* 祝辭 "invocation", and the "Nine Songs" and several other pieces in the *Chuci* clearly are based on this kind of model – a

85 Jao Tsung-i argues that the bird represents not Qu Yuan but King Huai (*Chuci dili kao*, 106–7). This seems possible, but only because the symbolic language of the *Chuci* is inherently ambiguous, with both courtier and sovereign being represented as a beautiful maiden. Given the ambiguity it is simpler to understand it as referring again to Qu Yuan, the main speaker throughout.

86 See Huang Linggeng 黃靈庚, *Chuci yu jianbo wenxian* 楚辭與簡帛文獻 (Beijing: Renmin wenxue, 2011), 85–6.

mode of speech used for communication between humans and spirits.[87] With this background of religious ritual in mind, it becomes much easier to appreciate the repetition and restatement of the "Unravelled Yearnings" or "Li sao", not as some accidental features of textual transmission or relics of oral tradition, but rather as intrinsic to their form. The point of prayer is not to communicate some particular message but to perform a ritual action, which can be repeated in the hope of greater effectiveness. The "Unravelled Yearnings" does not employ the motif of the spirit journey or as many mythological references as "Li sao", but it does refer to the shaman-heroes Peng and Xian, and an extended section of the "Air" describes the hero's situation in terms of the flight of the soul. The *Chuci* language and form may be adapted to the political situation of the courtier, but they retain much of the purposive context of the "Chu prayer".

It seems unlikely that the texts of any of the poems as we have them were actually performed in a ritual context, but this tradition certainly lies in the background of the *Chuci*. The "Unravelled Yearnings" is not just a single prayer repeated, but an arrangement of plaints and invocations that overlap and repeat certain themes, together giving a greater impression of amplitude than mere repetition could. The "Lesser Air", in particular, reinterprets the initial situation of the protagonist both allegorically and spiritually, transposing the same experience onto different levels of abstraction. The *ci* are not simply words, but focused messages addressed to the lord, in the manner of an invocation or supplication.

The "Coda" does not really conclude or sum up anything, but reads more like the prayer that we have been waiting for throughout the earlier part of the poem. The prayer concludes, inevitably, with a self-referential summary of the composition of the poem. But although one goal of its composition, or performance, was to ease the anxieties of the author/performer, the conclusion reveals that there is no addressee. The poem is an invocation of a superior being who is absent: "For to whom may I tell these words of mine" (l. 86). The only tangible achievement of the poet's complaint is awareness of its own futility. The poem is a soliloquy that contains multitudes, a strange loop whose purpose lies in its own unfolding.

Untying the knot

The proposition that these poems are well-crafted simulations of self-expression that represent the recursive form of self-reflection is not discordant with the content of "Unravelled Yearnings", in particular, with its self-referential repetitions of the phrase *chen ci* 陳辭, "set forth in words". Here *ci* is rich in implication, as has been shown by Lu Jui-ching 魯瑞菁, who argues that the "Li sao" exemplifies traditional *ci* genres in several overlapping respects: as political plaint directed at the sovereign, as religious prayer towards ancestral gods, and as binding

87 Fan Wenlan 范文瀾, *Wenxin diaolong zhu* 文心雕龍注 (Taipei: Xuehai chubanshe, 1991), 10.176. Hoshikawa Kiyotaka 星川清孝 argued along these lines that the *ci* in *Chuci* refers not so much to the language of Chu, or to the literary form as in the compound *cifu*, but rather to the genre of the prayer or invocation (*zhuci*). See Hoshikawa, *Soji no kenkyū* 楚辭の研究 (Tokyo: Yōtokusha, 1961), 24–35.

legal oath.[88] Yet Qu Yuan has adapted these traditions into an innovative lyrical form. The "Nine Avowals" frame political plaints within self-referential poetic forms that allow their audiences to participate in the original predicament of the Qu Yuan hero figure.

The layers of artifice that constitute the poems – think of the separate musical divisions of "Unravelled Yearnings", the prosopopoeia of "Encomium to the Tangerine", the extensive deployment of descriptive binomes throughout the sequence – make any attempt to tie their content closely to Qu Yuan's life a hazardous one. This is not so much because we do not know enough about the life (though we do not) as because the poems are telling us about more than one man's life, preferring archetype to experience; when has it ever not been the case that "The road is far and this place is dark, / And I have not even a go-between"? Thus the interpreter of *Chuci* needs to begin with the form and function of the text as it survives. Too much twentieth-century scholarship attempted to reconstruct the cultural prehistory of the text, finding the origins of the *Chuci* in shamanism, in the political sphere, in popular song, etc. This kind of scholarship treats the riddles of the texts like the Gordian knot, attempting to sever the majority of them and isolate one authentic kernel. The *Chuci* poems are compositely contrived from manifold materials, and the problem is not to sever their knots but to follow the internal logic of their hermeneutic spirals.

The pattern of the strange loop is by no means a conclusive reading even of the "Unravelled Yearnings", but rather a suggestive interpretation that can open our eyes to the total effect of the poems. The hero of "Li sao" or "Far Roaming" only roams far in the physical universe, and cannot be said to have transcended physical being, but there is at least some kind of consolation in the description of one's own entanglement, and a satisfaction in the effective crafting of one's *ci*. The tangled poetic forms of the "Nine Avowals" have a cumulative effect which seems to be part of their intended function. The speaker repeats his thoughts, reflects on them, resumes consideration of his plight from different perspectives, employing various analogies. This layered kind of structure, in practice, is one reason that the authorship of *Chuci* poems poses so many problems. They so often enact a kind of conscious reconsideration of the basic Qu Yuan situation that it is very easy to imagine that the author is not Qu Yuan but another poet, imaginatively sharing the plaints of Qu Yuan.

Consider, for instance, these lines from the very end of "Grieving at the Whirlwind", one of the pieces whose attribution to Qu Yuan seems particularly tenuous:[89]

88 Lu Jui-ching, *Fengjian shuqing yu shenhua yishi: Chuci wenxin lun* 諷諫抒情與神話儀式：楚辭文心論 (Taipei: Liren shuju, 2002), 3–62.

89 *Chuci buzhu* 4.161 (9/107–8). In fact this piece and "Regretting Past Days" were already singled out for scepticism in the Song dynasty. Wei Liaoweng 魏了翁 (1178–1237) questioned whether Qu Yuan could have praised Wu Zixu 伍子胥, as both these poems seems to do. See *Jingwai zachao* 經外雜鈔 (*Siku quanshu*), 2.16b–17a. In fact, though, it turns out that "Crossing the River" also seems to praise Wu Zixu. For an authoritative discussion concluding that this issue is orthogonal to the question of authorship, see Li Zhi 力之, "Wang Yi shi 'She Jiang' de 'Wuzi' wei 'Wuzi Xu' wu wu bian" 王逸釋〈涉江〉的「伍子」為「伍子胥」無誤辨, in *Chuci yu zhonggu wenxian kaoshuo* 楚辭與中古文獻考說 (Chengdu: Ba Shu shushe, 2005), 185–96.

驟諫君而不聽兮	Repeatedly I counsel my sovereign but he does not hear –
重任石之何益	Again I shoulder a stone but for what good?

This concluding couplet is problematic because *chong ren shi* 重任石, "to shoulder a stone again", can hardly be understood in the voice of Qu Yuan, since it would imply the improbable feat of drowning himself a second time. A variant reverses the order of the first two characters, which makes the phrase more easily placed in Qu Yuan's voice,[90] but here as so often, the *lectio difficilior* is more interesting: to drown along with a heavy stone *again* is indeed the question facing many of the poets who imitated Qu Yuan, but not Qu Yuan himself. Thus there is an easy transference, as simple as the transposition of two characters, between Qu Yuan and a later imitator.

If we take seriously the formal and semantic complexity of the poems, their multilayered structures, their loops and repetition and self-reference, then ultimately we can only conclude that their protagonist is not exactly Qu Yuan himself, but a simulation of Qu Yuan into which we can enter imaginatively by reading the poem. There is no way to free Qu Yuan from his entanglement with the world, but transmuting ethical and emotional bonds into formal and aesthetic ones is itself a kind of liberation.

90 *Ren shi* 任石 should be understood as a variant of *huai shi* 懷石, as in Sima Qian's description of Qu Yuan's suicide (*Shiji* 84.2490). Cf. Guo Pu 郭璞 (276–324), "Rhapsody on the Yangtze River" 江賦: "I grieve for Lingjun who shouldered a stone [to drown himself]" 悲靈君之任石 (*Wen xuan* 12.572).

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