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An Exploration of the Connection between Sima Xiangru's FU and Shu Cultural Elements

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Abstract: The abundant material and spiritual wealth of Shu, spanning millennia, vividly manifests in Sima Xiangru's fu works, transforming into a romantic breeze that still captivates readers across centuries. By disseminating his literary pieces throughout the Han Empire and to later generations, Sima Xiangru created a series of renowned fu compositions, whose grand and elaborate diction exerted an undeniable influence on the establishment of Shu's cultural paradigm. Through elegant prose that satirizes the pursuit of power and conveys admonitions with literary ingenuity, Han fu from Shu further distinguishes itself with its profound underlying themes, shining as a brilliant star in the history of Chinese civilization and serving as a guiding beacon for repeated scholarly interpretation. Therefore, this study analyzes the connection between Sima Xiangru's fu and Shu cultural elements based on his six extant fu works.

Keywords: Sima Xiangru's fu; Shu cultural elements; connection

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1. Introduction

1.1. The Vastness of Heaven and Earth: What Is "Shu"?

Shu possesses a timeless cultural allure, with its poetic legacy resonating through millennia. The term "Shu" inevitably evokes images of the southwestern region of the country, with its lush mountains, abundant rivers, fertile gardens, and bountiful fruits. "To the east, it borders Ba; to the south, it connects with Yue; to the north, it is demarcated from Qin; and to the west, it encompasses the towering E and Bo Mountains. The land is called the 'Land of Abundance,' and the plain is known as Huayang." This description in Records of Huayang: Annals of Shu highlights the perilous terrain and secluded mystique of Shu. Surrounded by Ba, Yue, and Qin to the east, south, and north, and bordered by the Min and Bo Mountains to the west, the rugged and strategically vital geography fostered the crystallization of human wisdom and the creation of enduring literary works. "The road to Shu is harder than climbing to the sky," as poets like Li Bai measured these treacherous peaks and deep ravines with awe, ensuring that the chants and verses of this land would resonate for generations, never fading with time.

As an important part of Chinese civilization, Ba Shu culture has a long history and unique charm, and its international dissemination is of great significance in the context of "Belt and Road" [1]. From the point of view of natural imagery, Ba Shu is located in a remote area with steep mountains, and Mount Wu and Mount Emei are common images in poets' writings, while animal imagery such as birds and deer also appears frequently in Ba Shu literature [2]. Shu as a state originated in the legendary era, sharing territorial

boundaries with Ba. Geographically adjacent, these two regions have increasingly been shown to possess intricate connections. The Ba and Shu region is marked by scarce plains and predominantly mountainous terrain [3]. Although located in the Sichuan Basin in the southwest corner of China, the Shu culture gained its glory in the Eastern Zhou Dynasty (770-221BCE) [4]. Therefore, the "Shu" discussed in this paper refers not only to the geographical area centered on Chengdu and encompassing southern Shaanxi and northern Yunnan but also to the broader southwestern region deeply shaped by Shu civilization in cultural terms.

1.2. Amidst Countless Works, Only "Shu" Stands Distinct

The term "fu," as a literary technique frequently seen in the Book of Songs, was first documented in the Rites of Zhou: "The six poetic forms are taught: feng, fu, bi, xing, ya, and song." Fu, a highly ornate and rhymed form of prose characterized by rich descriptive language, is generally considered a type of poetry [5]. In the trinity of fu, bi and xing, fu seems the least controversial element, for people believe its meaning is straightforward [6]. The Chinese critical terms 'fu', 'bi' and 'xing' have been repeatedly discussed since the beginning of this century [7]. Regarding how and when fu evolved into a celebrated literary genre, academic circles have long held diverse opinions. However, it is undeniable that fu occupied a prominent position in mainstream Han Dynasty literature. During such a period of great unification, literature developed splendidly, and many literary masters were born. Various literary styles such as Han fu, historical records, Yuefu songs and poems, political essays, and literati poems all flourished in the literary world and occupied an important position in the history of Chinese literature [8]. The significance of Han fu in literary history is comparable to that of Tang poetry, Song lyrics, and Yuan drama. The unique historical and temporal context shaped the achievements of Han fu writers, whose brilliance remains unmatched by later generations. However, despite the limitations of their writing technologies, the Western Han court produced "great rhapsodies" (da fu) of several thousand characters [9]. Yet, among the vast corpus of Han fu writers and their works, those from Shu and their compositions stand out as truly exceptional.

This assertion is by no means groundless. The century-long splendor of Han fu from Shu had already quietly commenced with the literary endeavors of Shu's scholars. Liu Yuejin's *Literary Geography and Distribution of Scholars in Qin and Han Dynasties* provides regional cultural data showing that *Bibliographical Treatise of Han History* records 10 literary works by Ba-Shu scholars totaling 118 pieces, including Fu of Sima Xiangru, Fu of Yang Xiong, and Fu of Wang Bao, with 57 being fu compositions. Sima Xiangru has consistently been recognized as the first true master of the genre [10]. Broadly speaking, fu works by Western Han Shu writers constitute over half of the total Western Han fu output, demonstrating the particular affinity of Shu literati for this genre during that period.

However, when examining the geographical distribution of Han Dynasty fu works and their authors, it becomes evident that although the number of Han fu writers originating from Shu was relatively small, their collective output was remarkably prolific. This raises the question: how could Shu produce so many classics representing the pinnacle of Western Han grand fu? Was it the region's abundant fruits, lush vegetation, fertile rivers, and plains that provided Shu literati with rich material for depicting local products? Or did the myths of shamans, legends of mountains and seas, and other local folklore endow these writers with an innate romantic spirit? Shamanism traces its roots to the pre-agrarian hunters and nomadic cultures [11]. Guided by these questions, the following analysis will delve deeper into these matters.

1.3. Sima Xiangru: A Pivotal Figure in Literary Transition

The *Records of the Grand Historian: Biography of Sima Xiangru* states: "Sima Xiangru was a native of Chengdu in Shu Commandery." As one of Shu's most prominent

literati during the Han Dynasty, Sima Qian devoted two-thirds of Sima Xiangru's biography to highlighting his achievements in fu composition. A unique classical literary genre, Fu commonly appears in classical Chinese literature as well as in aesthetics and philosophy, thus constituting an important part in Chinese literature in all periods from ancient to contemporary [12]. During Emperor Jing's reign, Sima Xiangru, frustrated by unfulfilled ambitions, came under the patronage of Prince Xiao of Liang and accompanied him on travels, composing Fu on the Imperial Park. After returning to Shu, recommended by a fellow townsman, he gained an audience with Emperor Wu and produced the timeless masterpiece Fu on the Shanglin Park. Although limited in number, these six surviving fu works by Sima Xiangru exerted a profound and lasting influence. Liu Xie's *The Literary Mind* and the *Carving of Dragons: Wind and Bone* praised: "Sima Xiangru's fu transcend earthly concerns like immortals, with their spirit soaring above the clouds; his lush diction established him as a master of rhetoric, all due to the vigor of his literary force." Drawing inspiration from Shu's landscapes and local customs while influenced by cultural classics such as *The Songs of Chu* and *The Book of Songs*, Sima Xiangru's fu dazzled with ornate language and unyielding literary backbone, effectively pioneering Shu's distinctive literary tradition.

Thus, while analyzing the geopolitical factors shaping the fu works of Shu literati like Sima Xiangru, Wang Bao, and Yang Xiong, one must also consider how Sima Xiangru's personal style came to influence the entire stylistic foundation of Han fu writing in Shu. The following discussion will therefore examine the connection between Han fu and Shu cultural elements through the lens of Sima Xiangru's compositions.

2. Natural Wealth and Human Excellence: The Material Manifestation of Shu

Born in Chengdu, Shu Commandery during the early years of Emperor Wen of Han and passing away in 118 BCE, Sima Xiangru lived through six fleeting decades, leaving behind twenty-nine fu works documented in the *Bibliographical Treatise of Han History*. Although his later literary style was significantly influenced by Central Plains culture after serving under Emperor Wu, his formative first thirty years were spent entirely in Shu, where he lived and cultivated his craft. Prose masterpieces like *Proclamation to Ba and Shu* and *Debating with the Elders of Shu*, composed to advise the Han court on developing the southwest and strengthening ethnic ties, reveal his deep attachment to his homeland. Similarly, landscape-centered fu such as *Fu on the Imperial Park* and *Fu on the Shanglin Park* reflect the enduring imprint of Shu's life on his imagination. Viewing Shu's scenery through the lens of scholarly integrity and literary sensibility, Sima Xiangru was inevitably influenced by its natural features and local customs in his Han fu compositions. Thus, the first associative factor to examine is Shu's material essence.

2.1. Material Elements

2.1.1. Natural Landscapes and Local Products

The *Miscellaneous Records of the Western Capital* states: "The mind of a fu poet encompasses the cosmos and observes all things." Indeed, during Emperor Wu's reign, Sima Xiangru's literary style should have reflected the unified empire and Central Plains culture. Moreover, literary creation is rooted in reality, and the imagery in *Fu on the Imperial Park* would logically depict the landscapes of Liang. Yet, subtly, he redirected his gaze from the vast Central Plains or Liang to Shu. The following analysis will examine specific phrases from this excerpt, categorizing the "material" elements influenced by Shu into mountains and territories, flora, and fauna.

2.1.2. Mountains and Territories

"The mountains rise in winding majesty, lofty and precipitous; their jagged peaks obscure the sun and moon; interlaced and tangled, they pierce the azure clouds... The earth yields cinnabar, azurite, ochre, and chalk; orpiment and white quartz; tin, jade, gold,

and silver, a dazzling array of colors, gleaming like dragon scales... Bordered by the great river and bounded by Mount Wu." A close reading reveals the towering mountains, mighty rivers, and abundant minerals described in Master Zixu's account of the Yunmeng marshes in Chu. However, the author argues that these depictions unmistakably bear the imprint of Shu cultural elements.

2.1.3. Flora

The vegetation rooted in Shu's soil represents not only living organisms but also cultural imprints. The Records of Huayang: Annals of Shu notes that Shu "embodies the virtue of Shaohao, hence favors pungent aromas," indicating a longstanding preference for spicy and fragrant scents. This distinctive appreciation for "fragrance" became a hallmark of Shu literati, manifesting in two primary forms. First, culinary aromatics. Fu on the Shanglin Park describes water flowing through "pepper-mound pavilions," referencing valleys abundant with Sichuan pepper, a regionally distinctive spice inherently pungent. Second, aromatic herbs. Though Fu on the Tall Gate Palace was composed by Sima Xiangru to convey the grievances of Empress Chen to Emperor Wu, ostensibly focused on the Han palace, it still features herbal motifs: "I gather fragrant ruo to stuff my pillow, / Spread orchids and angelica for fragrant mats." Similarly, Fu on the Shanglin Park mentions "blending with miwu herbs, mingling with liuyi flowers," where intense fragrances permeate Shu's landscape through such luxuriant vegetation. Moreover, specific plants reflect local climates, allowing us to deduce the geographical underpinnings of Sima Xiangru's compositions.

2.1.4. Fauna

The frequent appearance of primates in Sima Xiangru's works, whether the "black gibbons wailing with prolonged cries" in Fu on the Tall Gate Palace or the "dark apes and pale females" in Fu on the Shanglin Park, demonstrates his particular preference for simian imagery. This was not unique to him, as generations of literati have employed the ape as one of Shu's representative symbols. This enduring association between Shu's landscapes abundant in primates and literary representation undoubtedly influenced Sima Xiangru's selection of faunal motifs. The Han fu tradition deliberately blended reality and illusion, depicting imperial prosperity through an ethereal, mysterious lens particularly evident in its animal imagery. While the precise geographical origins of every creature in Sima Xiangru's compositions may require further scholarly excavation, modern readers can still perceive how Shu's freely roaming birds, beasts, insects, and fish transformed into vivid zoological memories that animated his literary imagination.

2.1.5. Customs and traditions

The music of China has a profound historical background and a vibrant folk cultural tradition [13]. In the early Han Dynasty, the feudal ruling class, led by Emperor Wu of Han, began to construct a new ritual music system to better maintain the ruling position of the Western Han Dynasty [14]. The Han Dynasty occupies an exceptionally significant position in China's musical cultural history, having erected a monumental historical landmark through its splendid musical achievements. The musical culture of Shu during this period also exhibited distinctive regional characteristics, including its passionate and moving singers and dancers who emerged as a remarkable feature of the era, with Shu musicians demonstrating comprehensive mastery of bells, drums, panpipes, and reed pipes. Whether manifested in the performance of qin zithers and bronze bells or the selection of repertoire such as "Fa Tan," these elements primarily reflect the Han Dynasty as an era that revered Confucianism and ancient ritual music while prioritizing the welfare of the common people. Simultaneously, Sima Xiangru did not merely engage in the mere listing of musical instruments, costumes, and other elements; rather, he subtly revealed Shu's unique folk customs or embedded admonitory meanings within these depictions.

Specifically, the representation of Shu's folk music activities in Sima Xiangru's fu can be summarized into two broad categories: externally visible musical costumes and instruments, and internally expressive musical pieces and dance forms.

2.1.6. Musical Attire and Instruments

The infusion of Shu elements into Sima Xiangru's fu stems from his approach to depicting dancers not merely through their movements and expressions but through meticulous descriptions of their attire, thereby accentuating their ethereal grace. The detailed costume portrayals in Fu on the Imperial Park vividly reconstruct the lines, patterns, and textures of dance garments in the reader's mind, reflecting the advanced and diverse silk-weaving industry of the Han Dynasty, particularly in Shu. Simultaneously, instruments form the soul of music. Han fu works authentically reproduce the influence of Han musical culture and instrumentation on textual composition, with the dynasty's advanced musical development and evolving instrumentarium providing rich material. Shu's instruments, inheriting millennia of cultural legacy, occupy an irreplaceable position in the literary representations of the Han dynasty's fu compositions. Bells and drums, already widespread, proliferated in courtly and Shu's private residences after the establishment of the Music Bureau. Particularly noteworthy is the qin zither. Shu's guqin tradition boasts profound historical roots, evidenced by numerous Han-era zither-playing figurines excavated in Shu since the 1950s, offering critical archaeological validation of its local lineage.

2.1.7. Musical Compositions and Dance Forms

The influence of pre-Qin ritual music extended into the Han Dynasty, reflecting a grand vision of emulating ancient kings to forge a unified state. Pieces such as Li Shou, Zou Yu, and Fa Tan, along with the blended melodies of Chu, Wu, Zheng, and Wei, and the archery ritual songs and folk tunes originating from the pre-Qin period, demonstrate the unique character of Han music, rooted in Central Plains culture yet broadly incorporating elements from various regions. "A thousand voices sing, ten thousand join in harmony, mountains tremble at the sound, rivers ripple with waves." These few strokes depict a Han Empire resounding with music while also illustrating how the era's advanced musical techniques propelled the evolution of Han fu's expressive methods and artistic style. The Han dynasty in China essentially served as a hub for collecting and improving folk songs and dances. Poetry, music, and dance were taught as a form of education, and traditional knowledge-based practices had an excellent opportunity to develop under the Tang dynasty (A.D. 618–907) due to its governmental stability and economic success [15].

Sima Xiangru notably positioned the Bayu Dance at the forefront of his enumerated performances, unmistakably revealing the profound influence of Ba-Shu culture on his compositions. The Bayu Dance undoubtedly originated in Ba-Shu. Historical records consistently show Shu locals performing this dance during celebrations and sacrificial rites. Under Han rule, Shu Commandery's integration transformed the Bayu from a singular dance form into a symbol of cultural unity. The passionate movements and courageous fervor of Ba-Shu dancers enabled Sima Xiangru to vividly capture a distinct Shu aesthetic, seamlessly interwoven with Han culture in his literary works.

2.2. *The Imaginary*

Having discussed the influence of tangible elements from Shu on Sima Xiangru's fu compositions, we now turn to the "imaginary." Beyond these physically grounded entities, his works also encompass fantastical beings that may not have existed in the locations he described, in Shu, or even anywhere within the Han Dynasty or throughout historical time. Yet they seem to have waited millennia in Shu, anticipating a scholar's brush to validate their origins in the region's innate romanticism and unexplored realms of wonder.

2.2.1. Unrestrained Mythological Elements

Sima Xiangru's Han fu works embrace all phenomena and cosmic scope, teeming with extraordinary imaginings of bizarre species. These creatures emerge from distant pre-Qin mythology and traceable paths through Shu's shamanistic culture and the Chuci. Within this ethereal realm, numerous "imaginary" beings rooted in Shu's myths invite exploration, including the mountain deity embodied in the Rhapsody on the Great Man, the winged qiongqi beasts in Fu on the Shanglin Park, or the bifang birds symbolizing Shu's solar worship. Their textual presence, though geographically unbound, consistently channels Shu's cultural archetypes: hybrid creatures reflecting Ba-Shu totemism, celestial journeys mirroring Shu's shamanic ascent rituals, and metamorphic imagery paralleling Sanxingdui's zoomorphic masks. This mythic vocabulary operates as Shu's subconscious cultural grammar, where even invented marvels bear the imprint of its bronze-age imagination. The baima (white horse) and xuanlong (black dragon) in his works, while nominally Chu motifs, adopt distinctly Shu characteristics, as their fluid forms echo Jinsha artifacts' serpentine gold foils and their kinetic energy mirrors Shu's dynamic funeral dances. Through this synthesis, Sima Xiangru's mythological creations become less arbitrary fantasy than cultural palimpsests, layering Shu's symbolic heritage beneath imperial literary conventions.

2.2.2. The Imaginative Classic of Mountains and Seas

The Classic of Mountains and Seas, believed by later generations to have been composed during the early Han Dynasty with Mount Min in Shu as its central focus, garnered widespread attention among scholars and commoners alike. On one hand, Xie Zhen noted in Siming's Poetic Remarks: 'When Han writers composed fu, they necessarily read myriad volumes to cultivate their minds—with the Songs of Chu as primary and the Classic of Mountains and Seas as supplementary—drawing from it fantastical and exaggerated elements.'" Thus, the rich array of mythological creatures described in the Classic of Mountains and Seas frequently appears in Han fu. On the other hand, the geographical reception of the Classic of Mountains and Seas in other literary works was relatively limited; apart from Shu-based fu writers Sima Xiangru and Yang Xiong, few other literati employed its wondrous imagery. These two considerations demonstrate that the Classic of Mountains and Seas, as another representative of Shu cultural elements, exerted an exceptionally significant influence on Sima Xiangru's fu compositions.

3. Transcending Time and Space: The Projection of Shu's "Spiritual Consciousness"

3.1. Magnificent and Resplendent Intellectual Currents

During the Han Dynasty, national unification propelled cultural prosperity to unprecedented heights. Building upon its material abundance and thriving populace, Shu generated numerous distinctive creative elements imbued with novelty and romanticism. This phenomenon bifurcates analytically: firstly, through the process of national consolidation and ethnic integration, Shu literati absorbed orthodox Han ideologies, with their spiritual frameworks profoundly shaped by Central Plains culture and Confucian classics; secondly, the region's indigenous cultural splendors, including ethereal shamanistic traditions, primordial beliefs with transcendent artistic conceptions, and totemic worship, permeated the intellectual bloodstream of Shu scholars through gradual, imperceptible assimilation. The synthesis manifested in Sima Xiangru's works reveals this dual heritage: while his admonitory themes reflect Confucian statecraft absorbed through imperial education, his cosmological imagination channels Shu's bronze-age religious motifs, particularly evident in the Fu on the Great Man where celestial journeys structurally mirror Sanxingdui ritual axes' symbolic pathways. This intellectual hybridity ultimately forged a unique aesthetic paradigm that simultaneously served imperial discourse and preserved Shu's cultural DNA through literary alchemy.

3.1.1. Orthodox Thought Transmitted to Shu

The Han Dynasty vigorously promoted Confucianism, establishing it as the exclusive state doctrine. Its influence was particularly pronounced in the Central Plains under Han rule, while also leaving profound marks on Shu. By the time of Sima Xiangru's birth, Shu had been incorporated into the Han Empire for over two decades, allowing reasonable conjecture that he encountered Confucian texts during his formative years. Moreover, the "Wen Gong Educational Revival" significantly accelerated Confucianism's spread in Shu. The Records of Huayang: Annals of Shu documents: 'Wen established schools, selecting officials' offspring for education. Through his advocacy, Shu initiated this transformation.' As governor, Wen Gong implemented Confucian principles in regional administration, making them the guiding philosophy for governance and scholarship in Ba-Shu. This cultivated a generation of scholars who revered learning and Confucianism, establishing enduring intellectual traditions. Although Sima Xiangru's ornate literary style diverged somewhat from Confucianism's pragmatic emphasis on statecraft, his *Fu* on the Imperial Park, in which Master Wuyou criticizes Zixu, and *Fu* on the Shanglin Park, where Lord No-Such rebukes Wuyou, demonstrate Confucian-inspired efforts to uphold imperial authority through literature.

3.1.2. Multicultural Currents Extending to Shu

Shu's indigenous cultural tapestry, encompassing shamanistic traditions, ancestral worship, and totemic beliefs, has been previously examined. Regarding externally transmitted influences, the Chuci's profound impact demands particular attention. Chu territory originated from eastern Sichuan, maintaining close connections with Shu that facilitated the Chuci's cross-mountain transmission. As noted in *The Literary Mind and the Carving of Dragons*: "Drawing inspiration from the Book of Songs and expanding horizons through the Chuci." Han fu's aesthetic sensibilities, lyrical patterns, and concise rhythmic structures, evident in Sima Xiangru's works, all reflect this reception.

The adaptive use of the Chuci's 'fragrant herbs and beautiful women' motif exemplifies this influence. While botanical records confirm some aromatic plants like angelica (*Angelica dahurica*, noted in the *Classic of Mountains and Seas*'s Min Mountain entry) were native to Shu, the literary deployment of such imagery reveals Chu cultural permeation. Thus, Chu culture, particularly through the Chuci, merged with Shu's natural and cultural substrates, enriching local intellectual diversity while imparting mystical dimensions to Sima Xiangru's compositions. This synthesis augmented Shu literati's cognitive frameworks and infused Shu's Han fu with uniquely resplendent qualities.

3.2. *The Dialectical Interplay of Various Schools of Thought*

For Shu, while Confucianism undoubtedly ranked foremost among the assimilated philosophies in terms of didactic utility, the influence of the School of Diplomacy (Zonghengjia) on Han fu composition remains equally significant. There is a rationale for proposing a connection between the School of Diplomacy and Sima Xiangru. The inquiry must begin with Sima Xiangru himself. The Records of the Grand Historian: Biography of Sima Xiangru opens with a definitive statement about his life: "Sima Xiangru was a native of Chengdu in Shu Commandery... Admiring Lin Xiangru's character, he changed his name to Xiangru." Lin Xiangru, renowned for his rhetorical prowess, epitomized the School of Diplomacy during the Warring States period. That Sima Xiangru could access these concepts, particularly Lin Xiangru's, stems from the early transmission of diplomatic strategies to Shu, where they permeated local education. This traces back to the ninth year of King Huiwen of Qin, when Zhang Yi and Sima Cuo conquered Ba and Shu, establishing commanderies and relocating "ten thousand Qin households to populate them." The influx of Qin settlers and the arrival of Zhang Yi, a leading strategist of the School of Diplomacy, unquestionably initiated the ideological linkage between diplomatic thought and Shu. Thus, beyond Lin Xiangru's personal impact on Sima Xiangru, the entire intellectual

framework of the School of Diplomacy exerted profound creative influence on Shu's Han fu tradition.

3.2.1. Formal Inspirations

1) Unconstrained Linguistic Structures

Historically, the School of Diplomacy has been renowned for its eloquent rhetoric and persuasive discourse. Literally, "horizontal and vertical" refers to the diplomatic strategies of "alliances" and "confederacies" advocated by these strategists, broadly encompassing all diplomatic tactics, while the terms "short and long" phrases denote the varying lengths of their practiced persuasive speeches. As a philosophy born from turbulent times, the School of Diplomacy thrived in the fragmented tensions of warring states, resulting in a relatively unrestrained writing style that proved sufficient for elucidating principles and advising rulers. In "Zou Ji Advising King Qi to Accept Criticism," Zou Ji recounts the differing motives of his wife, concubine, and guest to persuade King Wei of Qi to welcome broader counsel. Similarly, in "Chu Long Persuades the Queen Dowager of Zhao," the elder minister Chu Long employs circumlocutory language to connect the queen's maternal love to the fate of the state. Both works employ colloquial yet emotionally precise and structurally flexible narrative language. This linguistic freedom, derived from diplomatic practices, permeated Shu's literary traditions through figures like Zhang Yi, ultimately manifesting in Sima Xiangru's fu through rhythmic variations, syntactic elasticity, and strategic shifts between descriptive grandeur and abrupt concision. This became a textual embodiment of the School's core tenet: "adapt rhetoric to circumstance."

2) The Distinctive Guest-Host Dialogue Format

During the era of horizontal and vertical alliances, the "debate confrontation" method was frequently employed by strategists of the School of Diplomacy during the Warring States period as a rhetorical device to engage in intellectual combat. Through extensive citation and accessible reasoning, they sought to elicit rulers' approval. An examination of Sima Xiangru's works reveals his masterful use of this dialectical structure. A particularly exemplary manifestation appears in *The Imperial Hunt Rhapsody*, which employs a three-layered guest-host dialogue framework.

Within *The Imperial Hunt Rhapsody*, the three fictional characters Zixu, Wuyou, and No-Such respectively represent the states of Chu, Qi, and the Han imperial court. The text begins with King Qi's dialogue with Master Zixu following a hunt, establishing the king as host and Zixu as guest. When questioned about the magnificence of Chu's hunting activities, Zixu's elaborate narration ultimately renders King Qi speechless. Subsequently, Zixu boasts to Wuyou, proclaiming Chu's Yunmeng marshes as peerless under heaven. The culminating exchange features No-Such refuting both interlocutors. Through their consequent humiliation, the text not only demonstrates the Han Empire's material abundance and territorial expanse but also subtly conveys the author's political critique against sensual indulgence in hunting, advocating instead for imperial frugality and concern for the populace through this meticulously interlocking debate structure. This tripartite rhetorical framework transforms the diplomatic persuasion techniques of the Warring States period into a sophisticated literary vehicle for expressing Han political ideology. Each dialogue layer progressively reinforces the central argument while maintaining dramatic tension.

3.2.2. Conceptual Inspirations

A prominent characteristic observable in Sima Xiangru's fu compositions is his inheritance of the utilitarian and purposive qualities inherent in the writings of the School of Diplomacy. When engaging in persuasion, these strategists skillfully employed 'elaborate exposition' with the intention of 'captivating the ruler's mind.' In other words, within their varied rhetorical devices of horizontal and vertical alliances lay the implicit expectation that the ruler would find pleasure in their words and consequently heed their counsel.

The reason Fu on the Imperial Park and Fu on the Shanglin Park first exhaustively enumerate extraordinary sights from various regions is to lay the groundwork for subsequently extolling the magnificence of the imperial hunt; likewise, Fu on the Great Man constructs a world brimming with immortality myths through romantic and resplendent imagination solely to cater to Emperor Wu's desire for transcendence and divine inquiry. Through such compositional methods, Sima Xiangru sought to secure imperial attention, employment, and admiration.

Regarding fu compositions of this nature by Sima Xiangru, scholars throughout history have criticized them for excessively pursuing ornate diction and elaborate accumulation while lacking substantive significance. However, when reexamined through the lens of the School of Diplomacy's distinctive traits, it becomes apparent that while he indeed embodied the literati's dilemma of serving imperial diversion, he simultaneously maintained the intellectual's principled concern for social realities.

4. Transcendent Vitality: A Literary Legacy Spanning Millennia

Synthesizing the preceding discourse, this conclusion delineates the interconnection between Sima Xiangru's fu and Shu cultural elements. Recognized historically as the preeminent Han fu master of Shu, Sima Xiangru inaugurated the region's distinctive cultural resonance and established its literary conventions, earning him the titles "Master of Rhetoric" and "Sage of Eloquence." Shu's abundant material splendor and exceptional intellectual currents collectively shaped the literary paradigm of Han fu composition in the region, enabling Sima Xiangru's works to assimilate rich nourishment from Shu while exerting profound influence on subsequent generations of Shu literati in their Han fu writing. With vitality transcending temporal boundaries and his texts enduring for millennia, the exploration of relationships between Sima Xiangru's fu and Shu cultural factors remains an ongoing scholarly journey. Within his compositions persist myriad brilliant foundations rooted in yet surpassing Shu culture, which continue to await contemporary scholars to traverse these millennial echoes and systematically uncover their depths.

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