
The *Mu Tianzi Zhuan* and King Mu Bronzes

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The *Mu tianzi zhuan* was unearthed in A.D. 279 from an ancient tomb (said to be that of King Xiang [Ai] of Wei) in Ji Commandery (present-day Jixian, Henan). It recounts the western travels of King Mu of Zhou and of his meeting with the Western Queen Mother, and counts as one of the most famous and important of all of China's unearthed texts. There has long been a debate as to the date and nature of the *Mu tianzi zhuan*'s composition: whether it was an annalistic account from the time of King Mu or a later recounting. Although in the twentieth century there was a general consensus that the text was written in the Warring States period and should count as the earliest short story in Chinese literature, nevertheless paleographers pointed out occasional contacts between the content of the text and bronze inscriptions from the time of King Mu. The clearest of these is the mention of Mao Ban, a figure known from the Western Zhou bronze inscription *Ban gui*. In this study, I examine three or four other names that appear in the text: Jing Li, Zhai Gong, Bi Ju and Feng Li, and argue that all of them also appear as important ministers to the king in recently discovered King Mu-period bronze inscriptions. Based on this, I suggest that the source of the *Mu tianzi zhuan* can be traced back to the Western Zhou period. How this source was transmitted to the Warring States period is still unclear and requires further study.

Keywords: Bronze inscriptions, King Mu of Zhou, *Mu Tianzi Zhuan*, Tsinghua bamboo strips

The *Mu tianzi zhuan* 穆天子傳 is one of the most famous and important texts among all of China's unearthed textual materials.¹ Describing the western journeys of the Zhou king Mu Wang 周穆王 (r. c. 956–918 B.C.) and especially his meeting with Xiwangmu 西王母 (Western Queen Mother), it was placed—together with numerous other texts—in a tomb in the Warring States-period state of Wei (in present-day Jixian 汲縣, Henan) early in the third century B.C. This tomb was then robbed in A.D. 279. Although the bamboo strips on which the texts were written sustained considerable damage, nevertheless a considerable portion of them was salvaged and sent to Luoyang 洛陽, the capital of the Western Jin dynasty. The emperor, Jin Wudi 晉武帝 (r. 265–289) ordered Xun Xu 荀勗 (d. 289), the head of the imperial library, and a committee of officials under him to edit these bamboo-strip texts. The *Mu tianzi zhuan* seems to have been the first of the texts to have been completed, extant editions containing a preface written by Xun Xu himself in A.D. 282, and providing a description of the editorial work done on the text.

The *Mu tianzi zhuan* quickly became known to scholars of the time; for instance, in his *Bo wu zhi* 博物志, Zhang Hua 張華 (230–300) used materials from it as historical evidence concerning the time of King Mu. Bibliographies in the standard histories of the Sui and Tang dynasties all classified the *Mu tianzi zhuan* as “*Qi ju zhu*” 起居注 (rising-and-sitting notes), implying that it was a sort of veritable record of King Mu's reign. However, with the advent of iconoclastic attitudes toward ancient history during the Qing dynasty, doubts began to be expressed regarding the historicity of the text, and in the *Siku quanshu* 四庫全書 the *Mu tianzi zhuan* was placed instead in the “Xiaoshuo lei” 小說類 (fiction category). The “Simplified Index” to this work said of the text:

It records events concerning King Mu of Zhou's western travels that are not seen in the classic literature and contains many discrepancies with the texts of King Mu's time, so that it seems to be the miscellaneous recording of contemporary rumors that

1 The present paper is the author's own translation of a paper originally written in Chinese, entitled “*Mu tianzi zhuan yu Mu Wang tongqi*” 穆天子傳與穆王銅器; I have endeavored to remain as faithful to the Chinese as possible without sacrificing proper English-language conventions.