

The Image of Changan in the Odes to the Capitals of Han Dynasty

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Abstract

The odes (Fu, a literary style in Han dynasty) to the capitals of Han dynasty, represented by Ban Gu's *Ode to the Two Capitals* and Zhang Heng's *Ode to Two Capitals*, depicted the image of Changan as the luxurious and magnificent capital city of Han dynasty. In such depictions, which excluded tangential details of Changan of the Western Han dynasty as well as other elements not consistent with the broad theme of luxury (such as the efforts at reconstruction of Changan during the reforms of Emperor Yuan and Wang Mang), the dynamics of historical transformation were molded into a static sample of a capital city, labeled with desire. On an emotional level, the authors of these odes were deeply attracted to this capital city of luxury and magnificence; on the other hand, however, their ideal capital city was not the charming and tempting Changan. The more they devoted their heart and soul to depicting those grandiose architectural works and the heavenly imperial gardens, the more skeptical they became of the domineering powers' attempt at cultivating infinite desires; the harder they tried to glorify the awe of hunting, the more obvious their disapproval of the emperors' pursuit of pleasure exemplified by hunting. Yet the intricate interplay of emotional attraction and rational criticism made the image of Changan even more vivid and colorful.

Key words: Changan; Odes (Fu) of Han; Time; Space

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INTRODUCTION

Han dynasty is characterized by an abundance of odes, among which the collection of odes to the capitals, represented by Ban Gu's *Ode to the Two Capitals* and Zhang Heng's *Ode to Two Capitals*, stood out by their astounding literary merit and historical significance. The appeal of Changan of the Western Han dynasty, capital of the empire, the biggest city in the world at that time, was as immense as could be imagined. If Changan can be viewed as a work of art, then Ban Gu's *Ode to the Western Capital* and Zhang Heng's *Ode to Western Capital* are interpretations of this work of art. Of course such an interpretation is also art in and of itself. Just as Gadamer has pointed out, we may never be able to completely reconstruct the true image of Changan in history, but it is legitimate and necessary to offer an interpretation of Changan through the collection of odes to the capital city.

1. THE LABEL OF DESIRE ATTACHED TO CHANGAN IN THE ODES TO THE CAPITALS

Cities are of temporal existence; Changan is no exception. When it was chosen as the capital at the beginning of Han dynasty, it was nothing more than the ruins that remained after the chaos of Qin dynasty. Before that, Xianyang had been the capital of Qin, open and wide, crowded with clusters of palaces and houses, most of which were burned to ashes after the invasion by Xiang Yu's troops. In the fifth year of the reign of Emperor Gao in Han dynasty, following Lou Jing's advice, Emperor Liu Bang designated Changan as the capital city and built Changle Palace on the foundation of Xingle Palace of Qin dynasty. Later he placed Xiao He, the Prime Minister, and Yang Chengyan, official of palace construction, in charge of the construction of the eastern and northern watchtowers and the antechamber of Weiyang Palace as well as an

arsenal and a granary, upon completion of which the heart of Changan was in place. Construction of the city walls, however, did not start until the reign of Emperor Hui, along with the construction of the west market, west to the big market built in the sixth year of the reign of Emperor Gao; the city of Changan now began to take shape. During the reign of Emperor Wu, Changan underwent another round of large-scale construction: Shanglin Garden, Kunming Lake, Jianzhang Palace, as well as Mingguang Palace and Gui Palace, were all built at that time; the grandeur of the city reached its peak. Toward the end of the Western Han dynasty, Wang Mang initiated another round of housing renewal, including demolition of some luxury buildings, construction of the palace for presenting awards and delivering instructions, palace of ceremonies, ancestral temples and other ritual architecture. These architectural works, along with the renewed and revamped temples dedicated to the God of Land and God of Grain, constituted a complete system of ritual architecture.

It can be said that there was no immobilized Changan of the Western Han dynasty; there was only a city of constant formation and transformation, the process of which, however, was hardly recorded in Ban Gu's *Ode to the Western Capital* and Zhang Heng's *Ode to Western Capital*. The rendition of Changan, offered by these two authors, was in fact a model of Changan in retrospect. When Ban Gu and Zhang Heng of the Eastern Han dynasty looked back on Changan, what came to mind was no longer a temporal capital city spanning two hundred years of the history of the Western Han dynasty but a static sample of the capital with the most eye-catching label titled luxury.

This sample excluded tangential details about Changan of the Western Han dynasty as well as other elements not consistent with the broad theme of luxury (such as the efforts at reconstruction of Changan during the reforms of Emperor Yuan and Wang Mang). Such exclusion was of course directly related to the two authors' intention of writing, which was to upgrade the status of the eastern capital Luoyang and downgrade the status of the western capital Changan in the western vs. eastern capital debate. For Ban Gu and Zhang Heng, admittedly, the magnificent and dazzling Changan had its own charm; yet the simple and harmonious Luoyang had obvious ethical and political advantages. Therefore, intentionally or not, they nevertheless exaggerated the luxury nature of Changan in their attempt to depict it as a prototypical negative example of a city of desires.

Of course, it was not unfair for the two authors to place much emphasis on the materialistic and luxurious side of Changan, as revealed in a conversation that took place when the capital was built at the beginning of Han dynasty. When Lou Jing proposed that Changan should be designated as the capital, he said,

Han dynasty was founded by Your Majesty in a way different from Zhou dynasty. Since Hou Ji was appointed by Tang Yao as

the governor of Tai, the ancestors of Zhou had practiced good deeds and benevolent governance for over ten generations until the reign of Lord Tai, Lord Ji, Lord Wen, and Lord Wu when the feudal lords of all vassal states swore allegiance to them and helped them vanquish Shang dynasty and become the king. When King Cheng of Zhou dynasty ascended the throne, Duke Zhou advised him in state affairs. Luoyi was built as the center of the world to which all vassal states would travel the same distance when they went to submit tribute gifts and taxes. Kings with moral integrity would easily rule of morals; kings without moral integrity would be easily conquered due to lack of morals. Thus when Zhou dynasty remained powerful, the world was in a harmonious state; all vassal states in its territory and ethnic groups outside its territory submitted to its authority and presented tribute gifts. When Zhou dynasty became weak, no one would pay tribute, and Zhou lost control of its subordinates. This was due to not only its lack of morals but also the fact that it was starting to lose its momentum. Now in our times Your Majesty's uprising in the Feng county and Peng county against Qin dynasty swept across Shu Prefecture and Hanzhong prefecture; we conquered three states of Qin including Yong, Sai, Zhai; we fought Xiang Yu between Xingyang county and Chenggao county; during the 70 big battles and 40 small battles, large populations of civilians were killed; countless bones of the old and the young were laid bare in the wilds; the sad sounds of mourning were still audible and the disabled soldiers could barely walk. Under such circumstances, I don't think it would be appropriate for us to try to compete with the reign of King Cheng and King Kang of Zhou dynasty in power and prestige. Further, the territory of the former Qin faced the Yellow River with Mount Hua on its back, protected by strategically located passes all around. Millions of troops could be deployed right away in the case of emergency. The advantages of the so-called natural treasury depended precisely on the fertility of the farmlands of the former Qin. If Your Majesty would choose to build the capital in Changan after crossing the Hangu pass, we will still have complete control over the territory of the former Qin despite possible rebellion to the east of the mountain. In the fight against our enemies, complete achievement of victory won't be possible if we fail to grab their throat and attack their back.¹

Zhang Liang seconded Lou Jing's proposal:

Despite its strategic location, Luoyang has a small central district spanning merely several hundred li (note: a unit of measurement smaller than acre) of infertile farmland, vulnerable to enemy attacks from all four directions. Therefore, it is not a good place for military defense. By contrast, Guanzhong district is surrounded by Mount Xiao and Hangu pass on the eastern border as well as the thousands of rich farmland of Mount Long and Mount Min of Szechuan in the west. It also enjoys the benefits of the rich natural resources of the areas of Ba and Shu in the south as well as the grassland available for raising livestock in the north. The strategically located terrains along the western, southern, and northern borders are good for military defense, allowing us to guard against the vassal states along the eastern border. If the vassal states remain loyal to us, then we can transport grain through the waterways of the Yellow River and the Wei River, ensuring food supply for the capital. If there is rebellion, then we can transport supplies downstream as needed. These are the advantages of the so-called natural treasury, which enjoys the benefits of rich natural resources and the protection provided by sturdy walls spanning over thousands

¹ *Zi Zhi Tong Jian*, Vol.11.

of li. Lou Jing is right in proposing that Changan be made the capital”²

What can be inferred from the conversation cited above is that neither Lou Jing nor Zhang Liang had confidence in the legitimacy of the regime of Western Han dynasty, which was established in a way quite different from Zhou dynasty. Zhou was established on a natural, solid foundation rooted in the patriarchal clan system, which allowed it to practice rituals and cultivate virtues in a slow and deliberate manner without haste, practicing “good deeds and benevolent governance” for “over ten generations” until eventually, attracted by and only by its virtues, the other vassal states joined Zhou in its effort to overthrow Shang dynasty. The stability of Zhou dynasty was attributable to its natural foundation of blood relations on the one hand and with a propriety-oriented regime characterized by rituals and music on the other. With the passage of time, blood relations gradually weakened and the cultivation of virtues through rituals and music started to lose its appeal; consequently, maintenance of the political system became difficult. By contrast, the burgeoning of Han dynasty took a different route. Although Emperor Liu Bang, founder of Han dynasty, was often deified later in history, Liu Bang himself, along with members of his administration, in fact proved the truth of the saying “Is anyone born a king, duke, general, or minister? Is their status necessarily hereditary?”. Both the emperor and his officials acknowledged the fact that they established Han dynasty “on the horseback” by fighting; hence the emphasis that Lou Jing and Zhang Liang both placed on the military value of Changan: in their era, military power rules. At least, when the rulers of Han dynasty were just starting to stabilize the empire after the chaos of the former Qin, it was an absolute advantage to have a capital with strategically formed topography and terrain, which provided a comforting sense of security. Lou Jing’s comments on “the fertility of the farmlands of the former Qin” and Zhang Liang’s remarks on “the thousands of rich farmland... the benefits of the rich natural resources of the areas of Ba and Shu in the south as well as the grassland available for raising livestock in the north” called to attention the solid material foundation of this area, without which the magnificent and spectacular Changan would not have been possible.

What further illustrated the importance attached to a place like Changan as the capital was a conversation between Xiao He, the prime minister, and his emperor Liu Bang. When Xiao He was placed in charge of the construction of Weiyang Palace, upon completion, Liu Bang

lost his temper at the sight of the magnificent architecture and asked Xiao He, “we have not been able to restore stability after the chaos of the former Qin and years of hard fighting

may not guarantee victory. Why build such magnificent luxury palaces?” Xiao He replied, “It is precisely this initial state of instability of our empire that facilitates the construction of palaces accordingly. Further, as the son of Heaven, the emperor rules over the entire world. Only such grandiose architecture would do justice to the stateliness of the emperor and remain unsurpassable by future generations.

The magnificent Weiyang Palace thus became a symbol of the grandeur and inviolability of the empire. The pursuit of the grandeur aesthetics was embodied not only in Weiyang Palace; in fact, such aesthetics characterized official architecture in general since the Period of the Warring States to the periods of Qin and Han dynasties, represented in particular by gigantic high-rise platforms, demonstrating monarchical majesty. This pursuit of grandeur had gained much popularity by the Western Han dynasty. During the reign of Emperor Wu at least, the whole city of Changan had become a monument branded with grandeur.

As the great capital city of the Western Han dynasty, despite the destruction and chaos brought by the wars in the Western and Eastern Han dynasties, Changan left the people of the Eastern Han dynasty an abundance of tangible legacies. During the Eastern Han dynasty, Changan still maintained its status among all cities, second only to Luoyang. The grandeur of Changan at its peak in the Western Han dynasty was passed down both orally and in writing; those literary, historical, and legendary records were frequently referenced and elaborated by subsequent generations. Ban Gu and Zhang Heng of the Eastern Han dynasty never witnessed with their own eyes in Changan during any of the historical periods of the Western Han dynasty; all they had were memories, not of any particular individual, but collective memories. Just like a monument that retained its distinguishing features despite the passage of time, the grandeur of Changan had received almost universal recognition when Ban Gu and Zhang Heng were reminiscing about it.

Thus, the depiction of Changan in *Ode to the Western Capital* and *Ode to Western Capital* molded the dynamics of historical transformation into a static sample of a capital city, labeled a city of desires.

2. SPATIAL CONSTRUCTION OF CHANGAN IN THE ODES TO THE CAPITALS OF HAN DYNASTY

Spatial construction was an integral part of the construction of the image of Changan in the odes to the capitals. First and foremost, Changan was a spatial existence constituted by palaces, markets, and networks of streets and avenues. However, neither Ban Gu nor Zhang Heng had the experience of living in Changan of the Western Han dynasty; they could not have roamed its streets and avenues in the same way that Benjamin

² Ibid.

wandered around Paris. They were bound to view the city from high above. In fact, all urban planners in the initial phase of planning would subconsciously create their plans in a way as if they were looking down with a hypothetical set of eyes hovering above the city. This approach can be traced back to as early as Zhou dynasty. According to Kao Gong Ji (a collection of written records about the technical specifications, technological processes, and regulatory regimes of the departments responsible for manufacturing and construction before Qin dynasty), during Zhou dynasty, “craftsmen built the capital city” within an area “spanning nine Li, guarded by three gates on each of the four sides. There were nine north-south avenues and nine west-east avenues, each of which accommodating nine carriages moving abreast of one another. With the Royal Palace at the center, to its east stood the ancestral temples; in the west the Altar of Land and Grain. In front of the Royal Palace was the royal court and in the back the markets, each of which spanned a square equivalent to about one hundred footsteps on each side.” This approach was passed down all the way through Ming and Qing dynasties, showcased by the perfectly balanced central axes of the Forbidden City. These designs would not have been possible without a macro perspective and a bird’s-eye view above the city; otherwise, the city would only remain a cluster of naturally formed habitats. It was precisely the absence of Ban Gu and Zhang Heng in Changan of the Western Han dynasty that provided the two authors with a set of eyes capable of gazing at Changan from afar both temporally and spatially. Because of this set of eyes with almost no blind spots, because of this gaze from high above the city, the spatial configuration of Changan was depicted in a particularly clear and stratified manner in *Ode to the Western Capital* and *Ode to Western Capital*.

First, an overall sketch of the general topography and terrain of Changan was offered. Ban Gu noted in his *Ode to the Western Capital*,

Changan was guarded by Hangu pass and Mount Xiao on its eastern border with a view of Mount Taihua and Mount Zhongnan as its landmarks. On its western border it was protected by the valleys of Bao and Xia as well as Mount Longshou, irrigated by the rivers of Hong, Jing, and Wei as its belt. Flowing water paused and accumulated where the river bent, with the overflow waters turning westward.³

Zhang Heng offered a similar albeit more detailed description.

On its eastern borders lay the strategically positioned Xiao Pass and Hangu Pass...on its western border it was guarded by Mount Long...In front of the city stood Mount Zhongnan (also known as Mount Taiyi); in the back lay high hills and vast plains...on the far end was Mount Jiuzong and Sweet Spring... With such vast fields and rich soils, including top-quality farmlands, it was truly the center of Guanzhong area.⁴

Located at the center of Guanzhong area, Changan offers a panoramic view of mountains, passes, and rivers around it; such strategically formed topography and terrain were an important reason that Changan was chosen to be the capital. Following this overall sketch was a close-up portrait of Changan.

The spectacular city walls were long and high; outside of the walls of the moat ran deep like an abyss. Three wide avenues paralleled one another; twelve gates allowed a large population of people to come through. Inside of the city existed a large network of streets and avenues; in the alleys were thousands of residential houses. Nine government-regulated markets, separated by streets, accommodated the need for categorizing and trading various goods. The city was so crowded that one could barely look over one’s shoulder and carriages could barely make a turn in any direction. Dust brought by the crowd spread all over the city; it rose so high up in the sky that it could barely be distinguished from the clouds.⁵

In their description of the space inside of the city, Ban Gu and Zhang Heng used a sequential framework centering on the imperial palaces as the core and extending from the administrative halls to the enclosed residential chambers of the imperial family, from the political center to the residential quarters. This framework was consistent with the layout of the clusters of palaces in Han dynasty, characterized by “imperial court in the front and sleeping quarters in the back” or “halls in the front and residences in the back”. As the core site of political operations, the imperial courthouse had a lofty and solemn look, every single detail of which reflected the divinity of the imperial power. These administrative units were laid out in a particularly strict hierarchy: just like a myriad of stars revolved around the celestial pole, the administrative halls surrounded the imperial courthouse in a spirit of not only sharing the solemnity of its power but also illuminating the inviolability of the tip of the hierarchy of power.

The two authors’ gaze, however, did not linger on such a solemn and serene space; it quickly slid toward the enclosed residential chambers of the imperial family. In these residential quarters, the nerve-wrecking atmosphere ensuing from power was starting to dissipate. Compared with the administrative halls, the residential quarters were more resplendent and less boxy; “although the investment on construction materials was moderate, these residential quarters showcased the highest degree of luxury.”⁶ In their effort to depict the marvel of the decorations and furniture in the residential quarters of the imperial family, authors of odes used all kinds of ornamental rhetoric that had ever existed in their repertoire. Coincidentally, both Ban Gu and Zhang Heng mentioned Zhaoyang Palace:

Zhaoyang Palace was particularly magnificent; its magnificence reached its peak during the times of Empress Xiaocheng. It was hard to tell what construction materials had been used, and the

³ Ban Gu. *Ode to the Western Capital*

⁴ Zhang Heng, *Ode to Western Capital*.

⁵ Ban Gu. *Ode to the Western Capital*.

⁶ Zhang Heng. *Ode to Western Capital*.

walls were almost invisible. Decorated with colorful embroidery and silk ribbons, the palace looked so well-proportioned under the ascending moon.⁷

According to historical records, Emperor Cheng of Han dynasty doted on Zhao Feiyan and Zhao Hede, who were sisters. Zhao Hede lived in Zhaoyang Palace:

The atrium was painted red; the palace was painted black. The staircase was made of gold-plated copper, covered with white jade. The cornices were decorated with gold rings, along with round, flat pieces of jade with a hole in the middle from Lantian, pearls, and green feathers are taken from precious birds. What unprecedented luxury!⁸

Beautiful women, beautiful palace, in such a space, the emperor was able to loosen up and have fun to the extent that “he did not want to ever leave the residential quarters of his harem; all he wanted was endless happiness.”⁹ As the emperor went from the imperial courthouse to the residential quarters of his harem, in this process, feelings of anxiety accompanying exercise of power started remitting, and feelings of joy sprouted.

Spatial construction of the image of Changan did not stop here. The emperor would not be contented with confining the space for indulging in pleasure and lust to the small residential quarters of the harem; he intended to extend this space beyond the imperial palaces and even beyond the city limits of Changan to wider spaces.

As the best-known get-away palace in Shanglin garden, Jianzhang Palace, located to the west of Changan city, had a style and appeal that were different from that of solemn administrative halls and magnificent residential quarters inside of the city. Description of those administrative halls would usually focus on rising staircase, solemn, heavy gates and gold statues of imperial guards. Description of the residential quarters of the harem would mostly focus on the shine and shimmer of high-quality jade, coral, and other decorations. By contrast, description of Jianzhang Palace focused on Shenming Terrace, Jinggan Tower, the statue of a phoenix flying against the wind, and other dazzling and appealing high-rise architectural works. For example,

Shenming Terrace stood out in Jianzhang Palace. It rose high up in the sky, towering over its peers. It was even higher than the clouds, with the rainbow winding through its beams. Even those who were light and nimble on their feet would be hesitant and unconfident in their attempt at climbing it. If they did try, they would not even make it halfway when the water ran dry in the wells. Their eyes would be so blurred that they could barely think. When they leaned back against the rails for a rest, they would feel as if that they were about to fall; in such a panic they would lose control of themselves and check to see if they were safe. They would look down for a way back, afraid of height yet disconcerted by the flow of air around them on the way down.¹⁰

As one climbed up higher, one would gain

a view of the rainbow-shaped curve of the palace and an understanding of where the god of clouds originated. Looking up while climbing up the high-rise tower, one would see a myriad of stars, including Yaoguang on the tip of the Big Dipper and Yusheng to its north.¹¹

With thousands of doors and gates, Jianzhang Palace was a fairyland on earth, whose charm was enhanced by a lake and a hill symbolizing nature. The hill was called Jiantai Mountain, also known as Mount Penglai; the lake was called Taiye Lake, also known as Penglai Lake. These elements received equal attention from the authors of odes.

In front of Jianzhang Palace stood Tangzhong Palace, with a panoramic view of the area. Looking back, one would see Taiye Lake, wide and deep. In the middle was Jiantai Mountain, high, colorful with lots of open space. Large volumes of clear water were flowing around the lofty mountain of the gods. Named Penglai, this mountain enjoyed the same status as the legendary mountains of Yingzhou and Fangzhang.¹²

Even the names themselves, Penglai (one of the three legendary mountains where gods and goddess of ancient China lived) and Taiye, suggested the atmosphere that the emperor wanted to be created through the hill and the lake. Ban Gu admired the palace with a heartfelt sigh: “This is truly a palace for the gods, not a place for us humans.”

If it can be said that the transition from the administrative halls of the imperial palaces to the residential chambers of the imperial family was a process of the diminishing of power, this process was enhanced by the gradual addition of elements of nature and the intensification of a heavenly atmosphere, when the authors of odes extended their gaze to Jianzhang Palace. The lake and hill of Jianzhang Palace were still nature in a symbolic sense. When these authors further extended their gaze to Shanglin Garden, they were completely immersed in a sense of authenticity of nature, dedicating their attention to hills, forests, lakes, ponds, plants, trees, birds, and animals. The vast Shanglin Garden

spanned valleys and hills all the way to Ding Lake in the east. Along the banks of the lake were slim willow trees. Adjacent to Wuzha Palace, it obstructed the view of Changyang Palace. Making a detour around Mount Huan, it reached Mount Niushou. The walls were all connected, adding up to over 400 Li in length.¹³

Shanglin garden was populated by rare and precious birds, animals, flowers, and trees as well as scattered palaces and chambers. At this point the authors of odes were no longer able to focus; all they could do be looking around. Shanglin Garden had become a miniature universe, the backdrop for the magic permeating the city of Changan.

⁷ Ban Gu. *Ode to the Western Capital*.

⁸ *Zi Zhi Tong Jian*, Vol.11.

⁹ Zhang Heng. *Ode to Western Capital*.

¹⁰ Ban Gu. *Ode to the Western Capital*

¹¹ Zheng Heng. *Ode to Western Capital*.

¹² *Ibid*.

¹³ *Ibid*.

3. CHANGAN AS A LIVING BODY IN THE ODES TO THE CAPITALS

It does not suffice to construct the image of Changan merely in a spatial sense. Changan was more than just a spatial existence; it was also a temporal existence. It could be viewed not only as a static sample; it could also be viewed as a dynamic living body as well. The living nature of this temporal existence could be understood from two perspectives: first, from the perspective of the historical growth of the city itself; second, from the perspective of human activities in the city. As mentioned previously, Ban Gu and Zhang Heng did not devote too much of their writing to the history of Changan, but they were diligent in their effort to describe the activities of people living in the city.

A bird's-eye view observing the city from high above is undoubtedly important to any attempt at describing it. It was from such a perspective that Ban Gu and Zhang Heng completed their portrait of the static Changan, from its terrain and layout to its palaces and gardens. But a city portrayed exclusively in this manner was not yet a living body. Changan was more than just architectural aggregation. As solid existences, those magnificent palaces and spacious gardens, lakes, and hills of course mirrored the grandeur and luxury of the city; however, without human activities, even the most spectacular architectural work would not be capable of truly arousing emotional agitation in one's heart.

If the spatial construction of the image of Changan can be facilitated by a set of eyes that witness the city from high above, then an attempt to fondle the dynamics of a temporal city would require more participation and empathy, even if in one's imagination.

Businesses and trade flourished in Changan, as noted by the authors of odes.

A large number of markets were opened, connected by an intricate network of streets and avenue and kept in order by a sufficient number of market administrators. Following the political system of Zhou dynasty, the rulers of Han dynasty granted these market administrators a rank equivalent to that of a captain. A wide array of merchandise was available, ranging from flowers and birds to daily necessities and antiques. Everything sold well; every business was profitable.¹⁴

But the authors' comments were not positive because the wealth brought by the prosperity of businesses easily led to presumptuousness on the part of those with a high economic status but low social status.

Those merchants in the markets, men and women alike, led a life that was even more luxurious than that of noble members of the imperial family. As for those filthy rich such as Guo Xie, the Zhuo family, the Zhi Family, and Zhang Li, they were extravagant in their daily lives both at home and on the road as well as in socializing with one another.¹⁵

Although the rulers of Han dynasty imposed many constraints on the conduct of the merchants, in reality, in the later years of the dynasty, these constraints could hardly take effect. Aggregation and flourishing of businesses and trade produced wealth but also evil. "Why labor diligently when fraud and dishonesty would suffice to sustain a profitable business?"¹⁶ Changan was characterized by not only extravagance ensuing from booming businesses but also chivalry that was passed down from the periods of the Warring States and Qin dynasty all the way through Han dynasty.

Those city knights-errant, represented by the likes of Zhang Hui and Zhao Fang, aspired to the status of the famous aristocrat Wu Ji from the state of Wei and wanted to emulate Tian Wen from the state of Qi during the period of the Warring States. They prioritized loyalty to friends over their own lives. They formed their own communities, which attracted a truly large number of followers. Knights-errant like Yuan She of Maoling and Zhu Anshi of Yangling were well-known for their valour and their ability to move as swiftly as tigers and cougars. They got irritated so easily that even the most trivial matter would get them into a fight, leaving dead bodies behind them on the street corners.¹⁷

These descriptions provided mutual corroboration for the records of the Chinese knights-errant in Records of the Grand Historian. Xun Yue defined the Chinese knights-errant as follows: "Those who aspired to the natural arrogance of the aristocrats of Qi during the period of the Warring States, who were presumptuous, adept at maintaining a social network of their peers so as to rise above the masses." Sima Qian made a similar remark:

As for the so-called knights-errant, although their behavior violated the social norms, they distinguished themselves by their sincerity and trustworthiness. They meant what they said and were determined to accomplish what they set out to do in an effort to always keep their promise. They would risk their own lives to rush to the aid of those in distress.¹⁸

The wayward, wild traits of the knights-errant might be in line with the open, high-profiled nature of Changan. However, Changan of the Western Han dynasty was, after all, not yet a city of the people in a real sense; it was still a city that was built and that revolved around the imperial power. Therefore, no matter how active the city residents were, in actuality, what could truly represent the essence of this capital city was the activities performed by the aristocratic members of the imperial family.

These activities of course included various rituals, which, be it an imperial court ceremony or a worship ceremony offering sacrifices to ancestors and holy spirits, were with no exception solemn, orderly, and divine. The famous formal imperial ceremony performed under the guidance of Shusun Tong (a Confucian scholar in Han dynasty) at the beginning of Han dynasty was documented in historical records as follows:

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ *Records of the Grand Historian, Biographies of Knights-errant.*

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Ibid.

It was winter time, in October, that the construction of Changle Palace was completed. All aristocrats and officials went to the imperial court to congratulate the emperor. At the crack of dawn, the imperial receptionist started the ceremony by ushering the aristocrats and officials into the palace in an orderly fashion. Military officers all lined up on the west side of the palace, facing east; civil officials lined up on the east side, facing west. Some of the imperial guards stood by the staircase outside; others stood in the middle of the palace, all holding weapons or carrying flags. Then, as the emperor came out of his chamber in his imperial carriage, the court servants raised their flags to alert and prompt the aristocrats and the officials to pay respects to the emperor in order of rank. All aristocrats and officials showed respect for and awe of the emperor with no exception. Following the ceremony was a formal banquet. The court servants and officials all knelt and lowered their head. In order of rank, when their turn was up, they would stand up and make a toast to the emperor. After nine rounds of toasting, the receptionist announced "End of banquet". The censor monitored the whole process, ushering away anyone who did not behave according to the norms of the ritual. Thus throughout the celebration ceremony and the banquet from beginning to end, no one dared to make any noise or violate the norms of the ritual.¹⁹

Despite the fact that this ceremony took place only shortly after the emperor and his officials were inducted into their positions, it already demonstrated a surprisingly high degree of orderliness and solemnity, not to mention subsequent ceremonies held in the later years of the dynasty. But orderly ceremonies like this were neglected in the odes because they did not add to the construction of an image of hubbub and luxury intended of Changan by the authors of odes. Instead, they were elaborated in the odes describing the rival city of the western capital, titled *Ode to the Eastern Capital* by Ban Gu and *Ode to Eastern Capital* by Zhang Heng. The two authors happened to set eyes on the same activity, hunting, which was another prototypical activity in Han dynasty besides rituals.

"The affairs of the state center on two things: worship ceremonies and war."²⁰ The Western Han dynasty frequently battled for an expansion of its territory. Emperor Wu in particular initiated and won many battles against the northern ethnic group Xiongnu and the southern ethnic group Nanyue. As noted by Ban Gu, Shanglin Garden was filled with such precious items as "the legendary animal kylin from Jiuzhen, horses from Dawan, rhinoceroses from Huangzhi, and birds from Tiaozhi", all of which could be viewed as by-products of the emperor's military victories. These by-products in turn heightened the emperor and aristocrats' enthusiasm for war. Yet real wars after all were relatively far away from the capital city, and the emperor was unlikely to fight a battle himself; the empire needed to vent its hormones of belligerence through another channel. Hunting was precisely what they needed: It had the thrills of war with a much lesser degree of danger. Hunting started with

some elements of a military drill, but later it became basically a pure pleasure-seeking activity that cost enormous manpower and material resources. In *Ode to the Western Capital* and *Ode to Eastern Capital*, much of the writing was devoted to rich and vivid descriptions of the magnificence of the Ceremonial Guard holding flags and other ornaments on the emperor's hunting trips, the hubbub of the warriors chasing and hunting birds and animals as well as happy allotment of the booty and the big drinking parties held afterwards. In these descriptions, the authors of odes no longer viewed and fondled Changan from a perspective up above the city; they became members of the hunting team, as if they were experiencing first-hand the dazzling burst of excitement. From hunting, one gained confidence in getting what they wanted from nature as well as admiration of one's own strength and power at the sight of animals fleeing in a panic. The literati of course deemed such excitement and admiration inappropriate; in fact, they never stopped in their criticism and dissent of hunting. Jia Yi for instance once voiced his concern to the emperor in writing:

Which is more important, the pleasure of hunting or the security of the nation?...I don't see how we could ensure security by fighting not ferocious enemies but wild pigs, hunting down not rebels but domesticated rabbits, and not engaging in guarding against major potential threats but indulging in minor doses of pleasure.²¹

When Emperor Wu went on hunting trips to Changyang, Sima Xiangru also wrote a satirical ode as a reminder for the emperor. Ban Gu and Zhang Heng shared the same value judgment: the harder they tried to glorify the awe of hunting, the more obvious their disapproval of the emperors' pursuit of pleasure exemplified by hunting.

Ode to Western Capital also offered a vivid description of a variety show, which was one of the pleasure-seeking activities favored by the emperors and mirrored partially the grandeur of Changan. The show was filled with the worship of power and strength.

Men of unusual strength were lifting bronze Ding (an ancient Chinese vessel with three legs); acrobats from Dulu were performing pole-climbing, walking through loops of knives, jumping over a basin of water like a bird, and stabbing at their chest with a knife. Those acrobats hopped through showers of pellets and thickets of swords; they walked on tight ropes in pairs toward each other.²²

Performers imitating white tigers were playing Se (an ancient Chinese string instrument); performers imitating black dragons were playing Chi (an ancient Chinese instrument made of bamboo). Female singers sat there, singing in a clear voice and with beautiful twists and turns. The lead performer stood there in clothes made of furs and feathers, coordinating the singing. Before the music ended, clouds started to mass and snow was falling from the sky. The snow fell in small flakes first and then became fluffy. The performers rolled stones in high-rise pavilions to imitate the sound of thunder, the roaring sound

¹⁹ *Zi Zhi Tong Jian*, Vol.11.

²⁰ Master Zuo's Spring and Autumn Annals, The 13th Year of the Reign of King Cheng.

²¹ *The Book of Han, Biographies of Yuan Ang and Cao Cuo*

²² Zhang Heng, *Ode to Western Capital*.

of which represented the majesty of the emperor. Performers walked about in a wriggly manner, imitating the movement of a giant snake. From the back of the snake the lofty mountain presented itself to the view of the spectators.²³

Every detail of the show, from music and dancing to the background, mirrored sheer magic and intoxication. This theme was completely different from the theme of moderate and harmonious propriety represented by the rituals of Zhou dynasty, a dynasty that “regulated music by rituals and popularized rituals through music”. Thus, although these shows were so entertaining as to intoxicate the authors of odes, who were immersed in the dazzling atmosphere, what remained of their rationality still steered them towards criticism of the extravagant lifestyle reflected in these shows.

CONCLUSION

The odes of authors, with an almost split personality, completed the construction of a comprehensive view of Changan, from its existence in space to its existence in time, from the static palaces, lakes and hills to the dynamic customary practices of its people. On the one hand, in terms of spatial configuration, from its natural terrain to the transition inside of the city from the palaces to the lakes, hills, and gardens, the layout of Changan was depicted in a particularly clear and stratified manner in *Ode to the Western Capital* and *Ode to Western Capital*. On the other, descriptions of the human activities in the

city focused in particular on hunting and entertainment. Such descriptions and descriptions of the spatial configuration of the city mutually reinforced each other in a collective effort to intensify the theme of luxury. On an emotional level, the authors of the odes were deeply attracted to this capital city of luxury and magnificence. Yet, as noted in *Ode to the Eastern Capital* and *Ode to Eastern Capital*, these authors’ ideal capital city was not the charming and tempting Changan but Luoyang, the eastern capital. Of course, the charm of Changan as such did not diminish because of their criticism; on the contrary, it was because of such depictions in the odes to the capital that Changan became even more appealing to subsequent generations over time and space. Thus, these odes continuously instilled into Changan elements of sustainability conducive to the growth of the city, which eventually reached its highest level of glamour in Tan dynasty.

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²³ Ibid.