Narrative Variation and Motif Adaptation in Ancient Anecdotal Lore: A Perspective on the Bird-gift Story in Early and Early Medieval Chinese Sources

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This article aims to demonstrate how and why the reading paradigm of stories which do not introduce narrative innovations, but instead follow the narrative patterns found in traditional anecdotal lore, change over time. In order to do so, I have chosen as a case study a string of stories found in early and early medieval Chinese sources, ones that share similar narrative features. My study draws on the insights made by Qian Zhongshu 錢鍾書 on the "Guji liezhuan" 滑稽列傳 chapter of the *Shiji* 史記 in his *Guanzhui bian* 管錐編. Analysing one anecdote contained in this chapter of the *Shiji*, he listed a group of stories which he identified as variants of the same *tale-type*, but he did not attempt any further analysis.[1] This paper uses this succinct observation as a starting point and aims to highlight how similar anecdotes operated in different kinds of text, as well as to explore how similar motifs were shaped to fulfil different aims.[2]

A Man of Chu Acquired a Pheasant – a Case Study

The anecdotes in the passages quoted by Qian Zhongshu come from six different works. In order of analysis these are: the *Hanshi waizhuan* 韓詩外傳 (2nd century BC) (hereafter *HSWZ*), the *Shuiyuan* 說苑 (late-first century BC) (*SY*), the *Lu Lianzi*

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1 Qian Zhongshu, *Guanzhui bian*, 380.

2 To analyse the different stories I will use the terminology of folklore studies, which even if imprecise, is useful for describing the relationships among narratives which show different features from a variety of times and genres, which is the basis of this research. We use here the term *tale-type* to identify a self-sufficient narrative, and we use the terms *story* and *tale* as synonyms of *tale-type*. A tale-type can be an anecdote, which is defined as a brief narrative "of a striking incident" (*OED*, 76.). It may be completely independent, or connected with and embedded in a larger narrative (Lionel Gossman, "Anecdote and History," 149). A *motif* is defined as the smallest unit within a tale-type, and can be used generally to identify a unit of an anecdote's composition: an action, a theme, a character or a thing. A recent survey about folklore studies can be found in Hans-Jörg Uther, "Classifying tales: remarks to indexes and systems of ordering."

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魯連子 (? third century BC) (*LL*), the *Shiji* 史記 (first century BC) (*SJ*), the *Yinwenzi* 尹文子 (fourth century BC) (*YWZ*), and the *Xiaolin* 笑林 (third century AD). The passages can all be defined as anecdotes, which in traditional Chinese literature are self-contained narrative units embedded in the "historical" writings and works of the Masters (*zi*). They are often presented as being historical[3] as they involve real historical figures (or believed-to-be-so characters). Frequently, anecdotes appearing in different sources share narratives similar in wording, plot and structure but feature different characters. Jens Petersen defines these parallel versions of the same story as "illustrative stories": a kind of narrative in which the "historical figures themselves are unimportant" but where "the important question is which point is being illustrated."[4] David Schaberg suggests that the conspicuous presence of anecdotal lore in ancient Chinese literature must be related to an oral tradition in which anecdotes "were retold for the sake of the arguments they supported and were shaped by their use in these arguments."[5]

The anecdotes analysed in this study are evidence of this process. Similarities in motifs and structure suggest that they were adapted from a common largely oral tradition of anecdotes. The first four stories examined, found in pre-Han and Han textual material, feature narratives presented in different contexts and for different purposes; the general structure of these narratives, however, does not vary. In fact, all four variants of the story share the same main motif, here identified as the story of "a minister who is sent by his lord to bring a swan-goose as a gift to the sovereign of another state and loses it." They share lesser motifs as well; in fact the speech of the protagonist, the envoy, can be divided into different parts that recur in different combinations and are reworked in different ways in each anecdote. The fifth story, an identical version of which appears in the *Xiaolin* and in a pre-imperial text, the *Yinwenzi*, is not a further adaptation of this same tale. Instead it is based on some of the lesser motifs present in the first group of stories. This last story could be defined as the tale of "a man who bought a pheasant for his lord, thinking it was a phoenix, which then dies." This story is similar to the first group of stories in that a gift in the form of a bird is brought to a sovereign (in the group of stories it is a swan-goose, *hu* 鵠 or *hong* 鴻, a precious gift considered appropriate for diplomatic missions between states – in the fifth story it is a mythical phoenix, *fenghuang* 鳳凰, the precious bird par excellence in Chinese tradition) that does not arrive to its intended recipient (in the former it is lost, in the latter it dies). These stories will be analysed to highlight what their different features say about the texts in which they appear, about the author, and their audience. The aim of this study is not to find the original source of the story (which, moreover, is an impossible task)[6] but to explore how the story changes.

[3] David Schaberg, *A Patterned Past: Form and Thought in Early Chinese Historiography*, 172.

[4] Jens Østegards Petersen, "What's in a Name: On the Sources Concerning Sun Wu," 2.

[5] David Schaberg, *A Patterned Past: Form and Thought in Early Chinese Historiography*, 189, and 315–24.

The *Hanshi waizhuan*: The Envoy of Qi Loses a Swan-goose

This study starts with a story contained in the tenth *juan* of the *HSWZ*, as it is the earliest reliably datable source containing one of the four stories using the same defining motif. The *HSWZ* is a compilation of anecdotes ascribed to the Han scholar Han Ying 韓嬰 (200–130 BC). All of the stories it contains are closed by a quotation from the *Shijing* 詩經, perhaps to reinforce the argument expressed in the stories.[7] The anecdote reads as follows:

> The tradition says: The state of Qi 齊 sent its envoy to donate a swan-goose to the state of Chu 楚. The goose was thirsty, [so] the envoy, along the way, quenched its thirst, but the bird escaped from the cage. The envoy then went to Chu and said [to the king]: "I, an envoy of the state of Qi, [came here] to offer [your Majesty] a swan-goose. The bird was thirsty and along the way I quenched its thirst, and it escaped from the cage. I desired to run away, [but in doing so] I might have interrupted the relationship between two lords; I desired to draw my sword and kill myself [but] the people would have thought that my lord despises gentlemen but cherishes geese. Here is the [empty] cage, I submit myself to you." The King of Chu valued his speech, and considered his words to be eloquent; so he asked him to stay and rewarded him. For all his life he was considered a lifelong retainer of the highest category [at Chu's court]. Therefore, an envoy must speak with dignified language appropriate to the occasion, express sincerity and trustworthiness, show integrity, and solve problems between states; only under these conditions can he be an envoy. The *Odes* (Mao 254) say:[8] "If your words were gentle and kind, the people would be settled."[9]

In this anecdote, five narrative motifs can be identified: 1. An unnamed envoy of the state of Qi is sent with a gift of a precious bird to the unnamed Lord of Chu; 2. Trying to quench the bird's thirst, he loses it; 3. He presents himself to the Lord of Chu with an empty cage; 4. He delivers an eloquent explanatory speech; 5. He is rewarded for his appropriate solution to the problem. In order to comprehend the text we have to identify the ideological agenda behind it. The story is introduced by the formula *zhuan yue* 傳曰 ("the tradition says"), which is used to connect this story with other writings and oral traditions.[10] Hightower attempts to identify the

6 The story's "genealogy" cannot be reconstructed, as some of the texts are difficult to date. Moreover, according to studies discussing the evolution of such tales, "narrative change is a function not of time but of a particular narrator on a particular occasion. Consequently, it is possible for a recent text to represent a relatively conservative line of tradition and for an older text to represent a more innovative line." William F. Hansen, *Ariadne's thread*, 8.

7 James Robert Hightower, "Han Shih Wai Chuan," 125.

8 James Legge, *The She-king*, 500.

9 *HSWZ* 10, 413. Translations, except as otherwise noted, are mine.

10 James Robert Hightower, *Han Shih Wai Chuan,* 5.

textual sources of the *HSWZ*,[11] but he admits that most of the stories it records were probably part of an oral tradition of anecdotes not explicitly associated with texts.[12] In this sense, it is difficult to trace the original source of the story, but the reason why it has been preserved in this text can be explained. In this case, the anecdote was preserved to illustrate an exemplum of ritually prescribed conduct. The reading is explicitly guided by the end of the story where it is written: "An envoy must speak with dignified language appropriate to the occasion, express sincerity and trustworthiness, show integrity, and solve problems between states."[13] The story proposes a model of conduct for state envoys. The moral message, however, is not conveyed in the narration of events *per se*, but in the protagonist's eloquent speech. The rhetorical speech presents the reason why the envoy chose (rightly as the conclusion shows) to bring the empty cage to the Lord of Chu and honestly admit his mistake. In his speech the envoy mentions two other choices he could have made and the negative results they would have led to if chosen. The potential results he discusses would have affected his lord.

The actions of the envoy appear to be in accordance with the concept of ritual propriety (*li* 禮), which was viewed as the way to govern interstate relations and social interaction within society.[14] The concept of ritual propriety in the *HSWZ* is mainly understood to be the *modus operandi* of keeping states in order. In the end, the envoy is rewarded because he acted according to the concept of ritual propriety, placing the interest of his state and ruler above his own life. The story then is not only intended to be prescriptive in relation to how envoys should act, but broadly conveys to the reader the message that acting according to ritual propriety will be repaid.[15] The brief quotation from the *Odes* at the end has the role of "paragraph-capping *sententia*,"[16] which serves to close the point expressed by the anecdote.

According to Hightower, the anecdotal nature of the text appealed to different kinds of reader. The moral tone of the stories was attractive to some, but there were also those who took casual pleasure in merely reading the stories.[17] Nevertheless, the text was not created to entertain the reader. The narratives contained in the book were adapted to serve a singular didactic agenda.

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[11] Idem, "The Han-shih wai-chuan and the San chia shih," Appendix 3, Tables 3, 293–300.

[12] Idem, "The Han-shih wai-chuan and the San chia shih," 242.

[13] Kern appropriately translates the term *wenci* 文辭 (in my translation "dignified language") as "patterned phrases"; Martin Kern, "Ritual, Text, and the Formation of the Canon," 47.

[14] On this concept, see David Schaberg, *A Patterned Past: Form and Thought in Early Chinese Historiography*, 125–60.

[15] The notion of *bao* 報, the principle of recompense, is connected to the concept of ritual propriety; for further explanation, see David Schaberg, *A Patterned Past: Form and Thought in Early Chinese Historiography*, 170.

[16] David Schaberg, "Platitude and Persona," 180.

[17] James Robert Hightower, "The Han-shih wai-chuan and the San chia shih," 267.

The *Shuiyuan*: Wu Ze of Wei Loses a Swan-goose

The *Shuiyuan* of Liu Xiang contains a great amount of material which overlaps with that of the *HSWZ*. There are seventy-eight paragraphs which are shared with the *HSWZ*, with slight changes. A version of the story analysed in this paper appears in one of these paragraphs. The *SY*, similar to the *HSWZ,* is a compilation of anecdotes collected mainly from earlier sources.[18] It is organized into 20 *juan* with each *juan* concerning a specific theme. In general, most of the chapter titles illustrate the political nature of the anthology; we find chapters such as "Jun dao" 君道 (The Way of the Sovereign), "Chen shu" 臣術 (The Methods of the Minister), and "Zheng li" 政理 (Principles of Government). Liu Xiang was thus not just a mere compiler of texts; he arranged the material to show exempla of political principles to the emperor.[19] The story is part of the twelfth chapter, "Feng Shi" 奉使 (Envoys Sent on a Diplomatic Mission) and it reads:

> The Marquis Wen of Wei 魏文侯 sent his attendant Wu Ze 毋擇 to donate a swan-goose to the Marquis of Qi 齊侯. Wu Ze, on his way to Qi, lost it. He only presented an empty cage and, once he had an audience with the Marquis of Qi, he said: "Our Sovereign sent [me], the minister Wu Ze, to donate a swan-goose [to you]. Along the way, [the bird] was hungry and thirsty, so your minister took it out of the cage and fed and quenched its thirst, but the swan-goose flew into the sky and never came back. I considered that it was not the case that I had no money to buy another one, but as my Lord's envoy, how could I treat the gift of my Sovereign so lightly? I considered that it was not the case that I could not draw a sword and cut off my head, [allow my] body to putrefy and [my] bones to be exposed in the wilderness, [but this might suggest] that my lord cherishes geese but despises gentlemen. I thought that it was not the case that I could not escape to the states of Chen or Cai, [but in doing so] I would abruptly sever the relationship between the two states (Wei and Qi). This is the reason why I did not dare for treasuring myself to escape death, so I came here with an empty cage, [to allow] only the Lord of Qi to put me to death." The Marquis of Qi was very pleased and said, "Today, I heard these three phrases (i.e., the three explanations given by the envoy); they are better than receiving a swan-goose. In the suburbs of the capital I have a piece of land of 100 *li*. I would like to give it to you as a fief." Wu Ze answered, "How can it be possible that an envoy who took his Sovereign's gift so lightly could receive a piece of land from a feudal lord as a present?" He then left and never came back.[20]

[18] *HS* 30, 1727.

[19] On Liu Xiang's deliberate reshaping in rearranging the anecdotal lore, see Wang Yaomin 汪耀明, "Lun Liu Xiang de wenxue guannian" and Yang Bo 楊波, "*Xinxu*, *Shuiyuan* yu *Hanshi waizhuan* tongti yizhi gushi bijiao" 《新序》、《說苑》與《韓詩外傳》同體異旨故事比較. On the role of the scribes in manuscript culture, see also Christopher M. B. Nugent, *Manifest in Words, Written on Paper: Producing and Circulating Poetry in Tang Dynasty China*, in particular 55, 230.

[20] *SY* 12, 309.

This story shares the same five motives found in the *HSWZ* passage, albeit with slight changes. The names of the characters change, but their main actions are identical: 1. The envoy Wu Ze of Wei is sent to give a precious bird to the Marquis of Qi as a gift; 2. Trying to quench the bird's thirst, he loses it (additional details about the bird's hunger are given); 3. He presents himself to the Marquis of Qi with an empty cage; 4. He delivers an eloquent explanatory speech; 5. He is offered a reward.

First, it should be noted that this story is presented as an historical fact. The two characters in the story are given names that sound historically authentic. The Marquis Wen of Wei (r. 446–396 BC) was the first ruler of the State of Wei during the Warring States period.[21] The envoy is named Wu Ze 毋擇. Although this name is not found in any other texts,[22] identifying him by name makes the account more historically trustworthy. To construe anecdotes as being historically plausible is an important feature of traditional anecdotal lore. It is, for example, one of the main features of *Zuo zhuan* 左傳 and *Guoyu* 國語 anecdotes.[23] As far as the *SY* anecdote is concerned, being a moral and a political exemplum addressed to the emperor, its historical trustworthiness serves to remind the emperor of historical precedents, thus reinforcing the moral conveyed therein. In this version of the story, less space is allocated to the narrative description of the envoy's actions; both the actions and the reason behind the bird's loss are narrated here by the envoy himself. The story centres on his speech. Similar to the account in the *HSWZ*, the envoy delivers a rhetorical explanation of the events in which he focuses on the hypothetical alternatives to bringing the empty cage and the fatal consequences of these alternatives. In the *SY* the envoy uses the same argument, presenting further details regarding the possibility of replacing the lost bird. Compared to the *HSWZ* story, this anecdote is richer in narrative detail and has a more colourful description of the events. In particular, the presence of more hypothetical alternatives, which enrich the strength of the rhetorical discourse, indicates greater attention to the composition of narrative details. Unlike the *HSWZ* version, the lesson to be derived from this anecdote, instead of being guided by the words of an external narrator (in the form of a didactic ending), comes from the mouth of the Marquis of Qi who praises the words of Wu Ze as being better (*xian* 賢) than receiving a precious gift. He then desires to reward the envoy. Here is another important difference from the previous story: the envoy refuses his reward, explaining that because he has erred, he does not deserve any recompense.

The narrative structure of the *SY* story shows stronger interest in the composition of the speeches made.[24] Only rarely does the author explicitly guide the reading of the story. Instead, the moral lesson is conveyed in the words of the characters.

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21 *SJ* 44, 1839, *SJ* 121, 3116.

22 See Lu Yuanjun, *Shuoyuan [jinzhu jinyi],* 416.

23 On this topic, see Martin Kern, "Early Chinese Literature, beginnings through Western Han," 47–51. On historical anecdotes, see also the paragraph "The Historical Anecdote: Forms, Functions, and Occasions" in David Schaberg, "Chinese History and Philosophy," 395–404.

24 In the *SY* the remonstrances are classified under five categories, *SY* 9, 206.

The culminating moment of this anecdote is the envoy's speech and his following decision to refuse the reward, thereby taking a strong moralising turn. Even if both stories highlight the principle of recompense (*bao*), in that a worthy speech is recognized as something to be rewarded,[25] the refusal of the envoy in the *SY* conveys a stronger moralizing agenda. According to the principle of *bao*, one who receives "something worthy" (in this case the speech) from someone else cannot avoid repaying it, but one who bestows something worthy should not expect recompense. An entire chapter of the *SY*, the sixth *juan* entitled "Fu en" 復恩 (Repaying a Debt of Gratitude) is dedicated to this concept. It opens: "One who performs an act of grace (*en*) should not look for recompense; one who receives an act of grace must repay it."[26] It continues to state that ministers should not conduct themselves worthily only out of the expectation that they might receive rewards from their lords. Hence, the end of the *SY* story differs greatly from the *HSWZ* anecdote. The *SY* envoy refuses his recompense. This choice puts his act on an even higher ethical plane as it shows he is truly disinterested in a reward.[27] The *HSWZ* story lacks such strongly idealized conduct, and it takes a more pragmatic approach as the envoy accepts his reward and this choice is seen as appropriate.

The *Lu Lianzi*: Zhan Wusuo of Qi Loses a Swan-goose

A similar story appears in a fragment of the *LL*, a text related to the Warring States persuader Lu Zhonglian 魯仲連 (305–245 BC). The text is recorded for the first time in the "Yiwen zhi" 藝文志 (Treatise on the *Classics* and other writings) of the *Hanshu* 漢書 under the "Rujia" 儒家 section with the name of *Lu Zhonglian* 魯仲連, in 14 *pian*. Its author is unknown. In the "Jingji zhi" 經籍志 (Treatise on the *Classics* and other writings) of the *Suishu* 隋書 it is still under the "Rujia" 儒家 section but recorded with the name of *Lu Lianzi*, in 5 *juan*.[28] The *Suishu* bibliographical chapter also adds that it refers to Lu Lian 魯連 of Qi 齊 (also named Lu Zhonglian)[29] who was called "master" (*xiansheng* 先生); he was in fact a member of the Jixia Academy; *xiansheng* was the appellative given to its prominent members.[30] This text is not very well-known. It is preserved only in scattered fragments contained

[25] According to the notion of *bao* moral, worthiness can be expressed with material wealth; see the paragraph "Bao and the Economy of Narrative" in David Schaberg, *A Patterned Past: Form and Thought in Early Chinese Historiography*, 209–10, 215–16.

[26] *SY* 6, 116. On this topic, see Lien-sheng Yang, "The Concept of 'Pao' as a Basis for Social Relations in China," 296–97.

[27] On the concept of profit (*li* 利) in early Chinese texts, see Carine Defoort, "The Profit that Does Not Profit: Paradoxes with Li in Early Chinese Texts," in particular 157–61.

[28] *SS* 34, 997.

[29] He appears under both names; W.H. Jr. Nienhauser, *The Basic Annals of Pre-Han China*, 281, n. 1.

[30] Sato Masayuki, *The Confucian Quest for Order*, 77.

in various encyclopaedias.[31] The *SJ* contains a biography of Lu Lian (*juan* 83), which bears witness to his historicity. He is said to be a native of Qi and a lover of "grandiose and extraordinary schemes" (*qiwei titang zhi huace* 好奇偉俶儻之畫策), by which he has counselled various rulers. Nevertheless, he "was unwilling to serve as an official or to hold a post, delighting only in holding to his high principles."[32] He travelled to the state of Zhao 趙, where he served the ruler, providing him with political advice. Thanks to his stratagems, Zhao was prevented from being conquered by Qin 秦, but when he was presented with an office he declined.[33] The Chinese scholar Bai Xi presumes that Lu Lian's advice (a warning against Qin's thirst for conquest) was the reason why the text, ascribed to his name, was entered in the "Rujia" section of the "Yiwenzhi."[34] However, according to the records of his deeds, his teachings were not too similar to those of the traditional *ru* (such as Mengzi and Confucius). He discussed the relationship between *li* 利 (profit) and *hai* 害 (harm), and the relationship between *shi* 勢 (authoritative power) and *shu* 數 (tactics, method of governing).[35] These were topics in which Mengzi was not interested.[36]

The *Lu Lianzi* passage is recorded in the *Chuxueji* 初學記, a Tang encyclopaedia,[37] and reads as follows:

> Zhan Wusuo 展無所 was an envoy of the Lord of Lu 魯君; he was sent to Lord Rang of Qi 齊襄君, offering a swan-goose. Arriving at the Sheng River, he bathed the goose, but it disappeared; only the cage remained. An attendant said: "The swan-goose is a feathered animal, so it is possible to buy another goose like it." Wusuo said: "It is not that I cannot buy it, [but] for one, it would be to conceal something from my lord, and for the other, it would mean to take [the Sovereign's] gift lightly, [so] I (Wusuo) will not do it."[38]

The story is still clearly a variant on the same tale of an envoy who loses a gift in the form of a bird sent from his king, but it is very brief in comparison to the *HSWZ* and *SY* stories and its narrative arrangement and some story elements differ. The protagonists this time are Zhan Wusuo, an envoy whose name appears only in this fragment, the Lord of Lu, whose name is not specified, and the Lord Rang of Qi. The envoy loses the bird while "bathing" (*yu* 浴) the animal (which could

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31 A collection is preserved in *QSGSDW* 8, 65. See also David R. Knechtges, "Lu Lianzi," in his *Ancient and early medieval Chinese literature: a reference guide*, 632.
32 *SJ* 83, 2459, trans. W. H. Jr. Nienhauser, *The Basic Annals of Pre-Han China,* 201.
33 *SJ* 83, 2465.
34 Bai Xi, *Jixia xue yanjiu*, 74.
35 Ibid., 75.
36 Sato Masayuki, *The Confucian Quest for Order*, 65–69.
37 It also appears in the *TPYL* 916, 4063.
38 *CXJ* 20, 480.

be understood as a means of refreshing the bird) and is left with an empty cage. In this variant, it is the attendant who suggests possible solutions to the envoy's predicament as well as their potential outcomes.

Dividing the speech between the two characters makes the words of the envoy lose their rhetorical strength; the strength of the moral claim is also affected. Furthermore a didactic explanation has not been preserved in the text, as in the *HSWZ*, because this passage is only a fragment of the original text, so we cannot be sure of its original shape. Some researchers doubt whether the *LL* fragments actually are original Warring States material and question whether they could be the product of later generations.[39] The historicity of the fragment is doubtful,[40] but this is not of primary interest here. Even if the story was compiled at a later time, it can still be regarded as being a part of the anecdotal lore grouped around the State of Qi, of which Lu Lian was an important figure, and it is valuable because it shows how illustrative stories migrated from different groups of anecdotes.

The *Shiji*: Chunyu Kun of Qi Loses a Swan-goose

The fourth variant of the story comes from the anecdotes added by Chu Shaosun 褚少孙 (104?–30? BC) to the "Guji liezhuan" chapter of the *SJ*.[41] In this case the protagonist is Chunyu Kun 淳于髡 (385–305 BC), who also appears in the first part of this same chapter, traditionally ascribed to Sima Qian. Sima Qian portrays Chunyu Kun as an advisor remonstrating with a king by an entertaining way of speech and behaviour, which exemplifies the historian's understanding of the term *guji* 滑稽 of the title.[42] He also groups Chunyu's witty remarks and admonishments together with those of two jesters of pre-Han times, but does not provide much biographical information. More biographical details about Chunyu Kun are included in *juan* 74. Sima Qian identifies Chunyu Kun as a member of the Jixia Academy,[43] and describes him as "not following any school in his studies,"[44] a feature which seems common to most Jixia thinkers.[45] Even though he served as

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[39] Qian Mu, *Xian Qin zhuzi xinian*, 473–77.

[40] The name of the envoy, Zhan Wusuo, does not appear elsewhere. The only name that can be traced back in history is the Lord Rang of Qi.

[41] Chu Shaosun added several passages to the *Shiji*; see Timoteus Pokora, "C'hu Shao-sun –The Narrator of Stories in the Shih chi."

[42] *Guji*, read also as *huaji* and today meaning "funny, humorous" was used by the author of the *Shiji* to title this chapter to identify a particular way of remonstrating. He then illustrated it by the anecdotes he recorded. *SJ* 126. 3197-3199. On this chapter, see Timoteus Pokora, "Ironical Critics at Ancient Chinese Courts (Shih-chi, 126)," and Giulia Baccini "The *Shiji* chapter 'Guji Liezhuan' (Biographies of Witty Remonstrants): A Source to Look for Rhetorical Strategies in Early China," forthcoming.

[43] *SJ* 74, 2346.

[44] Ibid.; trans. W. H. Jr. Nienhauser, *The Basic Annals of Pre-Han China*, 182.

[45] Bai Xi, *Jixia xue yanjiu*, 69.

an advisor to more than one king, he never accepted a position in any government. Chunyu Kun, even in the anecdotes which Sima grouped together with the jesters, is regarded as a worthy character. His speeches convey teachings and advice from which governments always benefited.

Chu Shaosun supplemented the chapter with several stories in which all the protagonists are good orators and able to argue their point in an effective way. But, unlike Sima Qian, Chu understood the expression *guji* as an adjective, qualifying stories in which the wit of the protagonists provided entertainment value.[46] This entertainment value provided by the clever speeches of the protagonists appears to be more striking than the didactic message; in particular Chunyu Kun no longer acts as a worthy model. His anecdote reads as follows:

> In ancient times, the King of the state of Qi 齊王 sent Chunyu Kun to donate a swan-goose to the state of Chu 楚王. On his way out of the city gate, the swan flew off. [Chunyu Kun], holding in his palm only an empty cage, decided to fabricate an excuse. He went to see the King of Chu and said: "The King of Qi sent me, his minister, to offer you a swan-goose as a gift. When I crossed the water, I could not bear to see the bird thirsty, so I took it out [of its cage] to let it drink, but it parted from me and flew off. I wanted to die by cutting my stomach or by strangling myself about the neck, but I feared that someone could reproach my king [saying that] he made his officer commit suicide over a bird. A goose is a feathered creature; there are many kinds like it. I thought about buying one to replace it, but this would have meant dishonest behaviour and [therefore] I would have been cheating my king. I wanted to run away and escape to another state, but I feared that [in doing so] I might have interrupted the relationship between two kings. Therefore I have come to admit [my] guilt. I kowtow before your Majesty, ready to receive a punishment." The King of Chu said: "Very well, the King of Qi has such a loyal minister!" He rewarded him generously, granting him wealth two times the value of the bird.[47]

Upon first reading, it is obvious that this story shares the same narrative motifs of those encountered so far. However, the slight changes in plot and rhetoric distinguish this anecdote from the others. The action begins, as usual, with an envoy sent by his lord to offer a bird as a gift to the king of another state. The direction of the envoy's journey from Qi to Chu, and the fact that the names of the kings are not recorded, are all features analogous to the *HSWZ* variant. However, unlike all the other variants of the story, this one sets the events in an indefinite past (*xizhe* 昔者, "in ancient times").

The envoy loses the bird just like in the other versions. However, there is one detail which explicitly shows a radically different reading of the story: the reader is

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[46] David Schaberg, "Playing at Critique: Indirect Remonstrance and the Formation of Shi Identity," 200 and Ruan Zhisheng, "Guji yu Liuyi: 'Shiji Guji liezhuan' xilun", 362, 366.

[47] *SJ* 126, 3209–10.

informed that Chunyu Kun "decided to fabricate an excuse" (*zao zha* 造詐), which means "to cheat." The speech that follows in the presence of the King of Chu has to be read, then, according to this key: it is a "fabrication" (*zha* 詐), a "false speech." Once again the envoy reveals to the king that he has considered three alternative plans that he eventually rejected in favour of behaving "honestly." In explaining his decision to the king, he uses some of the vocabulary used to express high morality; he claims he does not want to be untrustworthy (*bu xin* 不信) by cheating (*qi* 欺) his lord. However, it is evident that the words he uses to describe his refusal to make certain choices that could affect his king (and thus his state) are the product of a clever mind wanting to escape trouble. Thus, these words do not truly indicate moral integrity, as they normally would. The eloquent speech that in the *HSWZ* identifies a quality of successful envoys, here becomes the expression of a talent employed to cheat the king.

The conversion of this tale from a didactic exemplum to an expression of amoral cleverness is brought to its extreme consequence in the end. The king is successfully cheated; in fact, he regards the "fabricated" words of the envoy as an expression of his trustworthiness (*xin* 信). Accordingly, he rewards Chunyu Kun generously. In summary, this anecdote recounts a tale where being able to deliver an effective speech can solve problems and bring profit. In this case, the problems to be solved do not involve governing a state; the problems are private in nature, specifically about how to escape punishments. Moreover, the moral principle of recompense (*bao*) is completely absent here. Dishonest behaviour is rewarded.

The *Yinwenzi*: A Man of Chu Acquired a Pheasant – a Story about Names and Forms

The fifth anecdote studied is contained in the *YWZ*, a text recorded for the first time in the "Yiwen zhi" under the "Mingjia" 名家 section.[48] In the bibliographical chapter of the *Suishu* it is added that the text contains the teaching of Yin Wen 尹文 (350–280 BC), a member of the Jixia Academy.[49] The story is recorded as follows:

> There was a man of Chu who was carrying a pheasant. Along the way a man asked: "What kind of bird is that?" "It is a phoenix," he lied. The passer-by said: "I have known about [the existence of] the phoenix for a long time, but today I see a real one. Are you selling it?" "Of course," he answered. The passer-by bid one thousand pieces of gold, but [the owner of the bird] refused. He asked to add another thousand, and after that the passer-by got the bird. [The new owner of the bird] wanted to give it to the King of Chu, but after one night the bird died. The man was not sorry about the loss of his money, he was only sad that he could not present [the bird to his king]. His

[48] It is also specified that it is a record of the times of King Xuan of Qi 齊宣王 (350–301 BC), *HS* 30, 1736.

[49] *SS* 34, 1104.

> fellow countrymen spread this story. Everyone thought that it was a real phoenix and it was precious, and that he desired to present it as a gift [to his sovereign]. The King was so moved by the fact that the man wished to give him [the precious bird], that he summoned him to reward him generously, ten times the amount the man paid to buy the phoenix.[50]

The four previously analysed stories share a device typical of historical anecdotal narratives: the exchange of gifts between states as a practice of political relations. This story however features two generic characters whose lives have no direct connection to the government of their state (Chu 楚), which is governed by an undefined king. The historical reliability of the narrative is not an issue here; the anecdote is treated as fictional.[51] Compared to the previous variants, this one seems to elaborate on more generalized motifs: 1. A man is going to gift a precious bird to a lord; 2. The precious bird is lost; 3. Even though the bird is lost, the man receives a reward.

As far as the *Yinwenzi* is concerned, comparing its content with textual materials linked to Jixia masters, it is possible to find a coherent system of ideas affiliated with the cultural debate on-going at the time of the Jixia Academy.[52] The *YWZ* is the first work that provides a comprehensive understanding of the concept of "name /to name" (*ming* 名), a highly debated topic during the Warring States period. It defines in detail its role in relation to "form" (*xing* 形),[53] and subsequently to "law" (*fa* 法), to formulate a "way of governance" (*zhi* 治).[54] According to the *YWZ*, "name" and "form" must correspond, otherwise confusion will arise in language communication; this will then confuse the way of thinking, which will in turn affect the government.[55] The *YWZ* stresses that names must be discussed (*bian* 辨);[56] by discussing and correcting them, it is possible to make distinctions between different things and to examine if a name truly corresponds to the object it represents or not. If name and form do not correspond, this could indicate a lack of correspondence between names and reality. The content of the *YWZ* is discussed here at length because the anecdote is instrumental to the text's philosophical disquisition. To

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50 *YWZ* 1, 18.

51 This only means that the reader does not need to question the story's historical reliability, but it does not mean that he should read it as "fiction," in the sense of a defined self-conscious genre.

52 Dong Yingzhe, "Yin Wenzi zhenwei ji xuepai guishu kaobian," 97; Cai Xianjin and Wang Yuquan, "*Yin Wenzi* wenben zhi jiedu," 100.

53 *YWZ* 1, 1.

54 Liu Jianguo, *Xian Qin weishu bianzheng,* 310–11.

55 "Names give names to forms; forms adapt to names, so if forms do not correspond to the proper names, names do not correspond with the proper forms, so the pair forms and their names easily are separated; if [names and forms] are not able to correspond, disorder [emerges]" 名者，名形者也；形者，應名者也，然形非正名，名非正形也，則形之與名，居然別矣；不可相亂。*YWZ* 1, 3.

56 名不可不辨 *YWZ* 1, 4.

understand the meaning of the anecdote, it is necessary to understand its position within the philosophical argumentation presented in the *YWZ*. The story of the man of Chu appears as an exemplum to describe how deviation from the truthful relationship between names and reality leads to strange consequences: the man of Chu sold a pheasant that he said was a phoenix, and in using the name "phoenix" he cheated the passer-by. The people of Chu spread the story of the man who bought a "phoenix" for the king. When the King of Chu heard of it, he rewarded the man as if he had bought a really precious gift. Hence, the man of Chu forged a lie by giving the *name* of "phoenix" to a pheasant; the passer-by believed this lie, this false correspondence between name and form, which the people of the state soon spread. The king eventually confirmed this false correspondence by rewarding the passer-by.[57] The *YWZ* story can be regarded as a *yuyan* 寓言 (metaphor, exemplum) which borrows "externals to discuss something,"[58] i.e., to use a story to argue an idea. The use of brief narratives as a tool to convey opinions and teachings and to give advice was a common feature in Chinese traditional literature and this story is just another example of how *yuyan* were used.

From the *Yinwenzi* to the *Xiaolin*

The anecdote about the man of Chu contained in the *YWZ*, in the Song encyclopaedia *Taiping guangji* 太平廣記 (*TPGJ*), is attributed to the *Xiaolin*,[59] a text ascribed to Handan Chun 邯鄲淳 (fl. 220), a renowned scholar who, after the fall of the Han Dynasty, served the Cao-Wei court.[60] The *Xiaolin* is considered to be the earliest collection of humorous anecdotes in the history of traditional Chinese literature. The original text was lost during the Song Dynasty, but scholars began gathering its scattered passages from several later encyclopaedias during the Ming Dynasty.[61] It

57 Cai Xianjin and Wang Yuquan, "*Yin Wenzi* wenben zhi jiedu," 101. The notion of naming and its relation to reality reminds us of a famous story of the *Hanfeizi* 韓非子: "(Pan Gong) said: 'Suppose one person maintains there is a tiger in the market. Would you believe it?' (The King) replied: 'No.' 'Suppose two people maintained that there is a tiger in the market. Would you believe it?' 'No!' 'Suppose three people maintained there is a tiger in the market. Would you believe it?' 'Yes I would.' " Trans. Christoph Harbsmeier, "Conceptions of Knowledge in Ancient China," 13.

58 *ZZ* 27, 948; trans. Victor H. Mair, *Wandering on the way*, 278.

59 *TPGJ* 461, 3781–82.

60 *SGZ* 21, 602. The attribution to Handan Chun is not certain; however, research into the authorship of the *Xiaolin* is not the main focus of this paper. What is relevant here is that the *Xiaolin* was collected at the end of the Han period and the beginning of the Wei period.

61 Today the most complete collection of *Xiaolin* anecdotes is that compiled by Lu Xun and preserved in his *Guxiaoshuo gouchen* 古小說鈎沉 (Ancient Anecdotes Uncovered). The collection, arranged by Lu Xun, appears translated and annotated in Japanese in Ōki Yasushi 大木康, Takeda Akira 竹田晃, and Kuroda Mamiko 黒田真美子. *Shōrin shōsan shōfu hoka: rekidai shōwa* 笑林・笑賛・笑 府他—歴代笑話.

consists of stories, whose narrative structures and plots are similar, and sometimes identical, to those found in the works of the Masters (*zi*) or in historical texts of the Warring States period and of the Han times, and were compiled not to convey moral or didactic messages but were instead intended primarily for entertainment.

The anecdote was previously recorded in the *Yiwen leiju* 藝文類聚 (*YWLJ*), an encyclopaedia completed by Ouyang Xun 歐陽詢 (557–641 AD) during the Tang Dynasty; the story here is preserved in the "Niao" 鳥 (birds) section, under the "Zhi" 雉 (pheasants) entry, and is ascribed to the *YWZ*. The anecdote appears again in the "Yuzu" 羽族 (feathered animals) section of the *Taiping yulan* 太平御覽 (*TPYL*); here it is again ascribed to the *YWZ*. The fact that the story appears in two encyclopaedias ascribing it to the *YWZ* and only in one ascribing it to the *Xiaolin*, raises suspicions that it may have been improperly attributed. This is particularly so because the *YWLJ* is an earlier work and features the *YWZ* as its source. But the *TPYL*, according to Johannes L. Kurz, is a derivative work based on previous texts and was explicitly modelled on older encyclopaedias, among which the *YWLJ* was included.[62]

Traditionally, both the *YWLJ* and the *TPYL* were considered sources of general knowledge for the literate population of the time. The *TPGJ* instead was something different; it was "[a collection] of unofficial histories (*yeshi* 野史), biographical records (*zhuanji* 傳記) and trivial talk (*xiaoshuo* 小說)."[63] Even if at the beginning it was listed with the *TPYL* in the "Leishu" 類書 (General encyclopaedias) category,[64] for the nature of its content, already in the Bibliographical chapter of the *Songshi* 宋史 (1314) it was ascribed to the "Xiaoshuo jia" 小說家 category.[65] Its classification did not change again, and also the *Siku quanshu zongmu* 四庫全書總目 (The Catalogue of the Complete Library of the Four Branches) (1781) lists it in the "Xiaoshuo jia" category.[66] So, maybe the *TPYL*, being a text incorporating material from officially recognized works, was inclined to cite the *YWZ* source, which was a text credited to a master of thought (*zi* 子), or copied the anecdote directly from the *YWLJ* entry. The *TPGJ* on the other hand, being a collection of stories, cites the *Xiaolin* as the source of the tale, as the *Xiaolin* was a text ascribed to the "Xiaoshuo" category[67]

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62 Johannes L. Kurz, "The Politics of Collecting Knowledge," 305 and idem, "The Compilation of *the Taiping yulan* and the *Cefu yuangui*," 48.

63 These are Taizong's 太宗 (r. 976–997) own words (the emperor who ordered the compilation of the two Song encyclopaedias) recorded in the *Taizong shilu* 太宗實錄, preserved in the *Yuhai* 玉海, see Johannes L. Kurz, "The Compilation of the *Taiping yulan* and the *Cefu yuangui*," 45–46.

64 See the *Chongwen zongmu* 崇文總目 (1034–42) (Catalogue of the Chongwen Institute), 3.174, also quoted in Johannes L. Kurz, "The Compilation of the *Taiping yulan* and the *Cefu yuangui*," 55.

65 *Songshi* 206, 5230.

66 *SKQSZM* 142, 85–86. Here, the *YWLJ* and the *TPYL* are still listed as "Leishu," *SKQSZM* 135, 27–28; 135, 19–20.

67 *SS* 34, 1011.

and still available at the time.[68] It also gives the story a title: "Chu zhi" 楚雉 (The pheasant of Chu).[69]

The explanations given so far point to a crucial issue: why was this story collected in the *Xiaolin*? According to our analysis, the story about the man of Chu ascribed to the *Xiaolin* is identical to the one found in the *YWZ*. A preface is attached to the *textus receptus* of the *YWZ*, in which a man of Shanyang 山陽, whose family name was Zhongchang 仲長, states that at the end of the Huangchu 黃初 era (225–226 AD) he went to the capital (Luoyang) and Miao Xi 繆襲 (186–245 AD, courtesy name Xibo 熙伯), a prominent scholar of the time,[70] gave him this text. Mr. Zhongchang liked it greatly (*shen wan zhi* 甚玩之); he "corrected many errors" (*duo tuo wu* 多脫誤) and divided the text into two chapters.[71] We know, then, that the *YWZ* was circulating among members of the educated elite at the same period of time in which Handan Chun, the author of the *Xiaolin*, could still have been alive.[72] It is also known that Mr. Zhongchang decided to work on the text because he liked it. It could be that he enjoyed it not only as a philosophical work but also due to the stories it contained. He found amusement in reading its stories.[73] Thus, it is possible that Handan Chun took this enjoyable story from the *YWZ*, which was available at the time, and grouped it together with other stories in his *Xiaolin*.[74] However, the story, placed in a different context, changes its reading paradigm. The new reading paradigm is made evident to the reader by the title of the text, *Xiaolin*.

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68 It has been lost, but during the Song it was still available, Wang Liqi, *Lidai xiaohua ji*, 1.

69 In the *TPGJ*, each collected passage is given a title. In doing so it shows that each passage is not just regarded as a simple excerpt of knowledge about a topic. The title frames the passage as a single piece of narrative.

70 *SGZ* 21, 620. Miao Xi was a close friend of Zhongchang Tong 仲長統 (180–220 AD), another man of famous literary ability, and therefore the Mr. Zhongchang mentioned in the preface to the *YWZ* had been identified as Zhongchang Tong in the past, see Dong Yingzhe, "Yin Wenzi zhenwei ji xuepai guishu kaobian," 94; Gao Liushui and Lin Hengsen, *Shenzi, Yinwenzi, Gongsonglongzi quanyi*, 88; However, Zhongchang Tong died in 220 so the dates do not match. Nevertheless, Mr. Zhongchang could have been a member of Zhongchang Tong's family, which would have made it possible for him to have been acquainted with Miao Xi; see Dong Yingzhe, "Yin Wenzi zhenwei ji xuepai guishu kaobian," 94. The content of the preface aroused several doubts regarding the origin of the text. Even if Yin Wen was acknowledged to have lived during the Warring States period, the authenticity of the *YWZ*, which supposedly contains his teachings, was questioned by some modern scholars (Tang Gen, "Yinwen he Yinwenzi," 223, 236, 240; Luo Genze, "Yinwenzi tanyuan," 249, 255). Today, however, there is a general agreement that the text was actually produced during the Warring States period

71 *YWZ*, Preface, 3.

72 Xu Kechao, "Xiaolin zuozhe bianzheng ji xingzhi lunxi," 63.

73 *Wan* 玩 with the meaning of "to find pleasure in a thing, to delight in," *HYDZ* 2, 1103.

74 This anecdote is alluded to in the *Liuzi* 劉子 (Northern Qi dynasty) by a short phrase: "The Chu phoenix was actually a pheasant" 楚之鳳凰，乃是山雞; see Jiang Jianjun and Liu Zhou, *Xin bian Liuzi xinlun,* 171.

It is composed of two characters: *xiao* 笑 and *lin* 林. The character *lin* recalls a previous legacy of texts, which were famous for embedding anecdotes. An example of such texts was the "Shuilin" 說林 chapter of the *Hanfeizi* 韓非子, which also served as a model for Liu Xiang's *SY*.[75] The *Shiji suoyin,* commenting on the "Shuilin," states: "The numerous persuasions and all the stories [contained in it] are as many as [the trees in] a forest."[76] The *lin* of our text has the same meaning; it suggests a multitude of something. The other character in the title, *xiao* 笑, is defined in the *Shuowen jiezi* 說文解字 as meaning *xi* 喜, or "to be pleased";[77] hence *xiao* could be understood as "to smile in response to something pleasant."[78] Therefore, the title informs the reader that the content of the text is, presumably, made up of humorous stories, the aim of which is to please the audience (not to teach or to give advice on government issues). The title of the *Xiaolin* creates the ideal mental set for readers and provides a "horizon" of expectations toward the text and the stories it contains. So a story morphologically identical to those found in texts with a philosophical or political agenda, is proposed here only for its own value. Thus, innovation is not to be found in a new narrative strategy adopted by the author to create a funny tale, but in shifting the way of reading the story, thus transforming it from a moralizing tale into an entertaining one.

Therefore, as far as the story about the man of Chu is concerned, once collected in the *Xiaolin*, it can be read as having two main protagonists: a cunning man and a numskull. The numskull not only believes in the existence of the phoenix (which could be understood as having a blind faith in something fantastic that does not exist), but furthermore he is not able to distinguish a pheasant from a supernatural bird.

Besides the fact that the story was collected in a different work, the different reading practice, which conferred to the bird-gift story a different meaning, was also made possible by the social and literary atmosphere of the third century. During the Late Han and Wei-Jin period, in fact, the members of the educated elite enjoyed telling each other stories during social gatherings and to be a witty conversationalist was praised. In the chapter "Xie yin" 諧隱 (Humor and Enigma) of his *Wenxin diaolong* 文心雕龍 Liu Xie 劉勰 (fifth–fourth century) clearly describes the atmosphere in which the "humorous" texts were enjoyed:

> Wei-wen (Cao Pi) used comic themes to write jokes, and Xuan Zong jested sarcastically during a diplomatic reception. These jokes, though effective in producing merriment during a feast, serve no practical purposes. And yet good writers often went out of their way to join in the fun.[79]

[75] The character *yuan* 苑 of the *SY* suggests the same concept of "a variety of items"; see Yang Yi, *Zhongguo gudian xiaoshuo shilun*, 139–40.

[76] *SJ* 63, 2148, n. 7.

[77] *SWJZ* 198.

[78] 因喜悅而開顏 *HYDZ* 5, 2950.

[79] *WXDL* 3/15, 194; trans. Vincent Yu-chung Shih, *The Literary Mind and the Carving of Dragons,* 80. On this passage, related to the *Xiaolin*, see Giulia Baccini, "The *Xiaolin* as a *Paiyou Xiaoshuo*: the Origins and the Changing of Meaning of the Term *Paiyou*," in particular 175–76.

An anecdote like that of the bird-gift story could have been used during social conversations and could have possibly served as the basis for jokes among courtiers.

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Abbreviations

CXJ: Chuxueji 初學記. Xu Jian 徐堅. Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1962.
HYDZ: Hanyu dazidian 漢語大字典. Wuhan: Hubei Cishu Chubanshe, Sichuan Cishu Chubanshe, 1986.
HS: Hanshu 漢書. Ban Gu 班固. Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1975.
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