Names Deeply Chiseled
Greco-Roman Motifs in Yang Mu’s Poetry

ABSTRACT This article provides the first comprehensive study of the use of ancient Greek and Roman allusions and motifs in the poetry of Yang Mu. By focusing on representative works from Yang’s oeuvre, the study sheds light on how the poet’s appropriations of Greco-Roman materials are a powerful and creative expression of his poetics as a whole. Going beyond the traditional model of influence study, the article proposes a theoretical framework of cross-cultural intertextuality, creative rewriting, and cultural translation.

KEYWORDS Yang Mu, Greek mythology, Pindar, Virgil, intertextuality

When it comes to Greece, we actually hold a great deal of imagination—or, to put it in a different way, memories.

關於希臘，我們其實保有很多想像，或者就說是回憶。

—Yang Mu

Yang Mu 楊牧 (1940−), the pen name of Ching-hsien Wang 王靖獻 or C. H. Wang, is widely considered one of the greatest poets in the Chinese-speaking world. To date, he has published fifteen books of original poetry (including a verse drama), most of which are collected in three tomes. His poetry has been the subject of more than a dozen studies, including one book in English and fifteen theses in Chinese.¹ He is also the recipient of many awards, including the prestigious National Award for Culture and Art in Taiwan (2000), the Newman Prize for Chinese Literature in the United States (2013), and the Cikada Prize in Sweden (2016).

One salient feature of Yang Mu is his dual identity as a major poet and an eminent scholar.² In fact, he has been hailed as the founder of the School of Academic Poets (Xueyuanpai 學院派) in Taiwan, a term that sometimes carries pejorative connotations but is nevertheless embraced by the poet.³ The epithet derives mainly from the fact that Yang holds a doctoral degree from one of the best universities in the world, the University of California, Berkeley; has published scholarship in
both English and Chinese; and has been a literature professor for more than four decades. Most significant, his scholarship is closely intertwined with his creative writing; his poetry, a deep engagement with world literature without ever being bookish or pedantic. To understand this connection, we need to know something about his educational background and intellectual proclivities.

After completing a BA in English literature at Tung Hai University in Taiwan in 1962 and the mandatory military service in 1964, Yang Mu left for the University of Iowa, where he entered the Creative Writing Program and received an MFA. He went on to pursue a PhD in comparative literature at the University of California, Berkeley. As a graduate student there, Yang Mu focused on classical poetry from Chinese and European traditions. After a short stint of teaching at Princeton University and the University of Massachusetts Amherst, he joined the faculty in the Department of Comparative Literature and the Asian Studies Program at the University of Washington in Seattle, in 1974. In the ensuing decades, he also taught in Taiwan and Hong Kong and served first as dean of humanities and social sciences at the National Dong Hwa University in Hualian and then as director of the Institute of Chinese Literature and Philosophy at Academia Sinica, the premier research institute in Taiwan. Since 2016 he has retired from teaching, though he still holds an endowed chair at the National Dong Hwa University in his hometown.

Besides being a poet and scholar, Yang Mu is a translator. When he was an MFA student at the University of Iowa from 1964 to 1966, with the help of his professor Frederic Will and his classmate Robert Casto, he translated Federico García Lorca’s Romancero gitano (Gypsy Ballads; 1928) into Chinese.4 In the past two decades, Yang Mu has published several volumes of Chinese translations of Western classics, including William Butler Yeats (1997), William Shakespeare’s The Tempest (1999), an anthology of English poetry (2007), and Sir Gawain and the Green Knight (2016).

The trajectory of Yang Mu’s academic and literary career makes clear the poet’s deep immersion in, and expert knowledge of, both Chinese and world literature, in particular, European literature. Scholars have often commented on the relations between his poetry and classical Chinese literature on the one hand, and between his poetry and English romanticism on the other. However, his use of Greco-Roman classics has received little critical attention. In what follows, I fill the lacuna in Yang Mu studies and focus on ancient Greco-Roman motifs and allusions. An analysis of how they function in individual poems reveals the important role they play in Yang Mu’s poetry. Moreover, the role goes beyond semantic and rhetorical to shed light on the underlining poetics.

At UC Berkeley Yang Mu studied several languages, including ancient Greek. The poem “Remembering Berkeley (Aorist: 1967)” 懷念柏克萊 (Huainian Boke-lai), written in 1992, recalls a scene in graduate school when one day he was memorizing the conjugations of Greek verbs, hence the subtitle. As a junior scholar, in 1975 Yang Mu published a substantial study titled “Toward Defining a Chinese
Heroism.” The essay opens by evoking Virgil: “The Aeneid is an epic written in a concise, elliptical style to envision the destiny of Rome through a sequential depiction of the traces of Aeneas.” Based on this paradigm, Yang Mu goes on to analyze five poems from the Shiijing (Classic of Poetry), the oldest collection of Chinese poems that span from the eleventh through the sixth century BCE. Together, the five poems paint a vivid picture of the founding of the Zhou dynasty (1046–256 BCE) and center on the great king Wen. Hence, Yang Mu names them Weniad, the Chinese equivalent of the Aeneid. In his conclusion, the poet remarks: “Collectively, the poems are comparable . . . to the victory odes of Pindar or Bacchylides.” Although Chinese literature has no epics in the Western sense, he believes that the Weniad expresses “an epic experience” of the early Chinese people.

In a more recent essay titled “Alluding to the Text, or the Context,” Yang Mu argues that in both early China and ancient Greece, philosophers draw extensively on poetic allusions to convey their thoughts. Just as Confucius referred to the Shiijing, so Plato referred to Homer.

Even before graduate school Yang Mu had already acquired a broad knowledge of Greek mythology. In his early poetry in the 1950s and early 1960s, written under the pen name Ye Shan 葉珊, we find several references, such as Narcissus 水仙花 in the eponymous poem (1961), The Iliad in “Farewell to Rainbow” 辭虹 (Cihong; 1963), and Ceres in “Wild Field of Yellow Cauliflowers” 菜花黃的野地 (Caihuahuang de yedi; 1964). The most significant example from the period is “To Athena” 給雅典娜 (Gei Yadianna), written in 1964. The poem is the sixth in a sequence of seven poems Yang Mu wrote in 1962–64; the others are “To Melancholy” 給憂鬱 (Gei youyu), “To Wisdom” 給智慧 (Gei zhihui), “To Fate” 給命運 (Gei mingyun), “To Loneliness” 給寂寞 (Gei jimo), “To Time” 給時間 (Gei shijian), and “To Death” 給死亡 (Gei siwang). Right away, the poem stands out because it seems to be the only one in the sequence that has a person (a Greek goddess) rather than an abstract noun as the title.

“To Athena” is divided into three sections: “Hunter of the Season” 季節的獵人 (Jijie de lieren), “The Classical Silhouette” 古典的側面 (Gudian de cemian), and “Elegy” 哀歌 (Aige). The first section opens with a hunting scene, with images of horn, flute, hunter, and bonfire in a cold, moonlit forest by the sea. In the ensuing stanzas, new contexts emerge as the poet introduces more images, such as a maiden returning with an earthenware jug, an apple orchard, a grape harvest festival, a man nursing the sword wound on his arm, and “Antigone died in the cold cellar / a bleeding grave gazes at a star” 安蒂格尼死在冷冷的地窖裡/流血的墳地,仰望一顆星. The amalgamation of the images suggests two of Athena’s roles: the goddess of agriculture and of war. At the end of the section, hunting returns and Athena is named for the first time: “By the riverbank, on the hill, under the eaves of the temple / dewdrops are congealing—Athena’s tears” 在河岸，在山坡，在神廟的屋簷下/露水凝聚著，是雅典娜的淚. The image of the maiden evokes multifarious
references. First, it implies both Antigone, who died a virgin, and Athena as a virgin
goddess. Second, the temple may well refer to the Parthenon, known as the Maiden
as it is dedicated to Athena, the patron goddess of Athens.

The second section depicts Athena’s “classical silhouette” in the bronze moon-
light, linking her directly with war: “Your cheeks are as red as battle flames / rising
from the western edge of the city—words of withered leaves” 你的頰紅如戰火/自
城的西沿升起——枯葉的語言. In contrast to connotations of martial might and
victory, both sections of “To Athena” evoke decay and death, grief and mourning.
The progress from “battle flames” to “withered leaves” suggests the bitter end of war.
Together, they pave the way for the climax in the last section of the poem, “Elegy.”

The third section begins with such desolate images as “icy bell chimes,” a
fallen star, “weeping,” tears, and a grave. It also compares footprints to “scars,” and
the man in hiding to a “wandering slave.” The poem ends with these two stanzas:

Let the shepherd see, under Athena’s braided hair
war, glory, bouquets of flowers, and meditation
Who will carry the earth that has fallen ill . . .
who will carry the earth that has fallen ill
amid sights of myths, after wheat has been
harvested
back to classical tributes? Oh, peninsula!

The long night on the peninsula is the color
of Athena’s eyes, gazing at the souls of the dead
wandering from this kingdom, to that kingdom
Yet, when spring days mark the boundary
of Greece
with prairies and branches, when grapes ripen
in autumn
flowing across the earth and singing a song,
Oh Athena
who will light a bonfire of yesterday for the
trembling hunter?

The section brings together all the scenes from the preceding sections: hunting,
planting, herding, and death. In juxtaposing “war, glory, bouquets of flowers,
and meditation,” which are associated with Athena, on the one hand, and with the
wretched earth, the lost souls of the dead, and the “trembling hunter” on the
other, the poem suggests a connection between the immortal goddess and the mor-
tal world that she “gazes” upon with sympathy and sorrow. This is supported by the recurrent images of tears and weeping throughout the sequence, the juxtaposition between the goddess and the tragic figure Antigone, and Athena’s eyes as dark as “the long night.” In short, she is portrayed as a sympathetic witness to human suffering.

In a 2004 lecture he gave at the University of Tokyo, Yang Mu recalled the circumstances of the composition of the poem. It was inspired by a bronze statue of Athena in a photograph that he had seen two years before. The poet was “fascinated by the verdigris on the statue.” Besides the poem, he also recorded the image in prose, in which he described her “blue eyes, cold beauty, often dressed as a warrior in awesome armor, holding a spear and a shield.” All of these attributes are subtly captured in the poem.

As noted earlier, “To Athena” is the only poem in the sequence Yang Mu wrote in 1962–64 not named after an abstraction, like wisdom or fate. However, the observation needs modifying because, according to the poet, he treated Athena no differently from the other topics. In fact, the sequence marks a threshold in the development of the poet’s thinking and writing:

For no reason I became sick and tired of too many lyrical feelings, refined metaphors, and symbolic prototypes. I wanted to create another syntax, through which to explore unknown or unusual concepts, especially abstract concepts such as melancholy and loneliness, to find out if a different mode of thinking could find an appropriate art form to express itself; and I should only be a witness, an organizer of words.

In the above-mentioned lecture in Tokyo, Yang Mu also invokes Shelley’s “Hymn to Intellectual Beauty” as the inspiration for the entire sequence and quotes these lines from Shelley’s 1816 poem to describe his own growth as a young poet:

While yet a boy I sought for ghosts, and sped
Through many a listening chamber, cave and ruin,
And starlight wood, with fearful steps pursuing
Hopes of high talk with the departed dead.
I call’d on poisonous names with which our youth is fed;
I was not heard; I saw them not;
When musing deeply on the lot
Of life. . . .
The poet’s account explains the rather unusual representation of the Greek goddess. “To Athena” is a collection of somber vignettes of personas and scenes that evoke loss and destruction. For example, in the third section, the images of burying “many sweet birthdays” under fallen flowers and leaves and “coloring Eirene a dark red of late autumn” are ominous and reinforce the section’s title, “Elegy.”17 Like Athena in the poem, the poet is a sympathetic witness to the vicissitudes and sorrows in life. Like the other poems of the sequence, “To Athena” is a young poet’s “musing on life.”

For decades, Yang Mu’s poetry has been distinguished by its creative reinterpretations of Chinese classics, often in the form of dramatic monologue. In articulating his poetics, he has repeatedly emphasized how important it is for poets to have a solid command of classical Chinese literature. Nevertheless, he has continued to draw on Western classics in his writings, poetry as well as prose. In December 1975, he wrote the poem “Virgil” 味吉爾:

Long hair spreading on my left arm 　　長髮在我左手臂上散開
At this moment you rest your head on the 　　這時你枕著黎明的風
wind of dawn 　　風在我單薄破敗的袖中
With the wind filling my thin and torn sleeves 　　我枕著味吉爾
I rest my head on Virgil 　　這時你凝望窗前的燈
At this moment you gaze at the lamp 　　但我知道你在思想羅馬
by the window, but I know you are thinking of Rome 　　除了流浪和建國的殺伐
Besides wandering and empire-founding slaughters 　　你應該也記取一些美好的牧歌
you should also remember some fine eclogues 　　風來自嵯峨的金樹枝
The wind comes from the lofty golden bough 　　而這裏有一片淡墨的寒林
and here is a grove of bitter cold trees in pale ink 　　寒林規劃著隱者的心
regulating the heart of the recluse 　　我讓你枕著黎明的手臂
I’ll let you rest your head on the arm of dawn 　　我枕著味吉爾
I rest my head on Virgil and 　　聽到城的焚燒和頹落
hear the burning and fall of citadels 　　兵刀棄在晨煙的原野上
Swords abandoned on the morning field 　　海面一艘大船靜靜等候
in haze, on the sea a large ship waits in silence. 　　18

The poem contains several images that evoke Virgil’s (70–19 BCE) Aeneid, including Aeneas’s wandering after the fall of Troy, his descent into the underworld with the golden bough, and the founding of Rome. In addition, Vir-
gil’s Eclogues, a sequence of ten pastoral poems, is mentioned. Even though Eclogues has a political dimension, by saying “you should also remember some fine eclogues” Yang Mu seems to contrast it with the Aeneid, thus juxtaposing the epic and the lyric. Lyricism mainly stems from the intimate relationship between the “I” and the “you” represented in the poem: she rests her head on his arm at the break of dawn while he rests his head on Virgil. The literal depiction morphs into the metaphorical or even surrealistic as she rests her head on the “wind of dawn” in line 2 and the “arm of dawn” in line 12. Similarly, when the image of laying his head on Virgil recurs in line 13, it may not be literal after all but, rather, refers to ruminating on the Aeneid in his mind. The poem ends on a note of silence, suggesting that all the “slaughters” and “burning” have come to an end.

Greco-Roman sources have continued to be an inspiration in Yang Mu’s recent work. For example, we find references to Pythagoras (110–50? BCE) in “Corroded” (Dushi; 2000), the Furies in “Old-Fashioned Dialectics” (Laoshi de bianzheng; 2005), and Daedelus in “Isaac the Scout” (Yisa chihou; 2001). Three poems from the new century especially deserve a closer look. The first is “Pindar’s Ode—472 BC” (Pingda’er zuosong; 2000):

Praise his horsemanship like a concentrated gaze

the vortex in a rushing current quickly takes form

impeccable and beautiful; in a flash

the brilliant details expand into nothingness

A newborn baby bundled in thick kunai grass

hidden in a gold and violet bush

his wandering father was once a god

and used to roam this place—

And yet, by her, his name was brought to the memory of two kind grey-eyed serpents

who cared for him until he could stand to race with the wind among pansies

Only her whereabouts are unknown to us perhaps she is overlooked in the rhetoric and rhymes of poetry

Praise his 马術如 專注凝視

一朵漩渦在 急流 里 短暫取 得 完整

美麗的形式，瞬息間

燦爛的細節超越擴 大 至 於虛無

新生 嬰 兒在厚厚的白茅純 束 裏裹 著

藏在金黃和深紫羅 兰 的 花叢

他浪 跡的生父原 本是神，之前

曾經，這一帶來回路 週

而名字早由她親自交 代給那 一對

慈藹的蛇記 得仔細， 負責 照顧他直 到

起立试能在三色堇 草地裏和風 賽跑的

那一對灰眼蟒 蛇

唯獨她的下落我們一 無所知

恐怕忽略在詩的修 辭 和韻類裏了
where the form of praise is completed and at once returns to nothingness, like a beautiful vortex vanishing in the current.

The date in the title points to *Olympian 6* written by the Greek lyric poet Pindar (517–438 BCE). It is a tribute to Hagesias, who won the mule cart race, probably in 468 or 472 BCE. The cofounder of Syracuse, Hagesias descended from the Iamidai, the family of seers founded by Iamos (Ἰαµος). Iamos was the son of Apollo and Evadne (Ευαδνη), the daughter of Poseidon and the nymph Pitana, and was raised by King Aeptus in Arcadia. After giving birth, Evadne was so ashamed that she abandoned the baby in a thicket, where golden and purple pansies sprang miraculously up. The baby survived as he was cared for by two snakes who fed him honey. Shepherds found him and named him Iamos, meaning “of the violets.”

When he reached manhood, Iamos descended into River Alpheus at night and called on his grandfather and father. Apollo’s voice led him to Olympia, where he granted him the gift of prophecy and made his family the custodians of Zeus’s altar.

Yang Mu’s rendition in the poem suggests creative fusions of multiple sources and introductions of new elements into the myth of Iamos. The first stanza emphasizes “his” skills as an equestrian (“impeccable and beautiful form”) and “his” speed as a runner (“race with the wind”)—there is some ambiguity in the reference of the personal pronoun. Based on Pindar’s ode, *he* should be Hagesias, who is known for his martial and athletic prowess. On the other hand, the rest of Yang Mu’s poem focuses on Iamos and Evadne, and syntactically there is no hint of a switch in the reference of the personal pronoun from Hagesias to Iamos. Therefore, I submit that the poem is about Iamos and Evadne, with the opening stanza fusing Iamos with Hagesias for artistic purposes.

It is also possible that the equestrian reference is appropriated from Pindar’s *Olympian 1* about Peleps, a superb charioteer trained by Poseidon who went on to defeat King Oenomau in a chariot race and marry his daughter Hippodameia. Similarly, the poet could also have in mind Pindar’s Pythian odes for Hieron (?–466 BCE), the tyrant of Syracuse and a close associate of Hagesias, who won both the single horse race and the chariot race.

In the end, the ambiguity surrounding the first stanza may not require a definitive resolution because the poem is not so much about retelling the Greek myth as about Evadne, who, according to the poet, is “overlooked in the rhetoric and rhymes” of Pindar’s lofty ode. As in almost all myths, the mother of the hero plays the passive role of the receiver of the divine seed and fades into the background once the baby is born and the focus shifts to his fantastic adventures and superhuman feats. This is not only true of Greco-Roman mythology—where, incidentally, violence is also a factor more often than not—but also of its Chinese counterpart. The story of Iamos
bears a close resemblance to the Chinese myth of Hou Ji 后稷, literally “Lord Millet,” in the sequence that Yang Mu calls *Weniad* in the above-mentioned essay.

No. 245 of the *Shijing* narrates the miraculous birth of Hou Ji. One day, the pious virgin Jiang Yuan 姜嫄 stepped on the footprint of God's big toe and became impregnated. After the baby was born, he was abandoned to die in three separate attempts: first in a busy lane, but cattle and sheep protected him; then in a forest, but a woodcutter saved him; and lastly on frozen snow, but large birds gathered to shelter him with their wings. Hou Ji grew up to teach his people agriculture (growing grains and animal husbandry) and ancestor worship. A culture hero, he was also the progenitor of the great Zhou dynasty (1045–256 BCE). In the narrative poem of seventy-two lines, Jiang Yuan is mentioned by name only once and is nowhere to be seen again after the birth of the baby.

Similarly, in Pindar’s *Olympian 6*, Evadne is mentioned three times: her birth, her upbringing, and her giving birth to Iamos. Yang Mu’s “Pindar’s Ode” seems to address the “oversight” in three ways. First, he asserts her agency in naming the baby in line 9. Second, her agency is further reinforced by the detail that it was she who entrusted the baby to the two “grey-eyed serpents” in line 10. Both details have no basis in the original source. Third, the last stanza explicitly critiques the erasure of Evadne in the Greek myth. The poem ends with the recurrent image of a “beautiful vortex vanishing in the current.” The first time it appears in the opening stanza, it explicitly refers to horsemanship. It may also be read as an echo of Iamos’s descent into the Alpheus to pray to Poseidon and Apollo. The second time the image of vortex appears, it is part of the description of the “nothingness” following a moment of beauty. It may be interpreted as a subtle reference to the fading away of beautiful Evadne, who only appears briefly as Iamos’s mother in the myth. Still another possibility is that the vortex—with its “brilliant details”—refers to Pindar’s ode or, more generally, poetry. The elegiac tone in the recurrent image intimates Yang Mu’s notion of art: art, whether horsemanship or poetry, is the perfection of form. However, in the boundless ocean of nothingness, whether life or time itself, it is but an island, a small and isolated existence of beauty. Hence, the poet’s effort to achieve beauty is all the more admirable and endurable.

The above reading of “Pindar’s Ode” is not far-fetched when we consider what Greco-Roman myths mean to Yang Mu. Besides a subject of academic study, they have been an integral part of his poetry and poetics throughout his career. Yang Mu refers to Keats, a longtime poetic model of his, as someone who, “at the age of twenty-one, held up Homer and Virgil as the artistic paradigms he aspired to” 濟慈——他二十一歲的詩就以荷馬和魏吉爾為藝術嚮往的鵠的.22 Yang Mu is never content with merely borrowing Greco-Roman myths, but he uses them in such a way that they are infused with new meanings.

In 2013 Yang Mu published his fourteenth, and latest, book of original poems under the title *Long and Short Songs* 長短歌行 (Changduanging xing). He chose to
open the collection with a sonnet he wrote in 2009, simply titled “Greece” (Xila). In the afterword to the book, he talks about the “vast, profound, and ever-present beauty and sorrow” in Greek mythology and how, based on its “versatile fables . . . we can construct the ethics and taste of our own generation” 扱其遼敻深邃和永不缺少的美麗與哀愁，曾經教我們追求之餘，也從而為其中變化無窮的寓言製作出我們自己一代的倫理和品味。A close look at the poem sheds more light on Yang Mu's poetics in relation to classical literature, including Greco-Roman.

The deities no longer grind their teeth and fight for seats
On high mountaintops: stone deeply chiseled
in a calligraphic style between cursive and semi-cursive
exhibiting only their titles, these gods and goddesses—
each occupying a temporary palace of eternally drifting clouds
and surveying the surging, glistening sea below
So let us assume that the raging mind for now has turned to calm
The young priest seated north-east against a begonia
leads a quiet and diaphanous existence (a symbol of oblivion), no longer caring about the past and the future, what he hears or sees, even though in early times when tumult reigned, swift Hermes shuttled here and there, translating all the disquiet.

The depiction of Greek gods and goddesses rings familiar: they engage in petty squabbles for power or out of pride. What is unexpected is the contrast between the “temporary” palace on Mount Olympus and the “eternally drifting clouds” in the first stanza. It is unexpected because we usually think of the deities as immortal, and so is their abode. But Yang Mu intentionally negates that. Why
clouds? While the image is an obvious echo of the Greek comedy *The Clouds* by Aristophanes (450–? BCE), there is little intrinsic correspondence between the two texts. Instead, I submit that the use of clouds is reminiscent of classical Chinese poetry in which the image is recurrent and meaningful. Depending on the particular text in which it appears, the image of clouds may suggest freedom, opacity, mutability, or impermanence. One of the most famous examples is Wang Wei’s 王維 (699–761) “Farewell” 送別 (Songbie):

We dismount and I offer you a cup of wine 下馬飲君酒
May I ask, where are you bound? 問君何所之
You say that you’re down on your luck 君言不得意
And will go live at the foot of Mount South 歸臥南山陲
Go then, I shall ask no more 但去莫復問
There is no end to white clouds. 白雲無盡時

An official serving in the court of the Tang dynasty, Wang Wei addresses a former colleague who is leaving the capital to live the life of a hermit. Some scholars hold that the white clouds refer to the spiritual freedom Wang’s friend can now enjoy; like clouds unfurling and floating freely, he no longer has to deal with court intrigues. A different interpretation that I submit is that the “endless” white clouds evoke the uncertainty and impermanence of worldly fame and glory. In other words, the only thing that does not change in life is change itself. If in traditional China government service is virtually the only path to, and standard for, success for men, the poet is reminding his friend of the sobering truth that any success is temporary. The two interpretations are not incompatible in that, in either case, Wang Wei is offering consolation to the friend whose political career has not gone well by hinting at the silver lining or the blessing in disguise.

Returning to “Greece,” we find that the image of “eternally drifting clouds” takes on a richer meaning in light of the Chinese poetic tradition. Paradoxically, clouds are an eternal reminder of impermanence. Through the device of cross-cultural intertextuality, Yang Mu gives a new twist to the representation of the Greek gods and goddesses by suggesting that all the squabbling, all the passion—like the “surging” and “raging” sea below—comes to naught, in the end. This leads to the second stanza where, rather than the laughable deities, it is the young priest who commands a panoramic view of the past and the future. Unlike the mighty Olympians, he has a Zen-like clarity of mind and exudes an air of transcendence. Structurally, by dividing the poem into two seven-line stanzas, giving equal space to the gods and the priest, Yang Mu decidedly elevates the latter. Like Athena bearing witness to human vicissitudes in “To Athena” more than three decades earlier, the priest in “Greece” is another persona of the poet who takes a comprehensive yet detached view at the busy work of the gods, often with the help of Hermes the divine messenger.
Besides the juxtaposition of the gods and the priest, we should also note the juxtaposition between the clouds and the names and titles “deeply chiseled” on Mount Olympus in calligraphic flourishes. There is a sharp contrast between these two images: between the immateriality and mutability of clouds and the solidity and durability of stone. The mention of cursive and semicursive writing also evokes Chinese calligraphy, an ancient art form that is inseparable from the reverence for the written language since the beginning of Chinese civilization. The Chinese connotation of the image of carved names is clearly intended by Yang Mu. As Wen-chi Li remarks insightfully, it suggests the enduring value of mythology; distant in time as it may be, it is indelible in “literary history” and “contemporary consciousness.”26 Like the clouds discussed earlier, calligraphy gives us another example of cross-cultural intertextuality.

Ever a classicist at heart, Yang Mu turns to Dante to construct an allegory of the poet’s journey. In 2011, he wrote “Reading Dante at Year’s End—An Edition with Illustrations by Gustave Doré” 資末觀但丁——谷斯達弗・朵芮插圖本 (Suimo guan Danding—Gusidafu • Duorui chatuben). This is not the first time Dante appears in Yang Mu’s work. Written in 1978, “Southern Mound” 南陔 (Nangai) quotes Dante’s Vita Nuovo: “Tutti li miei penser parlan d’Amore” (All my thoughts always speak to me of love). Juxtaposing Dante with the Confucian view on poetry, the poem refers to him as “the most beautiful soul in European civilization” 但丁是歐洲文明最美的靈魂.27 “Reading Dante at Year’s End” is a dramatic monologue divided into three sections, modeling after Dante’s Divina Commedia, and opens with the same image of being lost in a dark wood:

I too once lost my way in a dark wood, more than once embraced spontaneous, fragmented beliefs and illuminated them with stationary constellations and swiftly flowing blood.

Although the poem borrows many images and references from the Commedia, it is not a religious allegory but a poetic journey. The poet is seeking to lay the foundation for establishing a poetic world on a diagram of interwoven clues or a sound drowned and reborn journeying gradually into obscurity and the void.
He describes himself as a “banished” man, a “shabbily clothed pilgrim,” and looks not only to Virgil, Dante’s guide, but also to Dante for guidance.

The second section reflects on the challenge of language for the poet:

Only the word, the word thoroughly defined via the secret power of empty auxiliaries, only the recognition, induction, and classification of notional and functional words, as well as attempting to give an individual name to each for the continuation of tradition and to provide meaning. This is all that we are searching for—a dangerous road.

Yang Mu suggests that all poets must embark on the “dangerous road” leading to poetry, as he invokes three ancient Roman poets in the section: Ovid (43 BCE–17? CE), Lucan (39–65 CE), and Juvenal (55?–127 CE).

By the time Yang Mu wrote this poem, he had had a career of fifty-five years and had been a towering figure on the poetry scene in Taiwan for four decades. Yet, as he aged, and as he delved deeper into the nature and art of poetry, he seemed to find it increasingly more evasive as an object of pursuit. In “To the Angel” 致天使 (Zhi tianshi; 1993), the poet implores:

O Angel, if you with your holy glorified mind could not
understand these hard-wrought words as blood and tears
I pray for your mercy.

Written eighteen years later, “Reading Dante at Year’s End” reiterates the poet’s task with images of powerlessness, loneliness, blood, and death. It continues into the third section, in which the Big Dipper dims and is compared to a “forgotten chessboard arrangement.” It is toward the end of the poem that the poet reaffirms the ability of words properly arranged to bring new life:

In an emptier and lonelier corner of a monk’s quarters
a classic is opened to an unobstructed page: the most complicated sentences from early times vividly come to life
through new and judicious punctuation, vivid marks that bind
an outmoded tragicomedy, dead gods and shipwreck survivors reorganizing
an entirely new meter in translation.

In contrast to the formation of feeble soldiers that appears earlier in the section, poets are compared to “shipwreck survivors” who use an “as yet unripe dialect” to rekindle the “spark of prophecy” and make it shine as they pass through the “unfamiliar wilderness and outskirts” in purgatory. The road ahead will be tough, but the concluding image of rising “to the zenith” of the sky harbingers hope of redemption and rebirth. Evoking the tripartite structure of the Commedia, “Reading Dante at Year’s End” presents an intense, albeit greatly condensed, journey of the poet through Inferno and Purgatorio before reaching Paradiso.

Alongside classical Chinese poetry and traditional and modern English poetry, Greco-Roman texts, especially mythological and poetic texts, have been a major influence on Yang Mu and have played a significant role in his work from the 1950s to the present. The above analysis focuses on the most creative and meaningful ways in which the poet appropriates classical materials. Discussed in chronological order from the 1960s to the 2000s, “To Athena,” “Virgil,” “Pindar’s Ode,” “Greece,” and “Reading Dante at Year’s End” illustrate the use of Greco-Roman allusions and texts as vehicles for expressing Yang Mu’s contemplations on life and poetry.
To be more precise, Yang Mu’s appropriations of classical materials are creative in two ways. First, his perspectives are uniquely “modern” in bringing to the fore what is traditionally ancillary or marginal in the original sources. Thus, “Pindar’s Ode” endows agency on the hero’s mother and subverts the patriarchal order of the Greek myth. The approach is distinctly feminist. Second, Yang Mu deftly and subtly infuses his representations of Greco-Roman myths with Chinese connotations. Such images as clouds and calligraphic scripts in “Greece” take on a richer and deeper significance derived from Chinese poetry and culture.

In a broader sense, the above analysis shows the complex and multifarious nature of literary relations. It is oversimplifying to regard the use of Greco-Roman motifs in Yang Mu’s poetry as a one-way influence, of the source on the receiver. What we have seen are cross-cultural intertextuality, creative rewriting, and cultural translation, all happening simultaneously. One cannot tell where Greco-Roman mythology ends and where Yang Mu begins. The former is fully integrated into the poetic vision of the latter. In breathing new life into ancient Greco-Roman materials, Yang Mu has created a Chinese poetry that is solid, versatile, and modern.

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Acknowledgment
I thank the anonymous readers for their insightful suggestions for revision. The title image is taken from Yang Mu’s poem “Greece.”

Notes
1 For a complete list of creative works, see Yang Mu’s official website: yangmu.ndhu.edu.tw/files/1-1122-16193.php. The English study is Wong, Rays of the Searching Sun. For the list of the fifteen theses, see Yang Mu’s website; thirteen of them focus exclusively on Yang Mu, and the other two study Yang Mu and two other Taiwanese poets.
2 Yang is also a prolific translator and editor. More below on his translations; as an editor, his literary judgment can be seen in the anthology of Tang poetry and collections of such modern Chinese writers as Zhou Zuoren 周作人 (1885–1967), Xu Zhimo 徐志摩 (1897–1931), Xu Dishan 许地山 (1894–1941), and Zheng Chouyu 鄭愁予 (1933–).
3 See Xi, “Yang Mu.”
4 He did this under the name Ye Shan 葉珊: Ye, Xibanya langren yin.
6 Wang, From Ritual to Allegory, 74.
7 Ibid., 114.
8 Ibid., 113.
Although three Greek goddesses are collectively known as the Fates, “To Fate” clearly does not deal with them.

Yang Mu, *Yang Mu shiji*, 1:310. Unless otherwise indicated, all translations from the Chinese are mine.

Ibid.

Ibid.

Ibid., 1:313–14.

Yang Mu, “Chouxiang shuli,” 381. In the essay, Yang Mu says that “To Athena” was written in Berkeley. This cannot be true because the poet first arrived in the United States in September 1964, and it was the University of Iowa, not University of California, Berkeley, where he first studied. See his biography: Zhang, *Yang Mu*, 98.


Ibid., 374.

“Alheni” 愛荷妮 may be the Chinese transliteration of the Greek name Ἐἰρηνή or Eirene, goddess of peace.


The translators chose *pansies* instead of *violets* in translating the poem. Pansies, violets, and violas all belong to the genus Viola and are very similar; pansies have larger flowers than violets.

Wen-chi Li interprets the *he* in the first line as Hagesias. For his post about the poem, see Li, “Xiaobian Li Wenqi shangxi,” May 30, 2016.


Yang Mu, *Changduange xing*, 137.


See Wen-chi Li’s post on “Greece”: Li, “Xiaobian Li Wenqi shangxi,” July 4, 2016.


Translated by John Balcom in Yang Mu, *Hawk of the Mind*, 181; Chinese original in Yang Mu, *Changduange xing*, 112.

Yang Mu, *Changduange xing*, 113.


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