

## The History of the Strange: The Nature of an Historical Consciousness in Tang Tales

By Justin Winslett

### Abstract

Though the genre of history in China has a long and venerable pedigree, the role and nature of historical texts has been consistently disputed by successive generations of scholars. By the modern era, Chinese historiography has been approached in one of two ways, as either an exposition of the events of the past with the aim of arriving at the ‘truth’ or as didactic parables meant to impart moral lessons. Whereas recent scholarship suggests a more nuanced approach between these positions, it focuses on a narrow set of texts which constitute the genre of history *shǐ* 史, often ‘official’ imperial histories, and ignores the wider set of texts that premodern Chinese readers would have engaged with—notably tales about the supernatural and the extra-human. This paper looks at a selection of these tales to see how they use, and engage with, history. It notes that in many of these tales there are techniques and conventions to mark the time frame of the tale, but they are rarely concerned with placing the events of the tale into wider ‘historical’ contexts. Rather, the texts show a strong preponderance for either adopting an ahistorical historicization, or through framing the events, or drawing allusions to events and people that would have been contemporary to the writers of the tales. This paper argues that history in these tales is about providing a moral didactic, but also to inform people about the present and not only the past.

The association of history with China on the surface would seem to require little analysis. Casual observers of contemporary Chinese politics would consistently be exposed to political slogans such as 5,000 years of continuous history, international disputes over the ‘correct’ understanding of history and indeed debates over ‘historical revisionism’.<sup>1</sup> Chinese identity

---

<sup>1</sup> Shan 2024, 31-51.

both national and local is steeped in lengthy and interwoven historical narratives, and within the ‘discipline’ of Chinese studies, historians and historical methodologies are commonplace not only when looking at the modern era but also premodern China.

History, as such, can be seen to be a very inalienable aspect of China, but despite this wealth of engagement, there are many nuances, perspectives and ideas concerning history that remain unexplored and underdeveloped, not least owing to the continual framing of history in contemporary modes of historiographic scholarship. Early scholarly debate over Chinese history tended to be preoccupied with the factual reality of the texts identified as history, notably a question of whether or not the events written in these texts can be deemed to have taken place or not—an approach which spoke not only to the scholarly environment of the time, but also to the more contemporary approach to history as a record of events. Later scholarship, however, often looked more to the ideology that informed these historical texts to elucidate fundamental historiographic approaches found in Chinese history—that Chinese history is didactic and must be read for the lessons it contains, with some scholars even refuting the possibility of reading these histories as evidence of accurate events.<sup>2</sup> As Olberding points out, more recent scholarship has tended to regard history in these texts as often falling between these two extremes and has highlighted the greater nuances that many of these texts actually reflect.<sup>3</sup> These explorations, however, have generally been with texts which have been used by Late Imperial scholars, from not only the Ming 明 (1368-1644) and Qing 清 (1644-1912), but also in the present day to reconstruct the events of the past and which are understood as ‘history’. Much ink has been spilled, for instance, discussing the value and nature of texts from the Warring States 戰國 (420-221 BC) and the Han 漢 (206 BC-AD 220): texts such as the *Shiji* 史記, *Hanshu* 漢書 and *Zuo zhuan* 左傳 and their conventions and the role of history, effectively establishing a genre known as *shi* 史 is well understood.<sup>4</sup> However, there are many texts that in premodern China would be understood to follow the conventions of this genre

---

<sup>2</sup> For a more involved discussion of this scholarship and debate, see Olberding 2012, 14-16.

<sup>3</sup> Olberding 2012, 15.

<sup>4</sup> See Schaberg 2001, Chen 陈 2020, and Pines 2005 for further discussions of how these specific texts contribute to and establish this genre.

which even since the Late Imperial period have been generally excluded from the purview of history and, as such, not often engaged with in this discussion for how they use and contribute to history in China.

These texts, which contemporary scholars label as *zhiguai* 知怪 and *chuanqi* 傳奇,<sup>5</sup> have often been excluded from discussions of history owing to their concern for the extra-human and supernatural. Indeed, when approaching history from the attempts to ascertain what ‘actually happened’, tales of lurid monsters, miraculous transformations, and crafty spirits would certainly not provide useful information on the reality of events. However, these tales firmly follow the conventions of the genre of history. Likewise, though modern scholars have shown more interest in them as the beginnings of ‘fiction’ in Chinese literature,<sup>6</sup> the concept of fiction was not present amongst Chinese intellectuals during the Early Imperial period when many of these tales were being composed.<sup>7</sup> Perhaps they are not the most credible sources to understand whether events did or did not happen, but as it will be seen, most likely this was not of the utmost concern when approaching these texts which make extensive use of history not simply in terms of their construction but also as literary techniques that resonated with the intellectual community at the time.

When framing these tales into the larger discussions pertaining to history, a number of questions present themselves. If their marginalisation as history is the product of later generations, did the Early Imperial communities that used them regard their contents as credible and an accurate reflection of ‘what happened’? If they too found them too incredulous to accept as fact, were these texts purely understood in didactic terms? Were these didactic lessons to be ‘good’ or ‘not good’, an historiographic approach more commonly seen in the Late Imperial period?<sup>8</sup> If this is the case, what are the ‘not good’ lessons contained in these tales, and what happens when some of these lessons overlap with the historical material deemed

---

<sup>5</sup> Dudbridge 2005, 197 and Huntington 2003, 16.

<sup>6</sup> See Lu Xun 1930.

<sup>7</sup> Nienhauser 1998, 32.

<sup>8</sup> Ditmanson 2007, 156-158.

‘good’? Does one see consistent historical events referenced and employed, or do they represent alternative historical events? In short, how are these tales using and constructing history?

This paper will explore this overall question through a perusal of a selection of tales from the first millennium AD. As it will be seen, these tales are indeed constructed as ‘history’ through adopting a series of conventions from texts such as the *Shiji* and *Hanshu*. These conventions, however, often seem to provide greater ambiguity to the tale than explicit historical awareness. These tales are also prone to making a number of historical allusions, relying on historical figures or events to inform the narration and these events. In both of these cases, these tales engage far more with contemporaneous historical personages and events, raising further questions as to their role as ‘history’.

The tales discussed in this paper were all sourced from the notable compendium *Taiping guangji*. This compendium of 500 chapters and 7,021 tales was compiled at the beginning of the Song 宋 (AD 960-1279) in AD 978 and represents one of the great textual projects of the Song which were carried out to collect and catalogue the all the knowledge of the empire.<sup>9</sup> Not only does it offer a wealth of material that is not found in other extant sources, particularly from the Sui 隋 (AD 581-618) and Tang 唐 (AD 618-907) empires, but its organisation into various categories provides great insight into how scholars from this time organised their world.<sup>10</sup>

These categories do not show any specific temporal or historic concern themselves, often reflecting categories of ‘things’ *wù* 物 such as worthies, immortals, dragons, etc. Therefore, this categorisation in itself is not useful to pinpoint tales that engage with what ‘history’ may be. However, it is very clear in an engagement with any tales from across the compilation that historical epochs and the conventions found across early Chinese historical writing inform many of them. The texts here discussed reflect a sample of 558 of tales from across this

---

<sup>9</sup> Dudbridge, 1983, 2-3. For a more detailed history of the composition of the *Taiping guangji*, see Zhang Guofeng 张国风 2004. For a discussion of the other great projects of the Song, see Kurz 2007.

<sup>10</sup> For a discussion of the diversity of these contents and the difficulties of reliable categorization, see Dudbridge 2013, 34-35.

compilation, eighty-three of which are contained in nine chapters devoted to foxes *bú* 狐, fourteen in two chapters devoted to yaksha *yècha* 夜叉 (nature spirits/demons), thirty-two scattered across twenty chapters of different categorization that mention Persia *bōsī* 波斯, and 429 tales devoted to Shu 蜀, in modern day Sichuan, which are also scattered across 237 chapters of diverse categorization. This sample should by no means be taken as exhaustive—indeed the number discussed pales in comparison to the size of the collection; rather, their modes of constructing history and engaging with historiography should be taken as representative, and the consistent approaches and commonalities found across these tales speak to how engrained these conventions are, particularly as these tales are all sourced from a variety of different texts representing different times periods, though mostly can be dated to the Tang.

In general, history is manifest in these tales in a number of ways. The first and most frequent is through marking the time that these tales take place, which is often in the recent, not distant past. When historical personages and figures are alluded to, or even used as characters in the tales, these too follow a pattern of usually being figures of the recent past and, in some cases, possibly contemporaneous to the writing of the tale. This concern with the recent, over the distant, past is generally consistent in tales constructing history; there are a number of tales that do seem to convey an ahistoricity, but these tales either express encyclopaedic information or are set in distant and extra-human lands.

The establishment of a time period by placing it at the very beginning of the tale is a convention inherited from the *Shiji*. This goes beyond a basic grammatical function of the language, where time is placed before or after the topic, as it is often used as a framing device for the events in the tale, which are often encompassed by the time period established with tales rarely taking place across different periods. An observation of the time frames used in these tales reveals several consistencies and patterns about how the writers communicate the historicity of the tales they discuss.

When looking at the collection of tales about fox spirits for instance, bar none the most frequent way of establishing time is to reference the empire that the tale takes place in.

Fifty of the eighty-three tales across these sections do this, with forty-five set in the Tang. Only one each is set respectively in the Han, Wei 魏 (AD 220-266), Jin 晉, Sui and Later Wei 後魏 (AD 386-585). As illustrated by the following examples:

唐國子監助教張簡，河南緱氏人也。曾為鄉學講文選。有野狐假簡形，講一紙書而去。

Instructor Zhang Jian of Directorate of Education in the Tang was a person of Goushi of Henan. He once lectured on the *Wen xuan*<sup>11</sup> for a local school. There was a wild fox that borrowed the form of Jian, lectured on a page of text and then left...<sup>12</sup>

唐坊州中部縣令長孫甲者，其家篤信佛道。異日齋次，舉家見文殊菩薩，乘五色雲從日邊下。

As for Magistrate Zhang Sunjia of the central portion of Fangzhou in the Tang,<sup>13</sup> his family sincerely believed in the ways of the Buddha. One day, he was lodging in his study, when the entire household saw Manjusri<sup>14</sup> ride on a multi-colored cloud and descend from the sun...<sup>15</sup>

漢廣川王好發冢。發爨書冢，其棺柩盟器。悉毀爛無餘。唯有白狐一頭，見人驚走。

The King of Guangchuan in the Han<sup>16</sup> liked to excavate tombs. He was once excavating the tomb of Luan Shu,<sup>17</sup> and the coffins and tomb items had all been destroyed without exception. There was only one white fox which ran startled when it saw a person...<sup>18</sup>

The preponderance of tales set in the Tang is something of note. The texts provide no other clarifying information as to when the tale was set beyond the existing empire, suggesting some

---

<sup>11</sup> Compiled in the beginning of the fifth century, the *Wen xuan*, one of the anthologies of literary output of former times, enjoyed great prestige in circles of learning in the Tang. For further information on the text, see Knechteges 2014.

<sup>12</sup> *Taiping guangji* 447.3658. (All translations are done by the author).

<sup>13</sup> Today in southeastern Huangling 黃陵 in Shaanxi.

<sup>14</sup> A prominent and well-known bodhisattva. For a discussion of Manjusri's representations and roles, see Harrison 2000.

<sup>15</sup> *Taiping guangji* 451.3685-3686.

<sup>16</sup> The text is unclear as to which of the Kings of Guangchuan this was. The title was first bestowed on Liu Yue 劉越 (d. 137 BC) and this was subsequently passed on to four other relations before going to abeyance in 49 BC with the last holder Liu Haiyang 劉海陽. The area of their rule would be located today around Jizhou 冀州 in Hebei.

<sup>17</sup> A notable official of the state of Jin 晉 who is dated to have died in 573 BC.

<sup>18</sup> *Taiping guangji* 447.36853.

ideas concerning historicity—but this could also imply a relative lack of knowledge of historical events beyond the reigning empire. These tales appear to have been set overwhelmingly within the Tang empire, albeit a number may have also been compiled immediately after the Tang. This also raises questions as to what is the value of an ‘historical’ account of something that may be read by people within the same time period.

Eighteen of the tales do provide calendrical distinctions through the use of regnal dates. These are further focused owing to the practice of dividing one’s rule into reign eras, a practice established under Emperor Wu 武帝 of the Han (r. 141-87 BC). Only one of these is set in a reign era outside the Tang, in this case, the Jian’an 建安 era (AD 196-220) of the Han. The remainder are all predominantly in the reigns of Emperor Dezong 德宗 (r. AD 779-805), Wu Zetian 武則天 (r. AD 690-705) and Emperor Xuanzong 玄宗 (r. AD 712-756), however, beyond four tales in Xuanzong’s Kaiyuan 開元 era (AD 713-741) and two in Dezong’s Zhenyuan 貞元 era (AD 785-801), the eras represented are all different, an example is below:

唐開元中，有焦練師修道。聚徒甚衆。有黃裙婦人自稱阿胡，就焦學道術。  
In the Kaiyuan era of the Tang, there was a Dao Master Xiu who cultivated the Way and his followers were extremely numerous. There was a yellow clad woman who called herself Ahu. She approached Xiu to learn the art of the Way...<sup>19</sup>

What is marked is the ambiguity where era names are rarely clarified with exact years, only four provide them, and instead either simply state the era name as the historical period or provide some vague temporal specificity such as ‘early’ or ‘during’, an ambiguity that parallels the use of the empire’s name to denote period.

The remaining tales in these sections do not rely on time as a framing device and in some cases can be seen to be atemporal either owing to their encyclopaedic nature, or simply because the events in the tale are not placed within any historical framework. However, in some of these tales, the lack of this convention does not render them ahistoric. Rather another way in which these tales employ historical events is through the use of allusion. The longest, and perhaps most famous tale, in the collection on fox spirits—*Renshi* 任氏—for instance is clearly set in

---

<sup>19</sup> *Taiping guangji* 449.3672-3673.

the Tang. This is not simply because of contextual clues but is reinforced through literary allusion as the location of the climactic scene of the tale is Mawei 馬嵬, today in Xianyang 咸陽 in Shaanxi. This is the location of the climactic events concerning Emperor Xuanzong’s consort Yang Guifei 楊貴妃 (AD 719-756), who is made to hang herself at this site for her supposed responsibility in the sacking of the capital and their fleeing during the Anlushan Rebellion.<sup>20</sup> The construction of parallels to figures in the story is obvious from a literary perspective and the identification of the lead character Renshi with Yang Guifei not only provides unambiguous temporal framing for the reader but also ‘historicises’ the events of the tale.<sup>21</sup> This is not simply by placing it in an historical context, but also by tying it to the didactic that the events of Yang Guifei’s death are meant to teach the reader. Renshi is portrayed sympathetically throughout the tale—a virtuous and intelligent woman who is exploited by the male characters. If readers are to identify the two characters together, then one must understand that Yang Guifei was similarly virtuous and intelligent. Her death was hence not moral retribution for corrupting the emperor and scheming for power, but rather an unjust event brought about by the machinations of those she tried to aide. In this instance, one sees not only a tale employing historical events to develop its own historicity, but also to assert its own historiography on existing historical events.

Other tales in this collection likewise use existing historical events or personages as allusions to assert their own didactic and further inform the narrative, though. The tale of *Zhang Liben* 張立本 sees a young fox spirit take possession of the daughter of the titular character:

唐丞相牛僧孺在中書，草場官張立本有一女，為妖物所魅。其妖來時，女即濃粧盛服，於閨中，如與人語笑。其去，即狂呼號泣不已。久每自稱高侍郎。一日，忽吟一首云：「危冠廣袖楚宮粧，獨步閒廳逐夜涼。自把玉簪敲砌竹，清歌一曲月如霜。」立本乃隨口抄之。立本與僧法舟為友，至其宅，遂示其詩云。某女少不曾讀書，不知因何而能。舟乃與立本兩粒丹，令其女服之，不旬日而疾自愈。其女說云。宅後有竹叢，與高錡侍郎墓近，其中有野狐窟穴，因被其魅。服丹之後，不聞其疾再發矣。出會昌解頤錄。

---

<sup>20</sup> For an interesting and thorough look at the dramatic social and political changes that these events brought about, see DeBlasi 2002.

<sup>21</sup> See Dudbridge 1983.

When the Tang Chancellor Niu Sengru was in the secretariat,<sup>22</sup> there was a daughter of Zhang Liben, officer of the gardens. She became bewitched by a monstrous creature. Whenever this monster came, the daughter would heavily make herself up, put on fine clothes, would be in her boudoir and it would seem as if she were talking and laughing with someone. When they would leave, she went mad, howling and crying without stop. For a long time, she would call herself Deputy Minister Gao.<sup>23</sup> One day, she suddenly chanted a verse, ‘With lofty cap, billowing sleeves, in Chu court array, I walk alone through the halls seeking the cool of night. I put my jade hairpin in myself and rap on the scaffolding. I purely sing one song while the moon resembles frost’. Liben then transcribed as she spoke. Liben was friends with the monk Fa Zhou. He went to his house and then showed him what the verse said. This particular girl had not learnt to read when young, and he did not know how this was possible. Zhou gave Liben two pellets of cinnabar and made his daughter take them. In not even a day, the illness improved of its own accord. His daughter told him, ‘There is a bamboo thicket behind the house, and it is near to the Deputy Administrator Gao Kai’s tomb.<sup>24</sup> There is a wild fox den inside it, and I was bewitched by them. After I took the cinnabar, I did not feel their malady and came out of it’. Taken from the *Huichang jiejyi lu*.<sup>25</sup>

As seen above, the tale begins by framing the event during the chancellery of the controversial Tang official Niu Sengru, beyond the interesting and rare use of a government official’s tenure to mark the period, the possessed girl is likewise meant to recite the poetry of another official Gao Shi. Veridiction of how she knows this is provided in the coda to the tale where Gao Shi’s descendant Gao Kai is found to be buried behind the house and serve as den-space of a clan of foxes. Despite literally possessing a character in this tale, the daughter is not meant to be identified with either of the Gaos as in the tale of *Renshi* where Yang Guifei is paralleled to the title character. However, the allusions to controversial officials undoubtedly forces the reader to understand the events in relation to these figures and the known events of their lives. The events of the tale, however, are somewhat ambiguous if put in reference to the lives of the people alluded to. That baleful events such as fox-possession occur on the watch of

---

<sup>22</sup> This would place these events sometime between AD 824 and 830 when Niu Sengru 牛僧孺 was appointed to the secretariat under Emperor Jingzong 敬宗 (r. AD 824-827) and before being appointed to the Ministry of War under Emperor Wenzong 文宗 (r. AD 827-840) Niu Sengru (AD 780-849) was a noted official in the later Tang and a prominent figure in the factional politics that defined that era. For a greater discussion of the political climate of the time and how it manifests in much of the writing, see McMullen 1988.

<sup>23</sup> Referring to Gao Shi 高適 (AD 705-764), a noted official and poet to whom the subsequent verse is attributed.

<sup>24</sup> Ninth century AD.

<sup>25</sup> *Taiping guangji* 454.3709-3710.

Niu Sengru could suggest a less than approving take on his tenure and the poem from the Gao Shi may serve as commentary on this. However, the exact didactic would require greater familiarity with the intellectual community the speaker is a member. Despite this ambiguity in present day understanding of this didactic, it does, however, reveal an interesting preoccupation of these tales with the contemporary issues of those who are reading and writing them.

Other collections of tales witness similar uses of history with either framing through vague periods or allusions to notable figures. It is also not uncommon for notable figures to be the subject of a variety of tales. The identification of tales with individuals, rather than the events within them, is a convention established by the *Shiji*'s construction of biographies, and there is a variety of tales with the names of individuals who barely feature in the tales. However, within the tales devoted to yaksha, a type of Buddhist demon, one entitled *Geshu Han* 哥舒翰 recounts an extra-human encounter with the titular figure. Geshu Han (d. AD 757) was a general who fought for Emperor Xuanzong during the Anlushan rebellion. This tale shows a young Geshu Han, noted to be a bit of a firebrand and libertine, watch over the body of his dead lover only to witness the body be devoured by the demonic yaksha which he ultimately tussles with and scares it away. The final sentence explains that from this event, Geshu Han went on to achieve fame and notoriety. This coda may imply that this event, his encounter with the extra-human, is something which set Geshu Han on the straight and narrow and thus imply the didactic of this tale. Other discussions of Geshu Han's history provides little details to his nature as a young man, often focusing on his loyalty to Emperor Xuanzong, and so if this tale contains greater commentary, such as *Renshi*, and historical events cannot be attested in this tale.

The profundity of tales concerned with persons and events of the High Tang, and the Anlushan rebellion is clear from the variety of tales introduced so far. This propensity to focus on these events is seen in many other tales across the vast collection. In texts that make up its pages create figures such as Emperor Xuanzong and Yang Guifei as recurring characters. The tales concerning foxes and yaksha spoken about are collections established by the editors of the

*Taiping guangji*. As stated, they reflect how these editors understood their world and sought to organise for future scholars to make sense of the lessons and contents of the tales included. One could argue that this editorial approach may bring tales with similar content together, because even though this organisational approach was not done with an historiographic mindset, the subject matter, such as yaksha, a demon strongly associated with Buddhism which was highly pervasive during the Tang, could direct them to tales from a specific period.

But even looking at tales that are scattered across different sections not organised by the editors demonstrates similar historiographic approaches to those seen within editorially coherent sections. For instance, when looking at the number of tales that depict the area of Shu, what today would be in modern Sichuan, one also sees a strong propensity to use more ambiguous time frames, mostly the empire name, as framing devices and a general absence of specificity in this time frame. Further, historical events are also alluded to across these tales with the same frequent and recurring figures. During the Anlushan rebellion, Emperor Xuanzong is noted to have fled to Shu and established his court there before restoring the Tang at the end of the civil war. This historic event is alluded to in the majority of tales concerned with Shu with the phrase ‘When Xuanzong took refuge in Shu’ 玄宗幸蜀 becoming somewhat cliché. In some cases, this allusion is an active literary effect helping to construct a didactic meaning within the bounds of existing historiography, such as seen with the discussion of Yang Guifei’s death in *Renshi*. In others, it seems to merely establish historical framing for the individual discussed or the events of the tale, as seen in the tale of Geshu Han.

The below tale of Yang Tongyou, illustrates many of these uses as the tale is not only framed by Emperor Xuanzong’s escaping to Shu, but it also engages with notable historical events pertaining to Yang Guifei to build upon the didactic of the events she is famous for. Further, its focus on Yang Tongyou also builds up his character and helps the reader learn about who he is, why he is to be known and whether or not he is to be learned from.

楊通幽，本名什伍，廣漢什邡人。幼遇道士，教以檄召之術，受三皇天文，役命鬼神，無不立應。驅毒厲。剪氛邪，禳水旱，致風雨，是皆能之。而木訥疎傲。不拘於俗。其術數變異，遠近稱之。玄宗幸蜀，自馬嵬之後，屬念貴妃，往往輟食忘寐。近侍之臣，密令求訪方士，冀少安聖慮。或云：「楊什伍有考召之法。徵至行朝。上問其事，對曰：『雖天上地下，冥冥之中，鬼神之內，皆可歷而求之。』上大悅，於內置場，以行其術。是夕奏曰：『已於九地之下，鬼神之中，遍加搜訪，不知其所。』上曰：『妃子當不墜于鬼神之伍矣。』二日夜，又奏曰：『九天之上，星辰日月之間，虛空杳冥之際，亦遍尋訪而不知其處。』上悄然不懌曰：『未歸天，復何之矣。炷香冥燭，彌加懇至。』三日夜，又奏曰：『於人寰之中，山川岳瀆祠廟之內，十洲三島江海之間，亦遍求訪，莫知其所。後於東海之上，蓬萊之頂，南宮西廡。有群仙所居，上元女仙太真者，即貴妃也。謂什伍曰：『我太上侍女，隸上元宮。聖上太陽朱宮真人，偶以宿緣世念，其願頗重，聖上降居於世，我謫於人間，以為侍衛耳。此後一紀，自當相見，願善保聖體，無復意念也。』乃取開元中所賜金釵鈿合各半，玉龜子一，寄以為信，曰：『聖上見此，自當醒憶矣。』言訖流涕而別。」什伍以此物進之。上潛然良久。乃曰：「師昇天入地，通幽達冥，真得道神仙之士也。手筆賜名通幽。賜物千段，金銀各千兩，良田五千畝，紫霞帔、白玉簡，特加禮異。

Yang Tongyou, originally named Shiwu, was a person of Shifang in Guanghan.<sup>26</sup> When he was young, he encountered a Dao Master and was taught the arts of summoning and received the *Heavenly Text of the Three Emperors*.<sup>27</sup> When he commanded the spirits, there were none who did not immediately respond. As for dispelling toxic maladies, cutting through vile miasmas, magicking rain and drought and bringing forth storms, all of these he was able to do. He was rather crude and inarticulate and did not take up with the common people. His arts were numerous and varied and those from near and far called upon him. When Xuanzong took refuge in Shu, he was deeply preoccupied with Guifei after Mawei. He always ate sparingly and would forget to sleep. A servant who was attending him secretly sought out this practitioner and hoped he would give some peace to the Emperor's thoughts. Some said, 'Yang Shiwu has a method of ensnaring spirits'. He was summoned to court, and the Emperor asked about this matter. He replied, 'Whether to the top of Heaven, the bottom of Earth, the realm of the dead or the abode of deities, all can be tracked and sought out'. The Emperor was greatly pleased and set up a space in the palace so that he could perform his art. That evening, he reported that 'I have already roundly searched through all of the deities to the ends of the Earth, but do not know where she is'. The Emperor said, 'My princess is not now down amongst the ranks of the spirits'. On the second night, he also reported, 'I have also roundly searched through the bounds of the void and the darkness amongst the sun, moon and stars to the height of the empyrean, but do not know her location'. The emperor in sorrow unhappily said, 'If she has yet to return to Heaven, then where has she gone?' He then lit incense and candles for the dead to increase his efforts to make her appear. On the third night, he again reported, 'I have also roundly searched her out in the realms of man, within the temples, mounds, pools, rivers and mountains, but none know her location. In the Western Hall of the Southern Palace on the apex of Penglai in the Eastern Sea is where assembled immortals dwell.<sup>28</sup> The Primordial Immortal of the Ultimate Truth is in fact Yang Guifei. She told me, "I am the paramount handmaiden and serve in the Primordial Palace. His majesty the true man of the Vermillion Palace of the Sun. It so happened that I was destined to be in the thoughts of a mortal. His wish was of ardent intensity and so his majesty sent me down to the mortal realm. When I went to be with mortals, I became but a servant. Yet through this entire span, we spent this time together and I wished only to be good at taking care of the emperor. I do not wish to dwell on this again". She then took half of all the gold and trinkets she had been given during the Kaiyuan era and one jade turtle and entrusted them to me as an act of sincerity saying, "When his majesties looks upon this, then he will forever remember". She wept when she finished speaking and then departed'. Shiwu then presented these items and the Emperor took to himself for a good long while, and then said, 'Master, you have ascended to Heaven and plumbed the Earth comprehending the darkness and grasping the mysterious. You truly are a master who has understands the Way, spirits and immortals. I will personally bestow on you the name Tongyou. I also bestow on you a thousand boxes of treasures, a thousand

ounces of gold and silver each, five thousand *mu*<sup>29</sup> of good land, a purple cloak, a white jade talisman<sup>30</sup> and afford you rites and rituals most special...<sup>31</sup>

The tale continues as a conversation between Yang Tongyou and the emperor, where Yang explains in somewhat technical detail his education through identification of not simply the masters he has learned from, but also the deities they are associated with. He also explains the techniques that he has learned and their efficacy. Although particularly interesting in establishing Yang within the framework of intellectual pedigree and in the understanding of Dao master practices, this conversation does not engage with any of the prior passages’ matters concerning the Emperor’s loss of Yang Guifei.

In this tale Yang Guifei is identified as a deity who was destined to spend time with the Emperor. Whilst the romantic connotations are clear, further reinforced by the Emperor’s obsession with connecting with her even in death, this also identifies her with the extra-human and adds another dynamic to the didactic of understanding the role of Yang Guifei. Indeed, Yang Guifei’s loyalty is reflected not only in her feelings but also in her divine responsibility, and her surrendering her life in the immortal realms for life in the mortal world is an act of sacrifice worthy of a noble being. Yang is not being identified with a figure like in *Renshi*; nevertheless, this tale equally creates a sympathetic portrayal of Yang and highlights her commitment to service and loyalty to the emperor, particularly the willingness to forgo time as an immortal to live in the mortal realm.

---

<sup>26</sup> In modern, central Sichuan.

<sup>27</sup> This text, also known as the *Sanhuangjing* 三皇經, is purported to be an alchemical manual attested as early as the Jin. All copies of it were meant to have been destroyed in AD 647 on edict of Emperor Taizong, though fragments survive in a number of textual collections, notably the *Daozang* 道藏. That it is depicted here as being taught to Yang over a hundred years after its destruction adds to both Yang’s pedigree and exoticism. For a history of this esoteric texts, see Steavu 2009.

<sup>28</sup> One of the mythical islands where immortals are meant to dwell, Penglai is often mentioned with two other similar island abodes, Fangzhang 方丈 and Yingzhou 瀛洲, as being somewhere in the “Eastern Sea”. Often described with uncanny properties, such as floating with no supports, covered in palaces of gold, etc., these islands, and Penglai in particular, become bywords for otherworldly paradises across Chinese mythology, legend and fiction. For an interesting discussion Penglai in comparison to other paradisaical islands in other traditions, see Fokkema 2011.

<sup>29</sup> Roughly 823 acres.

<sup>30</sup> Both items are regalia of nobility and often reserved for the Imperial family.

<sup>31</sup> *Taiping guangji* 20.138-139.

Although the connection to history in these tales is clear from their convention and literary provenance, it is important to stress that there are a number of tales which do not conform to these conventions, either through stylistic choice or owing to their origins. The *Taiping guangji*, as a compendium of texts, naturally includes material which would have been different from many of the dynamic genres the scholars were engaged with. Many instances of more encyclopaedic material, such as descriptions of various flora and fauna, foreign lands and medicinal practices are found across the samples of this collection. However, a number of these more encyclopaedic tales do contain ‘historical’ information through their explanatory framework. In the tale of Geshu Han, readers are to understand the tale not as a suspenseful depiction of the extra-human, but a life changing event for a notable historical figure. A number of tales in the collection are explanatory to why certain things in this world are the way they are and thus often construct an historical narrative for their explanation. However, these narratives lack many of the other historical features seen in the earlier tales discussed, providing no real detail as to when the event is meant to happen or identification with known historical persons. These tales, hence, can be understood as ‘ahistorical history’, and thus share conventions in common with myth and legend.

吐火羅國縛底野城，古波斯王烏瑟多習之所築也。王初築此城，即壞。歎曰。吾今無道，天令築此城不成矣。有小女名那息，見父憂恚，問曰。王有隣敵乎。王曰。吾是波斯國王。領千餘國。今至吐火羅中，欲築此城，垂功萬代，既不遂心，所以憂耳。女曰。願王無憂，明旦令匠視我所履之跡築之，即立。王異之。至明，女起步西北，自截右手小指，遺血成蹤。匠隨血築之，城不復壞。女遂化為海神，其海至今猶在堡下，水澄清如鏡。周五百餘步。出酉陽雜俎

Balkh in Tocharia was built by the ancient Persian king *Wuseduoxi*. When the king first built the city, it was subsequently destroyed. He said, ‘Now, I am without the Dao. Heaven commands me to build this city, but I am unsuccessful. He had a young daughter named *Naxi* who saw her father’s sorrow. She asked, ‘Does your majesty have a nearby enemy?’ The King said, ‘I am the King of Persia. I command more than a thousand lands. Now, upon coming to Tocharia, I wish to build this city and pass my achievements down for a thousand generations, but I am yet to achieve this dream. This is but why I am sad’. His daughter said, ‘I wish that your majesty does not be sad. Tomorrow at dawn, order your builders to look at the trail of where I have walked, and build there. Then you will have your city’. The king thought this strange. The next day, his daughter walked toward the northeast, and left drops of blood where she walked from her right pinkie. The builders then followed the blood and built there. The city walls did not fall again. The daughter then transformed into a sea god. This sea is now still surrounding this city and the water that springs forth is as clear as a mirror. It is more than five hundred paces in diameter. Taken from the *Youyang zazu*.<sup>32</sup>

The above tale, found in the section on the *Prodigious and Strange* 靈異, is one of the thirty-two mentions of Persia within the tales of the *Taiping guangji*, none of which provides any useful information on the cultures and peoples of the Iranian Plateau. Rather, all sections on Persia tend to relay fantastical information and realms occupied by the extra-human. In this tale, the miracle is clearly the creation of a city from the supernatural acts of the princess. Tropes of sacrifice, physical exertion and commitment are clear literary conceits in this passage; however, though this can ontologically explain the miraculous origin of Balkh—or Bactres as it was known in antiquity—and thus purports an historical event, there are none of the other conventions observed in other tales to assert when this event took place. There are no dates, ambiguous or otherwise, provided and the only contextual clues would be the transliterated name of the Persian King Wuseduoxi, or what in Middle Chinese would have been something more akin to ‘Usrittazjep’.<sup>33</sup> This name is not attested in any other tales of the collection, nor can it be found in any description of ‘Persia’ in the extant texts of or before this time.

---

<sup>32</sup> *Taiping guangji* 45374.2971.

<sup>33</sup> Reconstructions taken from Baxter-Sagart (*Digital Etymological Dictionary of Old Chinese* 2012). Although there is no known Persian ruler with a similar name, Yoshida Yutaka does assert that this is a variant of *yu4duo1xi2* 鬱多習 which he identifies as Wishtasp the Middle Persian form of Vishtaspa, a complex figure in Zoroastrianism who was identified as Hystaspes in Graeco-Roman tradition and considered a follower and sage of Zoroaster. (Ma 馬 and Wang 汪 2018, 82).

Furthermore, phonetic glosses are relatively weak to the names of known Persian rulers providing little clue if this is meant to be a known figure. Although this name could refer to another Central Asian figure being conflated as a Persian ruler, or a local Bactrian ruler of the area, the obscurity of the name when compared to other texts would suggest this was not meant to be a known figure, and indeed the name may simply be artifice to sound ‘Persian’, and thus foreign. The city of Balkh is ancient in provenance and so the ‘history’ of its foundation would itself be lost in mythistory. The ahistorical nature of this tale can be construed to ‘historicise’ it in a way as it reinforces the exoticisation and ultimately extra-human nature of the experience presented. Readers do not need to understand exactly when this event occurs, as it is fantastical and exotic, thus being set outside the realm of ‘history’. Rather, they must understand that the foundation of this city was brought about through a daughter’s loyalty and love for her father. This lesson is universal in both place and time, and as such the need to frame it within larger history becomes unproductive to the tale; on the contrary, rendering it ahistorical serves a greater weight in teaching the lesson of the event and the reinforcement of it as something that would apply in any situation at any time.

That ahistorical tales are present is of interest, but the events they avoid framing are as the above exotic or so far removed from existing experience as to be rendered mythological or legendary. Most of the tales discussed herein seem to relate to historical events or frame the events of the narrative in time frames that are recent to the compilation of the tale. In some cases these may even be contemporaneous to the tale. The profundity and frequency of tales set in the Tang from works known to have been written in the Tang is marked in the tales discussed and requires greater understanding as to why there is such an historical focus on the present. From one perspective, this could suggest that there is a relatively weak historical consciousness in many of the literate population of the Early Imperial period, and this is hence observed in a much stronger reference to recent events which the literate population would be aware of. This could suggest a lack of knowledge of historical events or possibly even a disinterest. Indeed, the diversity in education and its limitation to the upper classes could suggest an equally diverse, yet narrow, curriculum. However, this belies the commonalities, not

least the venerable Classics,<sup>34</sup> seen across the diversity of educational communities in this period.<sup>35</sup>

However, it is still obvious from the tales discussed herein that the ancient periods mentioned in the Classics seem rarely called upon when discussing these tales, and tales that are set in the distant past tend to eschew many of the conventions seen in other ‘historical writing’ in favour of an ahistorical mode of storytelling. The distant past to many of these tales seems to be the incidental mentions of the Han, Wei or Jin which occasionally, albeit ambiguously, showing that some writers were certainly aware of the existence of these empires even if the nature of the empire is rarely important to the narrative of the tale.

Furthermore, the historicization observed in these tales even when discussing more recent events rarely involves a discussion of those events per se. Often the setting of tales in history serves as a framing tool to help frame how the readers are to understand the tale. When historical events are alluded to, such as in the tales of *Renshi* or *Geshu Han*, they likewise are used to not only inform the narrative but also inform the understanding of the tale suggesting that the main point of historical framing is instead, as scholars like Goldin and Olberding suggest, simply to convey a didactic lesson, and the factuality of the events are of secondary importance, and indeed with these tales perhaps of complete unimportance.<sup>36</sup>

When approached from this perspective, however, this understanding of didactic history begins to inform the reader as to why history is constructed the way it is. Indeed, if one were to simply flip this understanding and realise that writers will not compose a narrative if it is not didactic, at least in the minds of the writers, then this provides a reason for why tales seem to be concerned with contemporary history and that historical events and the representation of history has a modern flair—Chinese history is about the present, not the past.

Tales set in the distant past perhaps delight present day scholars who seek to discern new insights in more opaque and forgotten times, but for readers in premodern China, tales

---

<sup>34</sup> For a discussion of these and their origins see Nylan 2001.

<sup>35</sup> Li 2000, 57-77.

<sup>36</sup> Goldin 2008, 80-81 and Olberding 2012, 15.

featuring history are not read with this intent, which may also help to explain why anachronism is so predominant in the tales that do delve further into the past. Rather, readers would inherently approach these tales to understand what lesson they are meant to discern. The identification of characters and use of allusions to contemporaneous and recent figures, such as seen in *Renshi* and *Geshu Han*, offer clear and obvious lessons with which readers of this time can immediately understand, particularly if the lessons are for those real people and the events that immediately shape the lives of those reading the texts. However, the setting of tales in the same period, beyond simply convenient framing, also helps immediately ping the reader into understanding that what is being discussed will teach them something about what is going on today. Setting tales in the past requires allusion and metaphor. This is by no means beyond both writers to employ and readers to understand. The choice to employ these in the face of more recent events, which is more often than not owing to the temporal and physical universality of human emotion which are similar to those in the past, is not simply present.

The use of the English term ‘history’ often blinds readers to what history actually meant to the people who wrote and read these texts at the time, and though it may be simple to understand that history is meant to teach a lesson, this paradigm forces different approaches into how writers of these tales actually employed history and framed their tales into historical realities. Premodern Chinese history is not about looking to the past for answers but rather thinking about the present and how the past explains answers today.

### Bibliography

Baxter, W. and Sagart, L. 2012. *Digital Etymological Dictionary of Old Chinese*. Online at [https://edoc.uchicago.edu/edoc\\_login/edoc\\_login.php](https://edoc.uchicago.edu/edoc_login/edoc_login.php) (Accessed 15.12.2024).

Chen Jun 陈君. 2020. *Runse hongye: Hanshu wenben de xingcheng yu zaoqi chuanbo* 润色鸿业: 汉书文本的形成与 期传播. Beijing.

DeBlasi, A. 2002. *Reform in the Balance: The Defense of Literary Culture in Mid-Tang China*. Albany.

- Ditmanson, P. 2007. “Venerating the Martyrs of the 1402 Usurpation: History and Memory in the Mid and Late Ming Dynasty”, *T'oung Pao* 93, no. 1/3, 110-58.
- Dudbridge, G. 1983. *The Tale of Li Wa: Study and Critical Edition of a Tale from the Ninth Century*. London.
- Dudbridge G. 2005. *Books, Tales and Vernacular Culture: Selected Papers on China*. Leiden.
- Dudbridge, G. 2013. *A Portrait of Five Dynasties China: From the Memoirs of Wang Guangyu (880-956)*. Oxford.
- Fokkema, D. 2011. *Perfect Worlds: Utopian Fiction in China and the West*. Amsterdam.
- Goldin, P.R. 2008. “Appeals to History in Early Chinese Philosophy and Rhetoric”, *Journal of Chinese philosophy*. 35.1, 79-96.
- Harrison, P.M. 2000. “Mañjuśrī and the Cult of the Celestial Bodhisattvas”, *Chung-Hwa Buddhist Journal* 中華佛學研究所 13.2, 157-193.
- Huntington, R. 2003. *Alien Kind: Foxes and Late Imperial Chinese Narrative*. Cambridge, MA.
- Knechtges, D.R. 2014. “Wen Xuan 文選 (Selections of Refined Literature)”, in D.R. Knechtges, and T. Chang (eds.), *Ancient and Early Medieval Chinese Literature: A Reference Guide*. Leiden, 1313-1348.
- Kurz, J. 2007. “The Compilation and Publication of the Taiping yulan and the Cefu yuangui”, in F. Bretelle-Establet and K. Chemla (eds.), *Qu'est-ce qu'écrire une encyclopédie en Chine?*. Extreme Orient-Extreme Occident. Hors série, 39-76.
- Li, H. 2000. *Education in Traditional China: A History*. Leiden.
- Lu, X. 鲁迅. 1930. *Zhongguo xiaoshuo shilüe 中国小说史略*. Shanghai.

- Ma, X. 馬小鶴 and Wang, J. 汪娟. 2018. “*Jitian Feng zhi monijiao wenxian hanzi yinxie yanjiu* 吉田豐之摩尼教文獻漢字音寫研究”. *Nanhua daxue dunhuangxue yanjiu zhexin* 南華大學敦煌學研究中心, 34.8, 79-100
- McMullen, D. 1988. *State and Scholars in T'ang China*. Cambridge.
- Nienhauser, W.H. 1998. “Creativity and Storytelling in the Ch’uan-ch’i: Shen Ya-chih’s Tang Tales”. *Chinese Literature: Essays, Articles, Reviews (CLEAR)* 20, 31-70.
- Nylan, M. 2001. *The Five ‘Confucian’ Classics*. New Haven.
- Pines, Y. 2005. “Speeches and the Question of Authenticity in Ancient Chinese Historical Records”, in H. Schmidt-Glintzer *et al.* (eds.), *Historical Truth, Historical Criticism and Ideology*. Boston, 196-226.
- Olberding, G.P.S. 2012. *Dubious facts: the evidence of early Chinese historiography*. Albany.
- Schaberg, D. 2001. *A Patterned Past: Form and Thought in Early Chinese Historiography*. Cambridge, MA.
- Shan, P. F. 2024. “What Did the CCP Learn from the Past?”, in Q. Fang and X. Li (eds.), *China under Xi Jinping: A New Assessment*. Leiden, 31-56.
- Steavu, D. 2009. “The Many Lives of the Western Citadel: A Note on the Transmission of the Sanhuang wen 三黃文”. *Journal of the International College of Postgraduate Buddhist Studies* XIII (March), 109-161.
- Taiping guangji* 太平廣記. 1961. Beijing.
- Zhang, G. 张国风. 2004. *Taiping guangji banben kaoshu* 太平广记版本考述. Beijing.