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The Chinese Mosquito: A Literary Theme

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INTRODUCTION

The relationship between humans and mosquitos is a complicated and multi-faceted one. People across the world have developed forms of discourse in which humankind is represented as the acme of evolution and the most intelligent and noble of all species — but this flattering assessment is challenged by the presence of parasitic pests, of which the mosquito is one. In contrast to large carnivores such as leopards and tigers, which present a terrifying but rare threat, mosquitos are tiny, annoying — and ubiquitous.

Mosquitos have evolved to suck the blood of a vast number of different creatures, and they are found in all but the very coldest regions of the world, ensuring that, throughout history, virtually everyone has sooner or later experienced being bitten by one. The presence of a large number of mosquitos can render a particular locale, no matter how lovely, effectively uninhabitable. Furthermore, long before the importance of mosquitos as a vector for the transmission of various different kinds of disease was scientifically understood, areas in which mosquitos abounded were well known to be unhealthy.

Given the close relationship between human beings and mosquitos, it is not surprising that, over the course of two and a half millennia, Chinese literature has developed a large body of writings about these insects, in which they appear not only as pests but also as allegorical and metaphorical figures. It is these representations, in pre-imperial and imperial era literature, that are the subject of this paper.

There is an enormous amount written in Chinese about the mosquito, and therefore it is

impossible in this discussion to do more than provide a general survey. Furthermore, since the emphasis here is on literary representation, factual information (such as details about particular areas known to be infested and so on) preserved in local histories and gazetteers will not be considered. This study, instead, aims to reveal certain important trends in the development of the literary representation of the mosquito in pre-imperial and imperial era China. First I will offer a consideration of how mosquitos are represented in early philosophical texts. The richness and sophistication of the rhetoric found in Masters' Literature (*Zishu* 子書) makes this the golden age of representations of the mosquito in Chinese literature; no other later genre attempts such a varied discourse, in which this insect plays so wide a variety of roles.

Beginning in the early medieval period, writings about mosquitos essentially resolve into two main traditions: the realistic portrayal of home and landscape into which these noxious insects occasionally intrude, and an allegorical reading, in which mosquitos are used to represent harmful and socially undesirable individuals, in particular corrupt and slanderous government officials. Although this latter depiction is related to one strand of the discourse found in earlier philosophical texts, it is a significantly simpler and more straightforward form of representation than that found in the earliest literature on the mosquito. Finally, in the late medieval period, a further minor trend developed, in which the mosquito is explored as a symbol of eroticism, whereby bites inflicted on an attractive young woman are compared to assaults on her virginity.

By examining these different methods of representing the mosquito in literature, and how they developed over the course of many centuries, it is possible to explore the ways in which an unpleasant parasite is incorporated into the aesthetic vocabulary of Chinese culture. Understanding this process allows us to see these insects — and appreciate the writings produced about them — in a new light.

THE PHILOSOPHICAL MOSQUITO

Any study of Chinese literature about the mosquito must begin with a consideration of the complex nomenclature concerning this insect. The earliest thesaurus for the Chinese language, the *Erya* 爾雅 (Approaching Correctness), thought to have been compiled in the third century BCE, does not record the nomenclature used for the adult insect, but it does include two terms for mosquito larvae: *yuan* 蜃

and *xuan* 蠖 (Li Xueqin 2001, 331 [“Shiyu” 釋魚]). The earliest dictionary, the *Shuowen jiezi* 說文解字 (Explaining Graphs and Analyzing Characters), compiled by Xu Shen 許慎 (c. 58 – c. 147 CE) and presented to the throne in 121 CE, includes a number of characters that designate the adult mosquito; some names are indicated as regional terms, while others may originally have denominated various species of mosquitos, developed by those who lived in sufficiently close proximity to be able to distinguish them. The most common term for mosquito in the Han dynasty seems to have been *wen* 蚊 (occasionally also given in the variant form *wen* 蠃); however, the *Shuowen jiezi* indicates that *rui* 孺 was also used to mean mosquito in the language of the states of Qin and Jin (located in present-day Shaanxi and Shanxi provinces respectively), while *wen* 蠃 was the term for mosquito used in Chu, in southern China (Duan Yucai 2009, 1163, 1174–1175 [“Chongbu” 蟲部]). Given that there are thousands of species of mosquitos around the world, several hundred of which are native to China, it is not surprising that a complex nomenclature was developed from a very early stage to describe them.¹ Throughout the imperial era, there is evidence that a nationally and regionally diverse system of nomenclature continued to develop to describe mosquitos.² Today these distinctions have all been elided by the establishment of a common nomenclature: *jiejue* 孑孓 is the usual term for the mosquito larva, while *wenzi* 蚊子 designates the mosquito in modern Chinese. However, in the literary works considered in this paper, the older and richer vocabulary of terms for this insect still applies.

In early Chinese philosophical texts, the image of the mosquito is used in many different ways to create a highly sophisticated discourse. The earliest surviving reference to the mosquito appears to be that preserved in the *Xunzi* 荀子. In the chapter entitled “Jiebi” 解蔽 (Extrication from Obstacles),

¹ A pioneering work in the field identified one hundred species of mosquito in China (Feng 1938A; Feng 1938B). The history of early modern research on mosquitos is described in Chow (1950). Today, approximately 390 individual species have been described; it is thought, however, that this is an underestimate of the total number, as new mosquito varieties are frequently recognized through DNA testing (Wang et al. 2012).

² For example, the term *mo* 蟆, a character that normally refers to a toad (*ma* 蟆), was used during the Tang dynasty to designate a small, black variety of mosquito. Today, this name is probably best known because it appears in the title of a series of three poems, with a preface glossing the term, by Yuan Zhen 元稹 (779–831), entitled “Mozi” 蟆子 (The Mosquito) (Dai Qin 2000, 42).

there is a section in which the philosopher evaluates the intellectual attainments of a man named Ji 皃, who achieved some level of enlightenment but at the cost of eliminating all distractions. Among the problems featured in this discussion is Ji's inability to concentrate when he hears the sound of mosquitos. Master Xun criticizes this, for it means that Ji's accomplishments are achieved artificially, by cutting himself off from normal interactions with the rest of the world. In this argument, a sage is marked out by his ability to maintain his line of thought, in spite of every temptation or irritation to be found in his mundane surroundings. The mosquito seems to be used here as a metaphor for the annoyances of everyday life:

Living amidst the caves, there was a man and his name was Ji. He was good at guessing-games because he liked to think things over. But when the desires of his eyes or ears were aroused, it would defeat his ratiocination; when the sounds of mosquitos or horseflies were heard, it would ruin his cogitations.³ Therefore he avoided the desires of his eyes and ears, and kept far away from the sounds of mosquitos and horseflies, for it was only by living in seclusion and thinking quietly that he was able to reach a conclusion... Avoiding the desires of ears and eyes can be called being able to control oneself, but not proper ratiocination. If hearing the sound of mosquitos and horseflies can ruin one's concentration, then this can be called being in danger; it cannot be called true [self] perfection. (Wang Xianqian 2008, 402–403)⁴

空石之中有人焉，其名曰皃。其為人也，善射以好思。耳目之欲接，則敗其思；蚊蠹之聲聞，則挫其精。是以闢耳目之欲，而遠蚊虻之聲，閑居靜思則通... 闢耳目之欲，可謂自彊矣，未及思也。蚊蠹之聲聞則挫其精，可謂危矣；未可謂微也。

³ Mosquitos are noted for the whining sound produced by their wings during flight: this is not accidental, but the means by which they communicate (Arthur et al. 2014). The ears of both mosquitos and humans have the ability to amplify this noise, though the mechanism by which this is achieved is not understood (Göpfert and Robert 2006; Fudge 2007).

⁴ All translations are by the author.

The *Xunzi* passage is frequently quoted in later writings about mosquitos, but it is not particularly influential in terms of its theme, since very few imperial era literati writers adopted the mosquito to symbolize day-to-day distractions. A much greater impact can be seen from those early philosophical texts that use the mosquito to criticize human behavior. In the “Yuan Qian” 淵騫 chapter of the *Fayan* 法言 (Exemplary Sayings), there is an interesting discussion of various different kinds of individuals, in which they are compared to pests and parasites for the dangerous effect they have on the country:

“[How would you describe] harsh officials?” [Yang Xiong 楊雄 (53 BCE – 18 CE) said: “They are tigers! Tigers! But with the addition of horns and wings.” “[How would you describe] merchants?” He said: “Mosquitos!” He continued: “They have sucked the blood of three thousand countries dry. If they had but plucked herbs to eat, drank only water, and worn coarse clothing, would they not die without regrets?” (Wang Rongbao 1987, 460)⁵

“酷吏?” 曰：“虎哉! 虎哉! 角而翼者也。” “貨殖?” 曰：“蚊。” 曰：“血國三千，使捋疏，飲水，褐博。沒齒無愁也?”

In this section of the *Fayan*, the author taps into a long tradition of comparing undesirable individuals of one kind or another to animals or insects, and creates a comparison that would continue to appear in Chinese literature for millennia.⁶ The earliest example of this kind of rhetoric is probably the song entitled “Qingying” 青蠅 (Blue Flies), which is preserved in the *Shijing* 詩經 (Book of Songs), in which slanderers and sycophants are compared to flies: noxious insects that cause

⁵ Nylan (2013, 196) provides an alternative translation and explication of this passage.

⁶ For example, in “Bishachu bi wen shi” 碧紗櫺避蚊詩 (A Poem on Avoiding Mosquitos Inside My Green Gauze Net) by Yuan Mei 袁枚 (1719–1797), the poet says: “Mosquitos can be compared to bandits/ When the sun sinks, they become brave./ They gather with glad shrieks, their sound filling the sky./ One scream resounds more than a hundred voices./ It is as if they are hurrying to a bustling market,/ Contemplating raiding and plunder” (蚊虻疑賊比，日落膽盡壯。嘯聚聲蔽天，一呼竟百唱。如赴闐闐市，商謀抄掠狀) (Wang Yingzhi et al. 1993, 497).

distress and irritation (Kong 1999, 876).⁷ In Eastern Zhou dynasty philosophical texts, there are many instances of this kind of usage. For example, in the *Yanzi chunqiu* 晏子春秋 (Spring and Autumn Annals of Master Yan), the ruler's personal advisors are compared to rats, and government officials to fierce dogs — both of which serve to endanger the position of the ruler by destroying the substance of the state in the first instance, and preventing good men from gaining the government positions that they deserve in the second (Wu Zeyu 1962, 196–197 [“Neiwen shang” 內問上]). Likewise, in the *Han Feizi* 韓非子, the “Wudu” 五蠹 (Five Vermin) chapter uses the image of destructive wood-boring grubs to criticize various kinds of people he considered to be endangering the state (Chen Qiyu 1958, 1040–1079).⁸ This kind of metaphor continued to be very popular: in one of the very last works of Masters' Literature, the *Jinlouzi* 金樓子 (Book of the Master of the Golden Tower), a text produced by Xiao Yi, Emperor Yuan of the Liang dynasty 梁元帝蕭暉 (r. 553–555), mosquitos are again used to analyze and criticize the activities of people. In this particular tale, the personalities of people and mosquitos are indistinguishable:

Lord Huan of Qi (r. 685–643 BCE) was lying down resting at the Boqin [Tower], when he said to Guan Zhong: “My country is rich and my people numerous, so there is nothing much for me to worry about there. However, when even one creature has difficulties in surviving, I am worried on its behalf. Now the mosquitos are whining, for they are hungry and cannot be fed, and I find this concerning.” Then he opened up the curtains of green silk gauze, and allowed the mosquitos to enter. There were some mosquitos with a sense of propriety, who withdrew without eating from the ruler's flesh; there were some mosquitos that were easily satisfied, and hence they withdrew

⁷ The first verse of this song describes the danger to the ruler himself: “They buzz about, the blue flies,/ Alighting on the fences./ May our peaceful and happy lord,/ Never believe in slanderous speeches.” (營營青蠅, 止于樊. 豈弟君子, 無信讒言). The second verse goes on to stress the damage inflicted on the state by unscrupulous individuals: “They buzz about, the blue flies,/ Alighting on the jujubes./ The slanderers lie and scheme,/ Throwing the whole country into civil war.” (營營青蠅, 止于棘. 讒人罔機, 交亂四國).

⁸ The *Zuozhuan* 左傳 (Zuo's Tradition) records a related expression: *guo zhi du* 國之蠹 (vermin of the state) (Yang Bojun 1981, 1065 [Xiang 22]).

after biting the lord; and there were some mosquitos that were never satisfied, and which sucked and sucked until they were full, and their stomachs were bursting.⁹ The lord said: “Ah! Human nature is just the same.” (Chen Zhiping and Xiong Qingyuan 2014, 643 [“Liyang shang” 立言上])

齊桓公臥於柏寢，謂仲父曰：“吾國富民殷，無餘憂矣。一物失所，寡人猶為之悒悒。今白鳥營營，饑而未飽，寡人憂之。”因開翠紗之幃，進蚊子焉。其蚊有知禮者，不食公之肉而退；其蚊有知足者，齧公而退；其蚊有不知足者，遂長嘯短吸而食之，及其飽也，腹腸為之破潰。公曰：“嗟乎，民生亦猶是。”

A number of philosophical texts use the mosquito in imagery predicated upon its small size and fundamental fragility. The simplest of these analogies is that found in the “Tang wen” 湯問 (Tang asked) chapter of the *Liezi* 列子, which includes a description of an insect called *jiaoming* 焦螟.¹⁰ This creature is said to live in swarms and to nest upon the eyelashes of mosquitos, flying back and forth without the mosquito host’s even noticing its presence. Given that the mosquito frequently appears in Eastern Zhou and early imperial era rhetoric as the exemplar of a small, fundamentally powerless, and extremely delicate creature, the legendary *jiaoming* can thus be used to represent the very tiniest of living beings (Yang Bojun 1985, 157).¹¹ At the same time, since only a sage who has undergone careful preparations for the experience can see or hear the *jiaoming*, these insects can also be used to

⁹ The author of this passage seems to be aware of the practice of many mosquito species of excreting bloody liquid while feeding, in order to consume more blood and extract the solid nutrients (Briegel and Rezzonico 1985). It is thought that this allows the mosquito to avoid stress from overheating (Lahondère and Lazzari 2012). However, this behavior makes the mosquito an apt allegory for an insatiably greedy person.

¹⁰ The composition of the present transmitted text of the *Liezi* is thought to have occurred in the third century CE (Graham 1960–1961). However, the text does contain a number of stories with textual parallels recorded centuries earlier, indicating that it incorporates some significantly older material.

¹¹ Graham (1990, 98–99) includes a translation of this passage. This legendary creature also became a literary trope in its own right, as can be seen from writings such as the “Jiaoming chao wenjie fu” 焦螟巢蟲睫賦 (Rhapsody on the Jiaoming, Which Nests on the Eyelashes of Mosquitos) by Wang Qi 王榮 (jinshi 862) (Chen Yuanlong et al. 1986, 113.36b–37b).

represent the minute workings of the world to which ordinary people are insensitive.¹² The smallness and fragility of mosquitos is remarked upon in a much earlier text, the “Tianquan” 天權 (Heavenly Might) chapter of the *Heguanzi* 鶴冠子 (Book of the Pheasant Cap Master).¹³ In this text, the ability of the insect to turn these qualities to its advantage is used to analyze the concept of strategic advantage in battle:

When a mosquito or horsefly drops into a gulf a thousand *ren* deep, it begins to flap its wings and thus preserves its form; but when a cow or horse falls into it, then it is crushed into a shapeless mass. If you look at it from this point of view, there are times when being large is inconvenient, and being heavy results in deep wounds. Thus, soldiers face death in order that they might survive, and they go into danger in order to find safety. (Zhou Ziyi 1966–1973, 105–106)

夫蚊蚩墜乎千仞之谿,乃始翱翔而成其容;牛馬墜焉,碎而無形.由是觀之,則大者不便,重者創深.兵者涉死而取生,陵危而取安.

In the “Qiushui” 秋水 (Autumn Floods) chapter of the *Zhuangzi* 莊子 (Book of Master Zhuang), an ignorant and bigoted individual attempting to understand the master’s sayings is compared to asking a mosquito to carry a mountain on its back (*shi wen fu shan* 使蚊負山) (Guo Qingfan 2004, 601). The impossibility of such a tiny insect being able to support such a crushing weight provides a powerful analogy for the problems of comprehending the subtleties of the works of this philosopher.¹⁴ Meanwhile, in the “Wushi” 物勢 (The Strategic Advantage of Things) chapter of the

¹² Because of this, *jiaoming* occasionally appear in later literature in praising persons of exceptional ability — this is the case in the poem “Zeng shayi daoshi” 贈莎衣道士 (Bestowed upon a Daoist in a Raincoat) by Shi Jianwu 施肩吾 (d. 861), in which he praises the other man’s qualities (Peng Dingqiu et al. 1986, 539).

¹³ Defoort (1997, 13–30) gives a detailed discussion of the dating of this text, placing its composition in the period 209–202 BCE.

¹⁴ A similar idea is also found in the “Tianyun” 天運 (Movements of the Heavens) chapter of the *Zhuangzi*, where the painful physical experience of being bitten by mosquitos is compared to the difficult mental experience of trying to

Lunheng 論衡 (Doctrines Weighed), the tiny mosquito is used to explain the nature of power, whereby the small can unite to successfully attack the large:

The strength of a mosquito or horsefly is far from that of an ox or a horse, but when oxen and horses are surrounded by mosquitos and horseflies, they have the strategic advantage. (Huang Hui 1990, 155)¹⁵

蚊虻之力, 不如牛馬, 牛馬困於蚊虻, 蚊虻乃有勢也。

Mosquitos also appear in philosophical discussions of speciesism: the determination to ascribe more value to some life-forms than others.¹⁶ While ancient Chinese philosophical texts record strong pressures within contemporary thought to take a highly utilitarian view of other beings, there is also evidence of resistance to this way of thinking. A number of versions of the classic refutation of speciesism are recorded in early Chinese philosophical texts; the following example is derived from the “Shuofu” 說符 (Explaining Conjunctions) chapter of the *Liezi*. Here, the interlocutors are based in the state of Qi: one is a member of the Tian 田 family, which usurped the title of marquis in 379 BCE,

comprehend the Confucian concepts of *ren* 仁 (benevolence) and *yi* 義 (justice) (Guo Qingfan 2004, 522). However, it should be noted that this comparison goes further, because this text is highly critical of the Confucian application of *ren* and *yi*. Hence, both the experience of being bitten by a mosquito and trying to understand Confucian principles is portrayed as a pointless nuisance, uncomfortable and ultimately profitless to anyone.

¹⁵ The situation in which a large number of small creatures combine to dominate a small number of large ones is encapsulated in the aphorism recorded in a number of ancient Chinese texts: “Beetles and boring grubs can bring down pillars and beams; mosquitos and horseflies can stampede cattle and sheep” (*duyuan pu zhuliang, wenmeng zou niuyang* 蠹蝨仆柱梁, 蚊蠹走牛羊) (Xiang Zonglu 1987, 390–391 [“Tancong” 談叢]; He Ning 2006, 1283 [“Renxian xun” 人間訓]).

¹⁶ The term speciesism was coined in Singer 1975. In Judeo-Christian thought, other living creatures are frequently described as having been placed on earth to be used by humankind (Linzey 2016; Hobgood-Oster 2008; Gilhus 2006). The lack of such religiously sanctioned concepts in China is noted in Sterckx 2002 (73–76). However, some Chinese texts do nevertheless argue that mankind is intrinsically superior to other creatures: “Of all the creatures in the world, humankind is the most noble” (*Tiandi zhi xing, ren wei gui* 天地之性人為貴) (Li Longji and Xing Hao 1999, 28).

the other is a child from the highly distinguished Bao 鮑 family, who served as hereditary ministers in this state for many centuries:¹⁷

Lord Tian of Qi was holding a banquet in the courtyard, and he invited one thousand guests. Among those who attended, there was one who presented fish and geese. When Lord Tian saw this, he sighed and said: “Heaven is very generous to mankind! It has planted the five grains and created fish and fowl, in order that we may make use of them.” The massed guests chimed in to agree like an echo. There was a twelve-year-old son of the Bao family, who was waiting to one side. He now stepped forward and said: “It is not as you, sir, have said. The myriad creatures of Heaven and Earth are living beings just like us. These beings are not intrinsically noble or base: it is just that those who are cleverer or stronger can control [those who are stupider or weaker]. They take it in turns to eat each other — it is not that one was created for the sake of the other. Mankind eats those creatures which can be eaten, this does not mean that Heaven originally created them for us! Furthermore mosquitos bite our skin, tigers and wolves eat our flesh: does that mean that Heaven originally created us for the mosquitos, or so that tigers and wolves can have food?” (Yang 1985, 269–270)

齊田氏祖於庭，食客千人。中坐有獻魚鴈者。田氏視之，乃歎曰：“天之於民厚矣！殖五穀，生魚鳥，以為之用。”眾客和之如響。鮑氏之子年十二，預於次。進曰：“不如君言。天地萬物，與我並生類也。類无貴賤，徒以小大智力而相制。迭相食；非相為而生之。人取可食者而食之，豈天本為人生之？且蚊蚋嚼膚，虎狼食肉，非天本為蚊蚋生人，虎狼生肉者哉？”

¹⁷ Alternatively, in the version of this story found in the *Kong Congzi* 孔叢子 (Book of Master Kong Cong), it is Ji Yan 季彥 who takes the position that animals and plants are placed on this earth to be used by humans, and Lord Liu 劉公 rebuts this (Song Xian 1988, 360–361 [“Lian Congzi xia” 連叢子下]).

The final use of the image of the mosquito in early Chinese philosophical literature is also perhaps the most intrinsically controversial. There are a number of texts in which this creature is used to express contempt for conventional values. This kind of discourse seems to be a feature of Daoist texts, for it is found in both the *Zhuangzi* and the *Huainanzi*. The former text, in the chapter entitled "Yuyan" 寓言 (Metaphorical Language), contains an indictment of a government official who is unable to free himself from the shackles of a way of thinking that values the salary he receives above any personal cultivation:

Zengzi twice held government office and twice he transformed his thinking. He said: "I took office when my parents were still alive; [my salary] was three *fu* and I was happy. Later on I took office [a second time], and [my salary] was three thousand *zhong*, but I could not share it, so I was unhappy." His disciples asked Confucius: "Can a person like [Zengzi] be said to be free from entanglement?" He said: "He is still entangled. If he were not entangled, would he be sad? He would look upon three *fu* or three thousand *zhong* as if it were a stork or a mosquito passing in front of him." (Guo Qingfan 2004, 954-955)

曾子再仕而心再化，曰：“吾及親仕，三釜而心樂。後仕，三千鍾而不泊，吾心悲。”弟子問於仲尼曰：“若參者，可謂無所縣其罪乎？”曰：“既已縣矣。夫無所縣者，可以有哀乎？彼視三釜，三千鍾，如觀雀蚊虻相過乎前也。”

Very much the same kind of concept is expressed in the *Huainanzi*. However, where the *Zhuangzi* compares receiving a government salary to an encounter with a stork (alien but possibly pleasing) or a mosquito (alien and definitely unpleasant), the *Huainanzi* compares the judgment of society as a whole, whether favorable or unfavorable, to an interaction with mosquitos or other blood-sucking insects. In this particular instance, the text seems to be arguing that *any* expression of praise or blame on the part of other people is going to be unpleasant and damaging for the individual, even if only temporarily:

The significance of nobility and baseness to them,
 Is like the brief passing of a swift breeze.
 The impact of praise and blame upon themselves,
 Is like an encounter with mosquitos or horseflies.¹⁸

貴賤之於身也
 猶條風之時麗也
 毀譽之於己
 猶蚊虻之一過也

—HE NING 2006, 111 [“CHUZHEN” 俶真]

Throughout early philosophical texts, mosquitos play a wide variety of roles. Though generally acknowledged to be unpleasant creatures, which it would be best not to encounter, they also appear in other contexts: mosquitos are accorded a special rhetorical position in texts where they appear as fragile and delicate insects, endlessly being tasked with things beyond their power. Some of these tasks they are able to perform triumphantly, by banding together into a swarm, or by turning their weightlessness and weakness into a source of strength, but in other cases they are destroyed. Additionally, they represent a broad class of petty irritations and minor distractions — mosquitos can stand for the most annoying aspects of day-to-day life. Thus, in philosophical literature, mosquitos consistently represent more than an emblem of parasitism, and they perform a much wider range of functions than is seen in later imperial era literature.

THE MOSQUITO IN RHAPSODY

The earliest surviving rhapsody on a mosquito appears to be the eponymous “Wen fu” 蚊賦, composed by Fu Xuan 傅選 (dates unknown) in the Jin dynasty. In this short piece, written in a highly realistic mode, mosquitos are represented as a veritable plague: the poet concentrates upon the horror of how these vicious creatures torment people for months at a time, massing in vast numbers to fall upon anyone unlucky enough to cross their paths, biting without mercy (Fan Zhihui and Wu Guoqiang 2011). The verisimilitude found in this rhapsody is in stark contrast with the later tradition of writing on the mosquito in this genre, where political allegories predominate. Most unusually, this poem ends with an couplet expressing concern about the economic and social costs of mosquito infestations, which affect the most basic means of production: men who farm and women who weave.

¹⁸ Here I am following Major et al. (2010, 91), in laying out this passage as verse.

Although the importance of these insects in the transmission of many life-threatening diseases was not recognized until much later, the connection between places where mosquitos lived in large numbers and a significant adverse impact upon human health was well understood from a very early stage. In spite of this, very little literature about the mosquito expresses any concern about this issue. Instead, as will be considered in more detail below, imperial era literature on the economic costs of being bitten by mosquitos tends to focus exclusively on this as an issue of inequality: rich people could afford to buy a wide range of products to protect themselves from attacks by insects, ranging from mosquito repellent spice-mixes to protective nets, but such products were too expensive for the poor. As a result, the miseries of poverty would be exacerbated by living under constant attack by mosquitos, with all the concomitant problems. Fu Xuan’s rhapsody reads:

Where water is shallow and grass is sparse	水與草其漸茹
It gives rise to this horror: the mosquito [is born]. ¹⁹	育茲孽而蚊[生]
Their mouths are as fine as an autumn hair;	雋味銳於秋毫
But stab as hard as sharp awls.	刺鋸利於芒錐
They do not lay eggs, or give birth, but are born by transformation,	無胎卵而化孕生
These creatures can then spread their wings and fly.	博物翼而能飛
At the beginning of summer they rise up.	肇孟夏以明起
At the end of autumn, they still have not disappeared.	迄季秋而不衰
They gather in clouds; countlessy,	眾繁熾而無數
Grouped together, they whine; thunderously. ²⁰	動群聲而成雷

¹⁹ The earliest version of the text of this rhapsody is that preserved in the *Yiwen leiju* 藝文類聚 (A Classified Collection of Quotations from Literature). In Wang Shaoying’s 王紹楹 annotations, it is suggested that the missing last character from this line is *sheng* 生 (to be born); this single character has been displaced to the third line below: *wu tailuan er hua yun sheng* 無胎卵而化孕生 (Ouyang Xun 1999, 97.1683). However, transposing this particular character destroys the rhyme-scheme. In this rhapsody, every second line rhymes: *zhui* 錐 (tsui), *fei* 飛 (pui), *shuai* 衰 (sui), *lei* 雷 (luai), *ji* 飢 (kii) and *ji* 機 (kii) — the reconstructed early medieval pronunciation is derived from Schuessler 2009 (293, 288, 224, 294, 287, and 286). The character *sheng* 生 (ʃeŋ) does not fit this pattern at all.

Their way of life is one of great cruelty	肆慘毒於有生
For they eat flesh to assuage their hunger.	乃殮膚體以療飢
They injure the farmers at work in their fields;	妨農功於南畝
They hurt women weavers as they labor at their looms. ²¹	廢女工於杼機
—OUYANG XUN 1999, 97.1683	

This Jin dynasty rhapsody is a unique early example of a prestigious literary genre being used to commemorate the mosquito. Using a highly valued poetic form to discuss a noxious insect seems to have been considered exceptionally challenging, and hence this genre simply was not used again in writings about the mosquito until many centuries after this first attempt. There are four surviving rhapsodies about mosquitos written in the course of the Song dynasty — the “Ruizi fu” 蚋子賦 (Rhapsody on a Mosquito) by Wang Zhou 王周 (*jinsshi* 1012); the “Zhuwen fu” 誅蚊賦 (Rhapsody on Killing Mosquitos) by Yu Yunwen 虞允文 (1110–1174); the “Wen fu” 蚊賦 (Rhapsody on Mosquitos) by Wang Mai 王邁 (*jinsshi* 1217); and the “Jiwen fu” 嫉蚊賦 (Rhapsody on Hating Mosquitos) by Yao Mian 姚勉 (1216–1262) (Chen Yuanlong 1986, 140.10a–11a; Zeng Zaozhuang 2006, 207.3–5, and 351.277–278; Ma Jigao 2014, 3744).²² By this time, the allegorical use of the image of the mosquito was well-established; these poems use the insect to criticize the ills of contemporary society, in particular the depredations inflicted by members of the ruling elite: blood-suckers at court, corrupt officials, and

20 The locus classicus of the conceit that the whine of mosquitos can resound like thunder is the *Hanshu* 漢書 (History of the Han Dynasty). In this famous passage, Liu Sheng, king of Zhongshan 中山王劉勝 (d. 113 BCE), was complaining of the way in which court officials secretly plotted to trump up charges against members of the imperial family, who found it very difficult to defend themselves against slanderous lies. In a speech addressed to his half-brother, Emperor Wu of the Han dynasty 漢武帝 (r. 142–87 BCE), the king frequently returned to the metaphor of the mosquito (Ban Gu 1962, 53.2423).

21 The interpretation that *nügong* 女工 — literally “women’s work” — refers specifically to women weavers is derived from a number of early sources (Ban Gu 1962, 28B.1660; Wang Liqi 1996, 4–5 [“Benyi” 本議]). Chin (2014, 193–213) provides a detailed discussion of the normative nature of weaving as women’s work, and its economic importance in the early imperial era.

22 Wang Zhou was frequently incorrectly said to have lived during the Tang dynasty, and hence his writings were conventionally incorporated in anthologies of Tang literature.

those who slander others (Ma Jigao 1987, 577).²³ In this way, an unacceptable subject is rendered palatable, for these rhapsodies are political writings, exploring challenging issues in social values.

After the fall of the Southern Song dynasty, this topic seems to have fallen out of favor again, and does not reappear until the late Ming dynasty, when a further group of rhapsodies was produced, of which approximately thirty have been transmitted to the present day, again with a strong political subtext. These include the “Wen fu” 蚊賦 (Rhapsody on Mosquitos) by Huang Shengzeng 黃省曾 (1496–1546); the “Wen fu” 蚊賦 by Qian Wei 錢薇 (1502–1554); the “Zengwen fu” 憎蚊賦 (Rhapsody on Hating Mosquitos) by Chen Jiru 陳繼儒 (1558–1639); and the “Wen fu” 蠡賦 by Fu Zhanheng 傅占衡 (1606–1660) (Chen Yuanlong 1986, *buyi* 補遺 17.19a–20a; *buyi* 17.17a–19a; *buyi* 17.20a–21b; and 140.8a–10a).²⁴ This subject then seems to have dropped out of popularity again, and does not reappear in Qing dynasty literature.

Only two of the many Ming dynasty rhapsodies on the mosquito will be considered in detail here: the pair composed by Yang Shen 楊慎 (1488–1599). The first of these, entitled simply “Wen fu” 蚊賦, uses a very archaic rhapsodic form. The very earliest examples of this genre of literature are the five riddle rhapsodies found in the *Xunzi* (Wang Xianqian 2008, 472–484 [“Fu” 賦]).²⁵ Yang Shen’s first rhapsody on the mosquito begins with a description of the creature, which forms a riddle that the reader (addressed respectfully as *gongzi* 公子) is apparently unable to interpret. The same topic is then the subject of three further riddles, proposed first by three personifications of divination methods — *Lingshi* 靈蓍 (Milfoil), *Yuwa* 玉瓦 (Crack), and then finally by *Shifu* 射覆 (Guessing-Game).²⁶ The form of this rhapsody references a story preserved in the *Taiping guangji* 太平廣記

23 Liu Pei (2015, 145–146) attempts to specifically link the production of a number of Southern Song rhapsodies on mosquitos with the political problems engendered by the government of Qin Gui 秦檜 (1090–1155); however, given that the precise dating of these pieces is not known, any connection with criticism of an individual government official can only be speculative.

24 Zou Xiaoxia (2003) provides a discussion of these rhapsodies in the context of contemporary satirical writings.

25 The relationship between Yang Shen’s rhapsody and the *Xunzi* is discussed in Pu Xian (2002, *xia* 下.192).

26 *Lingshi* — literally “numinous milfoil” — are the sticks used in *Yijing* 易經 (Book of Changes) divination. In the case of Crack, according to the *Zhouli* 周禮 (Rituals of the Zhou), there were a variety of different types of crack in oracle bones, including “jade cracks” (*yuzhao* 玉兆) and “tile cracks” (*wazhao* 瓦兆). Here, the term translated as “Crack” literally means

(Extensive Records of the Taiping Reign-Era, 976–983) in which the famous Han dynasty court jester, Dongfang Shuo 東方朔 (c. 160 – c. 93 BCE), answers a riddle on the subject of the mosquito set during one such guessing-game (Li Fang 1986, 174.1292):

There is a creature like this: ²⁷	有物于此
Gestated by the southern Tian-bird, it is called <i>bainiao</i> . ²⁸	孕于丹鷓, 氏于白鳥
Nurtured in Zhuling, it flourishes in lush grass.	育于朱陵, 殷于豐草
Flying about, it tries to show off	翩翩以作狀
Its whining is very palpable.	藹藹以成象
When it is light, it hides;	昭昭以相避
But once it is dark, these creatures congregate again.	以相向
Even in palaces, they can set up their camp, ²⁹	閣閣椽椽, 據以為營
In elegant surroundings, it is famous for its depredations.	郁郁彬彬, 竊以為名

“jade and tile,” but is intended as a reference to oracle bone divination — a highly prestigious but very mysterious form of fortune-telling (Zheng Xuan and Jia Gongyan, 1999, 635 [“Chunguan” 春官. “Taibu” 太卜]). Hence in the riddle proposed by Crack, the language is extremely abstruse. *Shifu*, here translated as “guessing-game,” was a practice that could also be used in divination (Ban Gu 1962, 65.2843). The use of this term strongly links this rhapsody with the *Xunzi*, for Ji, the clever man distracted by mosquitos, was also good at this game.

²⁷ The three riddles on things given in the *Xunzi* all begin with exactly this phrase.

²⁸ According to legend, the Tian-bird, also known as a *wenmuniao* 蚊母鳥 (mosquito-bearing bird), spits mosquitos from its beak. In medieval literature, foul creatures of this kind were said to inhabit remote areas in southern China, adding greatly to the unpleasantness of these hot and swampy regions; see for example Guo Pu's 郭璞 (276–324) commentary on the *Erya* (Li Xueqin 2001, 352 [“Shiniao” 釋鳥]). The Tian-bird is today often understood to refer to the nightjar, which is in fact a predator of mosquitos. *Bainiao* is given as a synonym for the mosquito in a number of ancient texts, including the *Da Dai Liji* 大戴禮記 (Mr. Dai Senior's Record of Ritual) and the *Jinlouzi* (Wang Pinzhen 2008, 43 [“Xia xiaozheng” 夏小正]; Chen Zhiping and Xiong Qingyuan 2014, 643 [“Liyan shang”]).

²⁹ The term *gege zhuozhuo* 閣閣椽椽 here seems to refer to the description given in the *Shijing* song “Sigan” 斯干 (This Stream), which records the construction of a palace for the ruler. Ironically, the *Shijing* song specifies that birds and rats will find nowhere to live within its precincts, hence using this term to describe the abode of mosquitos shows the ubiquity of these unpleasant creatures and the impossibility of expelling them (Kong Yingda 1999, 685 [“Sigan”]).

In drizzle, or on rainy days, it forms a thunderous chorus	霖霖眩雨豐隆混聲
Young girls suffer, fine men have their concentration ruined.	貞女棄骸, 壯士挫精
If you do not know what it is, you can divine it with Milfoil.	公子不知, 筮諸靈蓍
Milfoil said:	靈蓍曰:
“These needle-like mouths are sharp enough to pierce the skin:	“針之喙, 嚼膚之利:
They strike during the night, with shrieks of communal delight	利在三宵, 羣嬉羣囂
Though drunk on blood they do not let [their victims] go;	醉血不醒
So they die in a moment, with a blow from the hand.”	疾斃于掌戟.”
Milfoil’s riddle was simple, so he summoned Crack.	蓍頌喻寡, 徵諸玉瓦
Crack said:	玉瓦曰:
“It is the food of the flittermouse, its home is in rushes and reeds, ³⁰	“仙鼠聚糧, 萑葦之鄉
Lying in wait to attack, sharp barbs are arrayed.	伏鼈攸戕, 利距森張
But no matter how it flourishes, it cannot withstand boreal winds.”	何彼皇皇, 不見肅霜.”
Crack’s words were hard to understand, so inquiries were made of Guessing-Game.	瓦辭難讀, 訊諸射覆
Grandee Guessing-Game said:	射覆大夫曰:
“Gathering in the firelight, delighting in the lamps	“烟火其屯, 鐙燭其喜
The <i>jiaoming</i> makes its nest here; midges are its envoys.	焦螟以為巢, 蠚蠓以為使
It comes with [summer] beans, but dies in the cold	芸瓜而來, 零粟而逝

³⁰ According to Guo Pu’s commentary on the *Erya*, the term *xianshu* 仙 is another name for the bat (Li Xueqin 2001, 352 [“Shiniao”]).

So once the autumn winds rise up, its harm is at an end.” 秋風夕起, 斯害也已。”

You then said: “This is a mosquito.” 公子喻矣, 是曰蚊理

—YANG SHEN 1968, 1.8

In this first rhapsody on the mosquito, Yang Shen gives four riddles in succession, in which the answer to each is the same. Although some scholars have argued that this rhapsody (like others on the same subject produced during the Ming dynasty) should be read as a political allegory, this reading is somewhat forced (Yang Yaozong 2009, 39–42). Yang Shen’s first rhapsody is a literary tour-de-force: it makes reference to a wide variety of previous writings on the subject of mosquitos, as well as using an extremely difficult and unusual poetic form — only a reader of considerable erudition would be able to fully appreciate the artistry of these descriptions of the mosquito. Subsequently, however, Yang Shen produced another piece of writing on the same subject, the “Hou wen fu” 後蟲賦 (Later Rhapsody on the Mosquito), which is quite different from the first. The “Hou wen fu” should undoubtedly be read as an allegory criticizing corruption at court; as noted by Pu Xian 蒲銑 (fl. 1764–1788), this rhapsody follows the format of the *Chuci* 楚辭 (Songs of Chu) piece entitled “Jusong” 橘頌 (In Praise of the Orange-Tree) — where the “Jusong” (while ostensibly about a tree) is in fact praising a virtuous young man, Yang Shen’s “Hou wen fu” uses the image of the mosquito to criticize rapacious and evil-minded slanderers (Pu Xian 2002, *xia*.192).³¹ The use of this particular form, seven characters + *xi* 兮, immediately alerts the reader to the fact that this rhapsody on a thing should be read as being about a type of person. Furthermore, while this particular poem contains many allusions derived from references to the mosquito in classical literature, they are balanced by quotations concerning the damage inflicted upon the body politic by gossip and slander:

³¹ Hong Xingzu (1962, 153–155 [“Jiuzhang” 九章. “Jusong” 橘頌]) gives the text of the “Jusong.” This piece is translated in Hawkes 1959 (76–77).

In antiquity Shihuang created the first writings, ³²	邃古史皇, 創奎畫兮
From your feet came script, used to record underlying principles. ³³	曲腳旁低, 垂物則兮
Hence he called this creature "a biter of men," to make virtue and evil clear.	謚曰齧民, 昭凶德兮
Yanhou classified all living creatures, and thus you have survived through the ages, ³⁴	炎后品物, 世匱資兮
The scorpion's tail, the cobra's head, have also long escaped the net.	蠶尾虺首, 罔攸遺兮
Ah! Your larvae pupate, and this facilitates your myriad crimes,	嗜爾蛭化, 百靡宜兮
You even trouble the emperor and empress, right there at court!	擾龍儀鳳, 於帝庭兮
Alas! From the moment of your birth, you buzz about viciously,	嗟爾有生, 胡營營兮
When the sacred turtle is killed, when the classics are recorded.	禁龜去梟, 著周經兮
Wickedly you ply your sharp mouths, yet you never suffer punishment,	胡爾利槩, 獨無懲兮
When righteousness is properly set out, the light overcomes the darkness.	玄圭紀正, 炯弗昧兮

32 Shihuang, another name for Cang Jie 倉頡, refers to the legendary creator of script, as recounted by a number of ancient texts including the *Lüshi chunqiu* 呂氏春秋 (Spring and Autumn Annals of Mr. Lü), and the *Huainanzi* (Chen Qiyou 2002, 1088 ["Wugong" 勿躬]; He Ning 2006, 1336 ["Xiuwu" 脩務]).

33 This line is an allusion to the "Pinshu xu" 品書序 (Preface to the Appraisal of Calligraphy) by Yu Jianwu 庾肩吾 (487–551), and refers to the fact that "mosquito feet" (*wenjiao* 蚊腳) was the name of one of the fifty-two varieties of ancient script form (Yan Kejun 1961, 66.730–731).

34 Yanhou is another name for Shennong 神農, the "Divine Husbandman." The identification of these two deities as one and the same is discussed in the annotations to the *Shiji* 史記 (Records of the Grand Historian) (Sima Qian 1959, 1.3–4n1).

The fireflies prey upon you, enjoying the destruction of your hordes, ³⁵	丹良為羞, 欣絕彙兮
When turtles carry islands on their backs, sages leave their traces. ³⁶	鼈戴山抃, 聖播跡兮
But if you are asked to support a mountain, it is impossible, They say you have eyelashes, but who has ever tried to occupy them?	使爾負山, 諒何力兮 謂爾有睫, 奚誰攘兮
Whether via portals or windows, you simply come and go, ³⁷ They say you have arms, but who has ever perceived them? ³⁸	窳窳琅疏, 競來往兮 謂爾有臂, 奚誰愜兮
During the day you hide, but at night you go on campaign, in company with other villains, Swarming like locusts, amassing together, to the terror of that saintly child. ³⁹	明潛宵征, 侶罔兩兮 旅蜚成市, 仙孺惕兮

35 Although the predators of mosquitos have not been the subject of much scientific study, there is some evidence that fireflies do prey upon mosquitos in significant numbers (Ohba et al. 2013). This predation is mentioned in a number of ancient Chinese texts, beginning with the *Da Dai Liji* (Wang Pinzhen 2008, 43 [“Xia xiaozheng”]).

36 This is a reference to the “Tianwen” 天問 (Heavenly questions) section of the *Chuci*, where one question is: “When the turtle walks along with an island on its back, how does it keep it steady?” (*ao dai shanbian heyi an zhi* 鰲戴山抃何以安之) (Hong Xingzu 1962, 102).

37 The term *yaotiao* 窳, which literally means “dark and deep,” is a description for the entryways in Zhang Heng’s 張衡 (78–139) “Xidu fu” 西都賦 (Rhapsody on the Western Capital) (Li Shan et al. 1971, 2.22).

38 In the “Da Zongshi” 大宗師 (Grand Master) chapter of the *Zhuangzi*, Zili 子犁 suggests that, after death, his friend Zilai 子來 may be transformed into the liver of a mouse or the arm of an insect (*chongbi* 蟲臂) — here specifically imagined as the arm of a mosquito (Guo Qingfan 2004, 261).

39 This is thought to refer to the story of Wu Meng 吳猛 (d. 374), a genuine historical individual whose biography is included in the official history of the dynasty (Fan Xuanling 1974, 95.2482–2483). Wu Meng was frequently cited in imperial era texts as a paragon of filial piety, since, as a child, he is said to have allowed himself to be bitten by mosquitos, in order that his parents be spared (Tao Qian 1987, 2.23–24 [“Wu Sheren” 吳舍人]).

When you congregate with a noise like thunder, even the most powerful are afraid. ⁴⁰	聚響成雷, 藩侯慄兮
We put up nets and illuminate lamps, which just makes you move even faster,	障爾爍爾, 徒宜疾兮
Mosquitos cannot complain, they respond by filling their stomachs.	蟲不能辯, 對以臆兮
Whether flying high or crawling on the ground, you live accordingly,	肖翹蠕動, 生以息兮
Whether marvels or phenomena; let there be an end to it! Sucking the blood of three thousand countries, like merchants,	倣詭妍媸, 寧有極兮 血國三千, 彼貨殖兮
How can you say this is not cruel, as you bite into the state? Rumors can destroy a city: let us bewail these vicious lies Accumulated slander can melt bone, and destroy lives. ⁴¹	曷云不慘, 嚙有國兮 赤口燒城, 煩言噴兮 積毀銷骨, 瘡痍結兮
Chu cords and Qi curtains keep you away from us When red flame and golden fire fail in any frightening effect. The command said: Let these "mosquitos" explain themselves!	楚組齊帷, 疇其隔兮 赤燧赭爍罔有懾兮 命曰人蟲理可說兮
Only an insect can understand insects, each to their own kind, ⁴²	惟蟲能蟲, 各以類兮
It is in your nature that the base should attack the noble.	厥以恆性, 賤剖貴兮

40 The powerful individual who is here said to be terrified of mosquitos (that is, lying officials clustering round the ruler) is Liu Sheng, king of Zhongshan, during the reign of Emperor Wu of the Han dynasty (Ban Gu 1962, 53.2423).

41 The expression "accumulated slander can melt bone" (*jihui xiaogu* 積毀銷骨) is a quotation from the *Shiji* (Sima Qian 1959, 70.2287). It also appears in the text of the King of Zhongshan's complaint to Emperor Wu, and hence was long associated with criticism of human bloodsuckers.

42 The idea that only insects can understand the life of an insect is expressed in terms derived from *Zhuangzi* (Guo Qingfan 2004, 813 ["Gengsang Chu" 庚桑楚]).

When [blood-sucking] humans are not punished, what
crime have these insects committed?

人蠱不懲, 蟲何罪兮

All you gentlemen, why do you not complain?

百爾君子, 無庸喙兮

—YANG SHEN 1968, 1.8–9

In this particular rhapsody, Yang Shen concludes with a denunciation of “human mosquitos” and the failure of “gentlemen” (*junzi* 君子) to deal with the damage that they cause. Implicit in this criticism is the understanding that mosquitos are easily killed; Yang Shen objects to the fact that the educated elite were not even complaining about the problems caused by slander and back-biting at court. It is highly tempting to read in this rhapsody a criticism of the contemporary political situation during the reign of the Jiajing Emperor 明嘉靖帝 (r. 1521–1567): Yang Shen was an important critic of the regime and a notable sufferer at this time, spending many decades in exile (Zhang 1974, 192.5082). However, as with other writings of a similar kind, we have lost many of the keys needed to read such a piece properly — without detailed knowledge of the context in which it was written, it is not clear whether this was a general or a specific criticism. In addition to that, given that writing about mosquitos in this way was a well-established genre long before Yang Shen’s own time, we cannot be sure whether this was simply a literary exercise (and thus entirely comparable to his first rhapsody on the same subject) or a genuine outburst of rage at the kind of people running the government in the late Ming dynasty. This kind of problem crops up again and again in Chinese literature on mosquitos in which they appear as allegorical figures representing wicked people.

THE MOSQUITO IN ITS PLACE

Toward the end of the Age of Disunion, an enormous body of literature came to be produced concerning encounters between human beings and mosquitos. The reasons for this sudden development are obscure, but they seem to be related to changing ideas of what was acceptable to explore within literature (and particularly poetry).⁴³ Themes previously dismissed as vulgar, frivolous,

⁴³ This development, and the increasing emphasis on verisimilitude (*xingsi* 形似), is described in the *Wenxin diaolong* 文心雕龍 (The Literary Mind and the Carving of Dragons) (Fan Wenlan 1962, 10.694 [“Wuse” 物色]). It is also discussed in detail in Chang (1986, 47–78).

and unsuitable came to be regarded as appropriate subjects for poems exploring a new kind of naturalism — an exploration of the mundane. Mosquitos were one of the beneficiaries of this change, since now they could feature (singly or in swarms) in the works of some of the finest poets of the imperial era. Within this tradition, mosquitos were by and large presented in a highly factual way, and the emphasis was on realism. That is not to say that poems describing mosquitos necessarily represent genuine encounters: that the poet heard or was bitten by a mosquito and immediately settled down to record the circumstances in verse. It would rather be correct to say that in this group of writings mosquitos are presented in a straightforward, unmediated manner; the poet focuses on describing their annoying whine, the difficulties of chasing them around the room to kill them, their all-pervasiveness at some times of the year and in some parts of the country, and so on. This is a very direct literary representation, and the mosquitos that figure in these poems are not used as a metaphor for anything else. They are simply an unpleasant insect menace, just like the flies or horseflies with which they are sometimes paired. Thus, although some very fine poems were written about mosquitos in this mode, their uncomplicated presentation is striking.

The earliest surviving example of this new realistic trend of writings about the world around one that features the mosquito seems to be the poem entitled “Wanjing naliang” 晚景納涼 (Enjoying the Cooling Breezes amidst a Night-time Landscape) by Xiao Gang, Emperor Jianwen of the Liang dynasty 梁建文帝蕭剛 (r. 549–551). This piece, which focuses on the way the landscape changes as the sun sets, makes reference to two species of insect: the firefly and the mosquito. In both cases a literary allusion is employed: the belief that the firefly was born from rotting grass is mentioned in the “Yueling” 月令 (Monthly Ordinances) chapter of the *Liji* 禮記 (Records of Ritual) (Sun 2007, 456); while the idea that the whine of the mosquito could resound as loudly as thunder is derived from the *Hanshu*. At one level, this poem is a realistic portrayal of a night-time landscape: many species of mosquito and firefly are crepuscular or nocturnally active, and hence it is appropriate that they should be mentioned together. However, this poem is unusual for its philosophical content. In the final lines, though this is not explicit, Xiao Gang uses the presence of these insects as a metaphor for the intrusion of ordinary worldly matters into his life — an image derived originally from the *Xunzi*:

As the sun moves away, cold ethers spread	日移涼氣散
I cherish a feeling of true freedom and relaxation.	懷抱信悠哉
Pearl blinds sway gently, like shadows through space,	珠簾影空捲
Cinnamon portals are open, facing towards the lake.	桂戶向池開
The crows have gone to roost, the stars are about to appear,	烏棲星欲見
The river runs gently, the moon should soon rise.	河淨月應來
Rows of steps run through the fine bamboo shoots,	橫階入細筍
The ground is covered with lightly-wetted moss.	蔽地濕輕苔
Plants are transformed, they fly like balls of fire;	草化飛爲火
The mosquitos' scream resounds like thunder.	蚊聲合似雷
At this spot, I listen and watch calmly,	於茲靜聞見
From this point on, the mundane world is no longer my concern. ⁴⁴	自此歇氛埃

—DING FUBAO 1959, 915

Xiao Gang's poem would subsequently influence many later poems, particularly in the terms in which the mosquito appears in landscape poetry. An example of a derivative work, which is also a fine poem in its own right, is Yuan Zhen's piece entitled "Luoyue" 落月 (Setting Moon). Here, the association between the mosquito and the mundane world found in Xiao Gang's poem is set aside, in favor of a simpler description of the night-time scene and its insect denizens. However, the key elements — the setting sun, the lapping waters at night, the doors and windows where both mosquitos and the fireflies congregate — are all present:

The setting moon sinks, but shadows remain,	落月沈餘影
The hidden canal flows, glinting in the dark.	陰渠流暗光
The whining of mosquitos is concentrated around the windows,	蚊聲靄牕戶
The light of fireflies encircles the roof-beams.	螢火繞屋梁
The flapping blinds are like a fine green mist,	飛幌翠雲薄

⁴⁴ Tian (2007, 288–289) gives an alternative translation of this poem.

Fresh water-lilies are fragrant with pure dew.
I have ceased reciting, but I have not yet gone to sleep,
I will finish the night beside the waters of the lake.

新荷清露香
不吟復不寐
竟夕池水傍

—DAI QIN 2000, 88

Subsequently, mosquitos appeared in a number of different kinds of realistic portrayal in verse. One clearly defined subject in which the mosquito could be used was poetry about seasonal change. Since the mosquito is an insect associated with late summer and early autumn, it could be used as emblematic of the changing seasons throughout the year: poems about hot weather could complain about the presence of swarms of mosquitos and look forward to the first frosts, while poems about cold weather could anticipate not only improvements in the temperature, but also the unwelcome arrival of the first of these parasitic insects. An example of this kind of verse is a poem by Han Yu 韓愈 (768–824), the first in a series entitled “Zashi sishou” 雜詩四首 (Four Miscellaneous Poems), which looks forward to the coming of autumn, when such unpleasant insects as flies and mosquitos will disappear:

During the day, flies cannot [all] be chased away,
During the night, mosquitos cannot [all] be slapped.
Flies and mosquitos fill the entire place,
I have every opportunity to get to know them.
On the spur of the moment or after a short campaign
I find myself bitten by you.
But cooling winds will arrive in the ninth month,
And sweep every trace of you away.

朝蠅不須驅
暮蚊不可拍
蠅蚊滿八區
可盡與相格
得時與幾時
與汝恣啖咋
涼風九月到
掃不見蹤跡

—HAN YU 1997, 22

If in this first poem the author is looking forward to the cold, Han Wo 韓偓 (844–893), in his piece entitled “Dongzhi yezuo” 冬至夜作 (Written at Night on the Dongzhi Festival [Twenty-second Day of the Twelfth Month]), is contemplating with some concern the end of winter, with the prospect

that all too soon the mosquitos will be active again. Here, the very first signs that spring is on the way are not greeted with unalloyed pleasure, and the highly conventional and respected symbols of the changing seasons, most notably the plum blossom, are presented in an unusually negative light, as harbingers of the arrival of a new generation of mosquitos (Bickford et al. 1985):

In the middle of the night, suddenly I see rushes move,	中宵忽見動葭灰
I guess that the plum-trees will have early blossoms.	料得南枝有早梅
In the wilds, the dried grasses should have begun to go green,	四野便應枯草綠
In the sky, for the first time, I notice the cold clouds have parted.	九重先覺凍雲開
Cold ice, unmoving, still blocks the source of the river,	陰冰莫向河源塞
Warm vapors have now returned to the bowels of the earth.	陽氣今從地底迴
How can I not know that pain and pleasure have no appointed measure?	不道慘舒無定分
So I fear that the mosquitos' whine will soon be thunderous again. ⁴⁵	却憂蚊響又成雷

—CHEN JILONG 2000, 26

During the Song dynasty, Mei Yaochen 梅堯臣 (1002–1060) produced a large number of works featuring the mosquito as the subject. Indeed, Mei Yaochen has to count as one of the most mosquito-conscious poets ever to have written in the Chinese language, producing dozens of works in which he explores different aspects of these insects, many in the realistic mode. In poems like “In the Second Month, Mosquitos and Horseflies Appear after the Rain” (*Er yue yuhou you wenrui* 二月雨後有蚊蚋), he describes the beginning of the mosquito season, when everyone has become used to the absence of these unpleasant insects and does not welcome their return:

45 The subtitle to this poem informs the reader that it was completed in the second year of the Tianfu 天復 reign-era (902), when the poet accompanied the Tang Emperor Zhaozong 唐昭宗 (r. 889–904) to Fengxiang 鳳翔.

On a spring evening, one or two mosquitos are flying about, 春夜一二蚊蚋飛
Having not seen them for a long time, I can still be happy. 久不見之尚可喜
But now in a whining crescendo, they come and annoy people, 而今稍喧來聒人
From now on, as it gets hotter, there will be nothing we can do 向後更暖奈爾嘴.
about your mouths.

—ZHU DONGRUN 1983, 336

In addition to works that focus upon the seasonal constraints under which the mosquito lives, there are also many poems in the realistic tradition that present these insects as a menace both inside the house and out in the countryside. Here, the mosquito represents a hazard of place: they were difficult to expel from one's residence and impossible to remove from landscapes. Thus references to mosquitos could be used for piquant effect in verse; they serve to remind the reader that the most comfortable home can conceal unpleasant parasites, and that the loveliest landscape could contain noxious insects. Thus, in the poem entitled "Bumei" 不寐 (Sleeplessness), the poet Wei Zhuang 韋莊 (836–910), provides an account of a wakeful night provoked by a unpleasant combination of rats and mosquitos about the house. Although mosquitos often find a pairing with other unpleasant and disease-spreading insects, it is comparatively unusual to find them being linked with a mammalian pest like the rat. In this particular poem, Wei Zhuang stresses the crepuscular activity that is characteristic of many mosquito species, and that has served to keep him awake until dawn:

I have not slept, but the sky is about to get light, 不寐天將曉
My mind is troubled, tossing and turning. 心勞轉似灰
The mosquitos' whine has rung in my ears, 蚊吟頻到耳
Rats have fought, disturbing the green tower. 鼠鬪競綠臺
Since the window is dark, I know that the moon has set, 戶闇知蟾落
From the susurrations in the forest, I realize rain has come. 林喧覺雨來
A horse's neighing [announces] the passing of a court official, 馬嘶朝客過
Thus I know that the gates to the palace are open. 知是禁門開

—NIE ANFU 2002, 134

For all the emphasis on naturalism seen in much Tang poetry about mosquitos, it is not until the poem “Wenmo” 蚊蠓 (Mosquitos) was written by Bai Juyi 白居易 (772–846), that we have a direct description of the discomfort of being bitten, with particular emphasis on the welts raised on the skin. While there are numerous early works of literature that mention the unpleasantness of the experience of an encounter with these insects in indirect terms, there are few poets who address the subject in the simple and bold language found in this particular piece:

When travelling in Ba the burning heat comes early,	巴徼炎毒早
In the second month, mosquitos and gnats are born. ⁴⁶	二月蚊蠓生
They bite your skin, and you cannot swat them away,	啞膚拂不去
They circle round your ears making a screaming sound. ⁴⁷	遶耳薨薨聲
These creatures are small and fragile,	斯物頗微細
People begin by seriously underestimating them.	中人初甚輕
If your skin is bitten by them,	如有膚受譖
Shortly afterwards you will find a welt is formed.	久則瘡疔成
There is nothing that you can do about that welt,	瘡成無奈何
What you want is to prevent is [the insect] breeding further.	所要防其萌
Why would we talk about these tiny insects,	麼蟲何足道

46 In poems about mosquitos that attempt a realistic mood there is often reference to the fact that in certain places, these creatures appeared particularly early in the year. For example, in the poem “Jingmen xing” 荆門行 by Wang Jian 王建 (767–830), one couplet reads: “In the south, mosquitos appear in the third month/ At dusk you do not hear the sounds of people speaking” (*Nanzhong sanyue wenrui sheng, huanghun buwen ren yusheng* 南中三月蚊蚋生, 黃昏不聞人語聲) (Wang Jian 2006, 68–69).

47 This particular description of the sound of the insects, *honghong* 薨薨 (here translated as screaming), is an onomatopoeic term also conventionally used to indicate the trumpeting of elephants. However, it was also frequently used to describe the unpleasant buzzing of insects; this usage seems to have appeared first in the *Shiing* (Kong Yingda 1999, 45 [“Zhongsi” 蠹斯]; 330 [“Jiming” 雞鳴]). This term appears in many writings about mosquitos.

Were it not for the importance of warning others?

潛喻傲人情

—GU XUEJIE 2009, 219

Among all the poems about mosquitos and the experience of being bitten by mosquitos, there are a few that stand out for their wry humor. If Bai Juyi claims, in his “Song ke nanqian” 送客南遷 (On Seeing a Visitor on a Journey to the South), to be writing to warn others of the horrible experience of being attacked by mosquitos even in winter (Gu Xueji 2009, 411), Yang Luan 楊鑾 (also sometimes given as Yang Luan 楊鸞, dates unknown), in the Southern Tang dynasty, presents a much more accepting and fatalistic image of himself: he has come to terms with the fact that being bitten is part of his lot in life. This short poem, entitled “Jishi” 即事 (Facing Up to Things), concludes this section on naturalism: the mosquitos described here are a pest and a nuisance, but there is nothing much to be done about it. Poems of this kind resist all but a straightforward reading — Yang Luan’s representation of himself in the final line as the predestined prey of these insects reflects a genuine problem, for some people are much more likely to be bitten than others. Even today, the rationale behind mosquito prey selection is not at all well understood, but it is known that some individuals are exceptionally attractive to these insects.⁴⁸ In the circumstances, there is little that can be done to help such a person — Yang Luan’s rueful acceptance of his fate, to be bitten by these parasites, is paralleled by his understanding that trying to kill all the flies that crawl over his food when he is trying to eat is also going to prove to be impossible:

During the day, blue flies cover my eating bowl,
At night the mosquitos too gather in hordes.
Every time it gets late and people have gone to rest,
They are sure to come and bite Yang Luan first!

白日蒼蠅滿飯盤
夜間蚊子又成團
每到更深人靜後
定來頭上咬楊鑾

—WANG SHIZHENG AND ZHENG FANGKUN 1985, 3.144

⁴⁸ This particular problem, and the lack of research on it, is discussed in Kelly (2001). Some early studies on the subject have attempted to differentiate biting patterns of particular species of mosquitos by age and gender (Muirhead-Thomson 1951), while others indicate that size of prey is of particular importance (Bryan and Smalley 1978; Downe 1960).

THE MOSQUITO IN SOCIAL CRITICISM

From an early stage in the development of literary representations of the mosquito, they came to assume an important role in writings of social criticism. A wide variety of products to deal with mosquitos were developed by the early imperial era, if not before, including nets, herbal repellants, and so on.⁴⁹ However, since these items were expensive (indeed often prohibitively so), they could be used to show the way in which the rich bought themselves out of the problems faced by the poor. Those without the financial resources to purchase these products had to suffer the bites. The perception that society in general was dangerously unequal and unfair could therefore be expressed through writings about mosquitos. For example, Pi Rixiu 皮日休 (c. 834–883), in the poem “Wenzi” 蚊子 (The Mosquito), focuses on the experience of a poor scholar, living in uncomfortable and mosquito-prone accommodation, unable to afford the netting that will give him peace at night from the persecutions of a hoard of blood-thirsty insects:

In a swarm, they have gathered like a thunderclap,	隱隱聚若雷
Biting the skin without ever being satisfied.	噴膚不知足
August Heaven is indeed unfair!	皇天若不平
These tiny insects have been taught to eat [human] flesh.	微物教食肉
A poor scholar has no silken nets,	貧士無絳紗
He endures this suffering, lying in his thatched cottage.	忍苦卧茅屋
Why do you seek plump flesh here?	何事覓膏腴
He has no grain from the Capital Storehouse in his stomach.	腹無太倉粟
(PI RIXIU 1980, 10.22)	

49 An early reference to the presence of both nets designed to be spread around the bed and mosquito-repellent spice mixes is found in the poem “Kongque dongnan fei” 孔雀東南飛 (The Peacock Flies South-East), preserved in the *Yutai xinyong* 玉臺新詠 (New Songs from a Jade Terrace) collection (Wu Zhaoyi 1999, 45). Mosquito nets in particular were a very important possession for many people, and as such were frequently mentioned in imperial era verse.

A similar viewpoint is expressed in the conclusion of the poem “Wen” 蚊 (Mosquito), by Meng Jiao 孟郊 (751–814). The opening lines provide a realistic description of the arrival of a swarm of hungry mosquitos. The middle section then presents a strong speciesist viewpoint, for it argues that human beings are intrinsically superior to the mosquitos that prey upon them.⁵⁰ However, the concluding couplet returns to the idea of the mosquito-net as something that some people can have and others are deprived of: the poet expresses a fervent wish that all could experience the benefits of these wonderful items:

In the fifth month, at rest in the middle of the night,	五月中夜息
Hungry mosquitos are still whining back and forth.	饑蚊尚營營
As they demand my flesh and blood,	但將膏血求
Surely they do not realize how despicable their lives are?	豈覺性命輕
Thinking back, would they not be ashamed,	顧已寧自愧
Supping human [blood] to eke out their miserable existences?	飲人以偷生
I wish that there was a mosquito net [covering] the whole world,	願為天下幘
At one stroke, rendering the night landscape clear.	一使夜景清
—HAN QUANXIN 1995, 367	

There are numerous poems about mosquitos that also feature references to other noxious insects and animals, but there are very few works of literature that contain such a litany as Mei Yaochen’s “The Mosquito Swarm” (*Juwen* 聚蚊). In this particular poem, a whole series of other creatures are mentioned as failing to do their duty in predation upon mosquitos — these include spiders, praying mantises, and bats. This poem is included here on the basis of its middle section, in which the situation of rich people, who can afford mosquito nets, is contrasted with the experience of the poor and needy, who not only lack these amenities but are also ill-fed and badly housed. In this poem, the attacks of mosquitos are therefore presented as the crowning misery of lives already full of

⁵⁰ As noted by Owen (1975, 24–25), Meng Jiao’s writings are striking for their emphasis on judgment and evaluation, with a strong contrast between things portrayed as good and those considered evil.

unpleasant and distressing aspects; however, at least in the case of these insects, the dawn will bring relief from their attentions:

When the sun sets, the moon is returned to darkness,	日落月復昏
The flying mosquitos gradually leave their lairs.	飛蚊稍離隙
They congregate in space, with a clamorous whine,	聚空雷殷殷
Dancing in the courtyard, like a veil of smoke.	舞庭煙冪冪
The spider's web is spread for you in vain,	蛛綱徒爾施
The mantis' arms cannot catch you.	蟬斧詎能磔
The fierce scorpion also assists you in doing evil,	猛蝎亦助惡
The poison in its belly facilitates its ruthlessness.	腹毒將肆螫
But since it does not have a pair of wings,	不能有兩翅
It has to skulk on the dark wall.	索索綠暗壁
Noblemen reside in great mansions,	貴人居大第
Their beds and mats are swathed in fine silk gauze. ⁵¹	蛟綃圍枕席
Alas! You should [choose] one of these,	嗟爾於其中
[As a place] to show off your spear-like mouths!	寧夸觜如戟
How tragic! You frequent the poor and needy,	忍哉傍窮困
Never showing mercy for their haggard gauntness.	曾未哀癯瘠
With vicious bites, you compete to strike deep,	利吻競相侵
Sipping blood, you only want to benefit yourself.	飲血自求益
The bat flaps its wings in vain,	蝙蝠空翱翔
When has it ever screened and protected us? ⁵²	何嘗為屏獲

⁵¹ The term here translated as “fine silk gauze” refers to sea silk, or fabric produced from the byssus of certain species of mollusc. McKinley (1998) gives a survey of what is known of the history of this unusual material. The history of this particular textile in China is discussed in Laufer (1915).

⁵² Bat predation upon mosquitos has not been the subject of much academic study; however, early results suggest that they have a significant impact on mosquito mortality (Reiskind and Wund 2009; Kunz et al. 2011; Ghanem and Voigt 2012).

The singing cicadas eat their fill on the dewy breeze,	鳴蟬飽風露
Again, not even for a moment are their mouths at rest. ⁵³	亦不慙喙息
The whining [of the mosquitos] will not continue for long,	薨薨勿久恃
Already the dawn is brightening in the east. ⁵⁴	會有東方白
—ZHU DONGRUN 1983, 61–62	

In addition to the poems that use the mosquito to criticize social inequality, there is also a large number of poems that, while ostensibly complaining about an insect, can also be read as allegories in which the poet compares corrupt and vicious government officials to these noxious creatures. The “Juwen yao” 聚蚊謠 (Song of Swarming Mosquitos) by Liu Yuxi 劉禹錫 (772–842) has traditionally been read in this way (Xiao Ruifeng 1985, 52–53; and He Xiuming 2001, 71). Hence, although at one level this is a poem about defending oneself against attack by insects, it is also concerned with the distress and damage caused by the vicious liars who infested the corridors of power, destroying the lives of those unfortunate enough to stand in their way. This returns to a very ancient reading of the mosquito in Chinese literature:

On a quiet summer night, the front hall is wide open,	沈沈夏夜蘭堂開
Flying mosquitos pierce the gloom with a sound like thunder.	飛蚊伺暗聲如雷
As their whining starts, the first time you hear it you are	嘈然歛起初駭聽
alarmed,	
They amass as if they have come from South Mountain.	殷殷若自南山來
As the noise becomes louder they dance happily in the dark,	喧騰鼓舞喜昏黑

An early study on this subject found a colony of some 30,000 bats that consumed fifteen tons of mosquitos annually (Zinn and Humphrey 1981).

⁵³ Cicada song is in fact produced by the flexing of muscles, which then distorts tympanals located upon their abdomens (Young and Bennet-Clark 1995). As has long been noted, human beings have great difficulty in hearing subtle distinctions in the cicada song, since their ears have not evolved to deal with this kind of noise (Pringle 1954). This is in contrast to mosquito whines, to which human beings are very closely attuned.

⁵⁴ An alternative translation of this poem appears in Liu and Lo (1975, 314).

The blind cannot see them clearly; the clever are deluded.	昧者不分聰者惑
The dewy flowers are drenched as the moon climbs the sky,	露花滴瀝月上天
Sharp mouths intercept human [flesh] and cannot be stopped.	利嘴迎人著不得
I am a large man but you are tiny,	我軀七尺爾如芒
I am on my own, but you are many: thus you can hurt me.	我孤爾眾能我傷
The turn of the seasons cannot be withstood,	天生有時不可遏
It is for your sake that I set up the curtains that swathe my bed.	為爾設幄潛匡牀
Cooling winds will come, and autumn days,	清商一來秋日曉
Your fragile bodies will then go to feed the fireflies.	羞爾微形飼丹鳥
— LIU YUXI 1990, 266	

Very much the same treatment of the subject can be seen in the poem “Zeng wen” 憎蚊 (On Loathing Mosquitos), written in 1046 by Ouyang Xiu 歐陽修 (1007–1072). This lengthy and complex piece presents the reader with a number of different ways to understand this insect, and some of them are highly unusual. The opening section describes the nasty and brutish lives of early Chinese people — a time during which the mosquito flourished — and then discusses the achievements of the great sage–rulers of antiquity in terms of being able to control or eliminate these unpleasant creatures. This is followed by a number of allusions to famous (and apparently true) stories about mosquitos, all derived from Gaoyou County 高郵縣 in Jiangsu Province: a place clearly long notorious for its exceptionally horrible and numerous mosquitos. This is followed by a detailed description of an attack by a swarm of mosquitos at dusk, during which the poet depicts himself as completely unable to deal with their depredations. In his analysis of this poem, Colin Hawes proposes a number of possible readings based on the idea that mosquitos are here being used as a metaphor for some socio-political subtext. He suggests first that the mosquitos might represent the small-minded and petty people of a remote region, pestering a local official with their problems. Then he proposes the idea that the mosquitos might represent Ouyang Xiu’s opponents at court, who had succeeded in having him sent into exile the year before (Hawes 2005, 22). These variant readings show the difficulty of interpreting this kind of allegorical treatment. It is a poem about mosquitos, but it is also aimed at criticizing some aspect of the human world — it is just not clear which. The conclusion of this piece,

however, is not comforting. Whatever the nature of the problem, whether it is the mosquitos or the human blood-suckers, there is no prospect of anything being done to eliminate them:

The myriad species are crowded together	擾擾萬類殊
And among them some are decidedly hateful.	可憎非一族
The mosquito is truly one of the most miniscule	甚哉蚊之微
Not worth sullyng one’s writings with.	豈足汙簡牘
The universe is broad and enormously capacious	乾坤量廣大
Containing and nourishing both good and evil.	善惡皆含育
In the desolate days before the ancient kings and emperors	荒茫三五前
People and beasts lived in each other’s filth.	民物交相黷
But Yu made a tripod that captured evil spirits ⁵⁵	禹鼎象神姦
The dragons fled far away to hide in the depths.	蛟龍遠潛伏
The duke of Zhou expelled all surviving vicious wild creatures ⁵⁶	周公驅猛獸
And humankind began to live amongst the rivers.	人始居川陸
Since then thousands of years passed away	爾來千百年
Heaven and Earth have become peaceful and quiet.	天地得清肅
One could say great disorders disappeared from sight	大患已云除
And no-one bothered to record the tiny and slight.	細微遺不錄
There are flies, horseflies, fleas, lice and nits	蠅蠹蚤虱蟻
Locusts, scorpions, vipers, cobras and pythons.	蜂蝎虻蛇蝮
And you belong to this group too	惟爾於其間

55 This is a reference to a story, the earliest version of which is found in the *Zuozhuan*, that suggests that the nine bronzes (*jiuding* 九鼎) made by the sage-king Yu had an apotropaic function (Yang Bojun 1981, 669–670 [Xuan 3]). Although the original text describes these bronzes as holding the *baiwu* 百物 (literally: hundred beings) at bay, there is a long tradition suggesting that these creatures should be regarded as supernatural, rather than mundane pests like mosquitos, or alligators and tigers — this is seen for example in the *Lüshi chunqiu* (Chen Qiyou 2002, 956 [“Xianshi” 先識]).

56 As noted by the *Mengzi* 孟子 (Mencius), among the many accomplishments of the duke of Zhou was pacifying various barbarian peoples and expelling dangerous wild animals (Zhao Qi 1999, 178 [“Tengong xia” 滕公下]).

With your bodies as small as grains of millet.	有形纔一粟
But even though you are small you swarm in huge numbers	雖微無奈眾
And your tiny size makes it hard to avoid your vicious attacks.	惟小難防毒
I once heard that in Gaoyou [County]	嘗聞高郵間
A fierce tiger died from your cruel torments.	猛虎死凌辱
How sad! [The fate of] the girl from Lujin ⁵⁷	哀哉露筋女
Avenging your ancient grudge you exact severe punishment.	萬古讎不復
The wetland regions especially suit your kind	水鄉自宜爾
I can only blame the customs of the remote frontiers.	可怪窮邊俗
At morning and evening they lower their screen curtains	晨殮下帷幃
At summer's height they keep their colts and calves in the mud.	盛暑泥駒犢
I have come to govern this distant hill country	我來守窮山
Where the land is extremely low and damp.	地氣尤卑溽
With few official duties I lazily do what I choose	官間懶所便
It is sleep that really suits my inclinations.	惟睡宜偏足
But it is unbearable when you come in great swarms	難堪爾類多
Attacking me on my pillow and sleeping mat.	枕席厭緣撲
Smoking the eaves, I suffer from fumes and dust	燻簷苦煙埃
Scorching the walls, I exhaust the light from my candle.	燎壁疲照燭
By ruined city walls the plants and trees are lush	荒城繁草樹
The air grows dry and the blazing heat rises.	旱氣飛炎熇
Xihe drives forward the chariot of the sun ⁵⁸	羲和驅日車

⁵⁷ Lujin is a place located within the borders of Gaoyou County. As recorded by a number of local gazetteers, there was a temple at Lujin dedicated to a girl who died in the Tang dynasty after she refused to seek shelter overnight in the same hut as a man (thus sullyng her purity), as a result of which, during the course of a single night, her blood was sucked dry by hordes of mosquitos (Yang Yilun et al. 1991, 400). These events are also recorded in poetry; for example “Guo Lujin ci” 過露筋祠 (On Passing the Temple in Lujin) by Yuan Hongdao 袁宏道 (1568–1610) (Yuan Hongdao 1935, 22); “Zai guo Lujin ci” 再過露筋祠 (On Passing the Temple in Lujin Again) by Wang Shizhen 王士禎 (1634–1711) (Wang Xiaoshu et al. 1994, 35). In addition, Yang Yilun (1991, 556–561) records a further half-dozen poems by other writers on the same subject.

But reaching the noon hour it seems the wheels stop turning.	當午不轉轂
When a breeze blows and evening cool comes	清風得夕涼
It feels like an amnesty, releasing us from prison shackles.	如赦脫囚梏
I sweep the courtyard open to the sky	掃庭露青天
Then sit in the moonlight in the shade of fine trees.	坐月蔭嘉木
Why can't you [choose] some other moment	汝寧無他時
To make me endure this harassment?	忍此見迫促
Furling your wings you wait for dusk	翩翩伺昏黑
Then gradually you emerge from the walls of my room.	稍稍出壁屋
You cover the sky, sweeping over like a curtain	填空來若翳
Gather in crevices so numerous you would fill cupped hands.	聚隙多可掬
Crowding around my body, I feel under siege	叢身疑陷圍
Clamoring in my ears, it is as if you are wailing.	聒耳如遭哭
Fiercely you charge, ready to attack	猛攘欲張拳
Cruelly you strike, sharper than flying arrows.	暗中甚飛鏃
My hands and feet are powerless to save me	手足不自救
You soon make camp both front and behind.	其能營背腹
Tired of fanning and swatting my dinner tray	盤餐勞扇拂
I immediately force my stiff servant to wake up.	立寐僵僮僕
Vainly he exhausts every strategy he can think of	端然窮百計
Then sinks back down and closes his eyes in sleep.	還坐瞑雙目
I am certainly powerless to struggle any longer	於吾固不較
And you are indeed too cruel.	在爾誠為酷
Who can explain the laws that creatures follow	誰能推物理
Don't they just do the opposite of what it is we want?	無乃乖人欲
As for the <i>chuyu</i> , phoenix, and <i>qilin</i>	騶虞鳳皇麟

58 Xihe is mentioned as the deity that moves the sun in many ancient texts, including the *Chuci* (Hong Xingzu 1962, 27 ["Lisao" 離騷]). This information is also recorded in early encyclopedias (Xu Jian 2004, 1.5).

No-one has glimpsed them for thousands of years.⁵⁹

I long for them now, but cannot hope to see them

There's nothing to drive the evil ones away.

—LI YI'AN 2001, 45

千載不一矚

思之不可見

惡者無由逐

Allegorical works about mosquitos all suffer today from the same problem of interpretation: in the centuries between the time of writing and now, the circumstances provoking their composition have been lost. It is therefore not known whether any of these poems were composed about a general malaise or a specific outrage. The information that these works contain, which may have made their message entirely obvious to their intended readers, has not proved equally comprehensible to later audiences. At the same time, there is a further issue with these particular mosquito poems, which is that the allegories are fundamentally boring. By structuring the poem in such a way that one's enemies are configured as evil, and the poet as an innocent victim, the situation loses any nuance and becomes a black-and-white representation of a conflict between good and evil. While this may represent how the poets themselves felt about their situation, it is not an interesting or informative way of structuring the argument. As a result, though some of these poems are fine works of literature, they are more to be prized for the way in which they transform being bitten into an aesthetic experience, and juggle with complex allusions, than for their intrinsic underlying message.

THE EROTIC MOSQUITO

Sexual motifs associated with the mosquito are not found in early Chinese literature. However, by the time of the Tang dynasty, some poets were beginning to explore this kind of theme, in particular through poetry describing mosquito attacks on beautiful young women, in which the bite of a blood-sucking parasite is equated with the loss of virginity. An early example of this kind of verse is the poem “Jiangshang wenzi” 江上蚊子 (Mosquitos on the River) by Wei Chulao 韋楚老 (b. 803). In this

⁵⁹ These three kinds of creatures were all supposed to appear in conjunction with individuals of exceptional virtue and merit, as can be seen from references in the *Shijing* and *Liji* (Kong Yingda 1999, 105–106 [“Chuyu” 騶虞]; Sun 2007, 622 [“Liyun” 禮運]). The non-appearance of these mythical animals and birds therefore demonstrates the decadence of the times.

unusual poem, the mosquito blundering against the fabric of the net is compared to a clumsy man on a nocturnal visit, entangling himself in the window curtains as he makes his way towards his lover:

Flying along, their outstretched wings balance their red stomachs, ⁶⁰	飄搖挾翅亞紅腹
By the river, at nightfall, they rise up with a cacophonous cry. May I ask, are you not too greedy?	江邊夜起如雷哭 請問貪婪一點心
Fetid and putrid matter fills your stomach: when will you be satisfied? ⁶¹	臭腐填腹幾多足
A Yue girl, as lovely as a flower, lives by the bend in the river, The goddess of the moon, night after night, stares down fixedly here.	越女如花住江曲 嫦娥夜夜凝雙睞
She is afraid he will cause trouble getting in through the brocade curtains,	怕君撩亂錦窗中
Ten lengths of fine silk gauze surround this sleeping beauty. (HUANG JUN ET AL. 1998, 814)	十軸輕綃圍夜玉

If this kind of theme was rarely explored in Tang dynasty literature, it would appear somewhat more frequently in the later imperial era. Although works of literature in which the mosquito is given

60 This opening line incorporates an arresting image: the mosquito's wings straining to support its bulging red stomach, distended with the blood of its victims. This is not a common treatment of the mosquito in Chinese literature; however, in Fan Zhongyan's 范仲淹 (989–1052) *jueju* poem "Yong wen" 詠蚊 (On the Mosquito), the striking opening couplet reads: "Full they leave, and they are as heavy as cherries, / But they arrived hungry, as light as willow-floss" (*Baoqu yingtao zhong, jilai liuxu qing* 飽去櫻桃重, 饑來柳絮輕) (Beijing daxue guwenxian yanjiusuo 1991, 1916). The choice of the cherry as a comparison again indicates stomachs rounded with their meal of blood.

61 In another arresting image, the human blood that fills the mosquito's stomach is here described in disgusting terms, as "fetid and putrid" (*choufu* 臭腐). However, this might also be an allusion to a section in the *Zhuangzi*, where the transformation of fetid and putrid substances into those that are "sublime and marvelous" (*shenqi* 神奇) and back again is considered (Guo Qingfan 2004, 733 ["Zhi beiyou" 知北遊]). In this case, the blood becomes corrupted and repellent through the process of being sucked.

erotic overtones remained comparatively unusual, a couple of examples of this kind of treatment survive from the Yuan dynasty. It is not entirely clear why such a handling of this subject was more popular during this period, but it may be related to the increasing impact of commercialization on women's lives, which resulted in more and more women finding themselves forced into servitude as concubines and serving maids, ornamenting the households of rich men with their youth and beauty (Bossler 2013). That these mosquito poems are predicated upon the sexual availability of young maids brought into the family can be seen from works such as “Qiuwen” 秋蚊 (Autumn Mosquito) by Lu Qi 盧琦 (*jinsshi* 1342). In this poem, the beautiful maid (here designated by the generic term *xiaoyu* 小玉) is introduced as she is burning incense (presumably with a view to keeping the insects at bay); however, as the poem progresses, the mosquito bites inflicted upon her overnight are compared with a sexual encounter:

Moonlight falls before the Jasmine Hall,	茉莉堂前月華吐
Flying mosquitos swarm, creating thunder in a clear sky.	飛蚊擾擾晴雷怒
Deep inside in the women's chambers, the maid burns pepper and eupatorium,	深閨小玉焚椒蘭
The embroidered curtain and the window blind frame the willow floss.	繡幕穿簾柳花度
This lovely lady lies down at night, the silver lamp extinguished,	芙蓉夜臥銀燭滅
Green gauze, like mist, makes hazy the fragrant snow.	綠紗如煙罩香雪
From hiding, they fly in regardless of nets or breeze from fans,	潛身飛入羅扇風
The whining by her ear continues throughout the night, without respite.	耳畔營營宵不絕
Her pale skin is bitten once, she wakes from her lush dreams, ⁶²	瓊肌一啞雨夢回
Her lovely arm, under vicious attack, [shows] a mark of blood. ⁶³	玉腕斜批守宮血

62 This line alludes to the song lyric “Huanxisha” 浣溪沙 (The Sands of Washing Brook) by Li Jing, Emperor Yuanzong of the Southern Tang 南唐元宗李璟 (r. 943–961), which describes a woman waking from dreaming about her distant lover (Zeng Zhaomin et al. 1999, 726).

63 According to legend, if certain kinds of lizards were fed with cinnabar and then crushed to a powder, the resulting paste

Outside her room, the late cicadas keep themselves pure and 屋外寒蟬自清素
innocent,
Night after night they sing as they drink the dew from the flowers. 夜夜長吟飲花露
(QINDING SIKU QUANSHU HUIYAO 2005, 1192)

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 *Shan’ge* 山歌 (Mountain Songs).⁶⁴ 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 that are commonly found in other erotic writings featuring mosquitos, this particular piece is interesting for its presentation of a female perspective (Wu Cuncun 2010). In other writings on the same theme, the woman being bitten is presented in a voyeuristic setting — she is being viewed from outside by the poet. Furthermore, there is generally little suggestion, as here, that she welcomes the prospect of receiving the attentions of a parasitic insect/ the man in question:

The lizard is sick, and sits upon the wall,	壁虎兒得病在牆上坐
Calling out to the spider — hey you!	叫一聲蜘蛛我的哥
These last few days I haven’t even seen a blue-bottle fly	這幾日並不見他蒼蠅過
past.	

could be daubed on a woman’s arm and would form an indelible red spot as long as she remained a virgin (Fan Ning 2014, 51). Thus, the bite mark of the mosquito is equated with an assault on the woman’s virginity, in a highly sexualized image of this insect. This image is also found in other late imperial erotic writings about the mosquito, such as “Yezuo kuwen” 夜坐苦蚊 (Sitting at Night, Suffering from the Mosquitos), by Fang Yikui 方一夔 (1253–1314): “Not only do they enter through the green silk curtains,/ They leave ordinary women just to irritate this beautiful lady./ Sitting at rest, there is nothing to stop them [attacking],/ For each one has sharpened its teeth./ Flesh and blood are eaten raw,/ Skin is numbed and split./ As if stained with virgin blood,/ This cinnabar [is a sign] of having fallen victim” (不但入翠幕, 偏工惱紅裙, 端坐缺堤障, 各各磨牙齦, 血肉生咀嚼, 斑駁瘡與皸, 如塗關宮血, 丹砂服兼斤) (Gu Sili 2002, 290).

64 Nie Fusheng (2002, 275–300) gives a detailed account of the textual history of this collection.

A dragonfly is far too big,	蜻蜓身又大
A hornet has too many stings,	和蜂刺又多
So why can't you send along a mosquito,	尋一個蚊子也
To rescue me? ⁶⁵	搭救搭救我

(WEI TONGXIAN ET AL. 1993, 110)

Very little popular literature of this kind, approaching an erotic topic from a woman's point of view, survives from imperial era China. The importance of this particular piece lies in the fact that it also serves to demonstrate that very similar topics are found in literati erotic writings: the mosquito seems to have been a common symbol of sexual contact and penetration in both traditions.

CONCLUSION

Mosquitos are parasitic insects; and as with fleas, lice, and ticks, it is almost impossible, in many parts of the world, to avoid encounters with them. The same is true of other noxious and disease-spreading creatures, including flies, rats, mice, and so on. However, unlike the larger predators on human beings — and the tiger is a good example of this — writings about mosquitos are bound to be informed by personal experience. (Equally, personal experience conditions the response of readers). Sooner or later everyone is bitten by a mosquito, and many people are made sick by it. As a result, mosquitos in literature appear in terms that are informed not only by study of the classics and appropriate allusions, but also in ways that indicate prolonged observation. Many details of the activities of mosquitos, and particularly their relationships with the creatures that prey upon them, as described in Chinese literature, have been confirmed by modern scientific research, while others await further study. This characteristic of writings about mosquitos in the imperial era gives these works an enduring relevance, over and above their literary value. As Chinese mosquitos are the subject of more research, it is likely that the importance of generations of records of their behavior, the result of careful observation on the part of the people who lived with them, will be further demonstrated.

⁶⁵ The compilers of this edition incorrectly suggest in their annotations to the text that *bihu'er* 壁虎兒 should be understood as “rat”: this destroys the sexual symbolism implicit within the identification of this creature as a lizard.

Many of the greatest and most famous of Chinese writers and poets have written about mosquitos, whether in a realistic or an allegorical mode. These writings have often been comparatively neglected because of the subject matter. Parasites do not offer a highly esteemed theme — whether one is writing about insects or their human blood-sucking counterparts. This means that not only have writings about mosquitos been neglected, but other literature about predatory creatures has also been little studied. As a result, it is not clear whether the same patterns, identified in this paper as pertaining to literature about mosquitos, can be found in writings about other parasites. This is an issue that will require further research. However, by ignoring these writings, the cultural significance of parasites has been elided. In Chinese literature, as in many other cultures, an encounter with a mosquito could be an aesthetic experience as well as an unpleasant nuisance. To eliminate these subjects from critical discussion is to simplify the range of pre-imperial and imperial era literature in such a way as to falsify our impression of the writings of many of China's most famous poets and thinkers.

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