

Idle Talk: Gossip and Anecdote in Traditional China. Edited by Jack W. Chen and David Schaberg. Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2014. Pp. ix + 247. \$39.95.

Idle Talk: Gossip and Anecdote in Traditional China, edited by Jack W. Chen and David Schaberg, presents a unity of form and a concentration of matter that are rare among conference volumes of comparable ambition. Although the volume comprises twelve essays, arranged in chronological order from the Han to the Qing dynasty, it counts fewer than 250 pages, each contributor kept to fewer than 25 pages print, including endnotes. More importantly, the notions of gossip and anecdote provide an effective conceptual focus. Although the essays differ in their choice of period and genre, in their definitions, and in their approach—some being more literary, others more historical; some more conceptual, others more empirical—they sustain a coherent, lively dialogue about the place of oral culture in the literature of traditional China. Specifically, the essays address the place of gossip and anecdote in relationship to authoritative genres of writing and knowledge during the imperial period, and examine the consequences of this relationship between oral culture and writing for our present understanding of political, social, and cultural contests in the imperial past. In sum, the title of the book makes an amusing contrast with its considered contents and concentrated form.

Jack Chen's "Introduction" lays out a methodological approach to gossip and anecdote as topics of literary and sociological study. Chen effectively contrasts the marginal place of gossip and anecdote in normative discourses, including academic scholarship, to the centrality of such speech genres in the production of those same normative discourses: "What is transmitted within the cultural memory as 'literature' and 'history' was once the subject of social talk, and it is through the process of such talk that the tradition comes to take shape" (p. 14).

The three essays on the Han and the medieval period are diverse in their method and in their choice of genres. In the most provocative essay in the volume, David Schaberg argues that the great achievements of early Chinese historiography, Sima Qian's 司馬遷 *Shiji* 史記 (Records of the Historian) and Ban Gu's 班固 *Hanshu* 漢書 (History of the Han Dynasty), were the product of a constant mediation between official documents of the imperial court and plausible explanations of political events that circulated as accepted truth among elite families outside the palace. Rather than damaging imperial power, the "truing" (p. 34) of historical narrative by plausible gossip enhanced the charisma of the emperor, by connecting the court to the surrounding world.

If Schaberg examines the vague contours of gossip in the carefully plastered stonework of early historiography, Xiaofei Tian finds the anecdote a discrete, irreducible literary form that normative literary genres could control but never fully

assimilate. Historians sought to control anecdotes by inclusion, omission, and commentary; authors of anecdotal collections divided their material into categories in order to create moral lessons; and travel writers inserted personal anecdotes to transform their records of material fact into accounts of subjective observation. But its disruption of seamless narrative was both the threat and the attraction of the anecdote, its bolstered form protecting “the illusion of the real” (p. 51).

One of the anecdote collections introduced as an example by Tian, the *Shishuo xinyu* 世說新語 (A New Account of Tales of the World), receives more detailed treatment in Jack Chen’s essay. Chen argues that in the aristocratic society recorded and reproduced in the pages of the *Shishuo xinyu* “knowing men” (*zhi ren* 知人) is no longer a sagely art required of a charismatic ruler, but has become a performance of wit and verbal skill that creates the reputation of both speaker and subject. “Knowing men” thereby becomes associated with “knowing names” (*zhi ming* 知名), the crucial skill required in social networks constituted by men who are both “known by name” and “knowledgeable of names” (p. 67).

The three essays dedicated to the Tang dynasty all examine collections of tales and anecdotes. Sarah M. Allen analyses three classical tales in which private oral information proves more reliable than the public written record, or preserves knowledge that otherwise would have been lost: Yao Hong 姚泓, former emperor of the Later Qin (386–417), now a feathered immortal, convinces a monk in the early Tang that the account of his execution in the *Jinshu* 晉書 (History of the Jin Dynasty) is mistaken; Shangqing 上清, former maid to the disgraced Grand Councillor Dou Shen 竇參 (c. 733–792), restores her late master’s reputation by relating to Emperor Dezong 德宗 (r. 780–804) an eyewitness account of the ways in which Dou Shen was framed by his enemies at court; and Li Jifu 李吉甫 (758–814) confirms the truth of oral traditions about the erudite scholarship of Zheng Qinyue 鄭欽悅 by recovering a letter in which Zheng deciphers a Han-dynasty inscription that had defied epigraphists for several centuries.

Graham Sanders explains that poems, and the context in which poems had been composed, were important subjects of gossip during the Tang because they were deemed to grant “immediate access to the interior of the person being discussed” (p. 90). Extant collections of such literary anecdotes can therefore be considered “repositories in writing of the ‘state of gossip’ to be found in oral and written sources during a given period of time” (p. 103), the collections themselves often having accrued by repeated additions after their initial compilation. Sanders provides an effective example of the enduring movement of poetic lore between oral and written forms: a moving anecdote in which an old man sings a poem by Li She 李涉 (773–831), giving voice both to the late poet and to his own emotion at recollecting the day on which Li She composed the poem for him—a poem that convinced him to abandon his life as a bandit and to become a recluse.

In one of the strongest and most rigorous essays in the volume, Anna M. Shields demonstrates the progressive narrowing of the meaning and affect of “the Yuanhe style” (*Yuanhe ti* 元和體, or “the Yuanhe poetic style,” *Yuanhe shiti* 元和詩體) through successive anecdote collections of the ninth and tenth centuries, as the diversity of available sources diminished and writers reached a consensus about the dominant characteristics of Emperor Xianzong’s 憲宗 reign (806–820). Whereas in the 820s the *Guoshi bu* 國史補 (Supplement to the History of the State), by the conservative aristocrat Li Zhao 李肇 (d. after 827), condemned the literati upstarts of the Yuanhe era for seeking attention by “unusual” (*guai* 怪) literary styles and unconventional behaviour, the *Yinhua lu* 因話錄 (Records of Hearsay) in the late 850s or early 860s perceived those same upstarts as men of settled reputation living in an age of common brilliance; the *Zhiyan* 摭言 (Collected Sayings), composed in the 900s and based entirely on written documents, accepts the Yuanhe style as the expression of independent conviction, of “literati who shared a commitment to a Confucian past and its values” (p. 124), impervious to literary competition or imperial favour.

The four essays on the late imperial period analyse the operations of gossip and anecdotes in the preservation of specific realms of knowledge and in specific works. In an extended analysis of the *Mengxi bitan* 夢溪筆談 (Chatting with My Writing Brush at Dreams Creek) by Shen Kuo 沈括 (1031–1095), Ronald Egan discovers a persistent interest in phenomena that exceed expectation or defy explanation: previously unremarked natural irregularities, identical actions with divergent consequences, counterintuitive facts, unconventional behaviour. By keeping a record of the things he learnt from people who did not write, moreover, Shen Kuo preserved for posterity knowledge that would otherwise have been lost, including “contributions to the economic prosperity and technological innovations of Song history” (p. 138) such as the invention of movable type by Bi Sheng 畢昇 (d. 1051). The accommodating conventions of the *biji* 筆記 (“brush jottings”) provided a form in which Shen Kuo could offer preliminary observations about matters that “fell outside the conventional boundaries of what historians and literati wrote about” (p. 150), thereby suggesting a world more varied and complex than allowed in established discourse.

Just as Egan finds preserved in Shen Kuo’s jottings the specialized knowledge of builders, craftsmen, journeymen, and merchants, Beverly Bossler argues that much of present historical knowledge of gender relations, notably of literati relations with female entertainers, depends on records of social and literary gossip. Although Song literati spent considerable time in the company of courtesans and concubines, and although their behaviour in such settings contributed importantly to their reputations as men of cultured sophistication, their interactions with female entertainers were never encompassed by established literary genres. Instead, courtesans and concubines appear obliquely in the extant writings of the time, framed in the background of anecdotes about the sumptuous display, the poetic talent, the licentious behaviour, or the irreproachable manners of male literati.

Richard E. Strassberg's essay reflects on the paradoxes of glyphomantic dream anecdotes, that is, anecdotes about dreams that communicate predictions by referring to the shapes of characters, these characters generally revealed to be rebuses or constituted by rebuses. In spite of their occurrence across many centuries and their likely origin in oral tradition, these anecdotes assume a stable tripartite form (a puzzling dream, followed by a perceptive explanation and subsequent proof of the accuracy of the explanation) and display a number of other regularities (e.g., standard interpretive schemata, habitual misinterpretation of dreams by dreamers themselves, the fewness of female glyphomantic experts).

Dore J. Levy offers an extensive description of the intricate ways in which gossip operates as an instrument of karmic retribution in *Honglou meng* 紅樓夢 (The Story of the Stone), from the extensive discussion about the Jia 賈 family in a wine house in the second chapter to the fatal gossip and misunderstandings that lead to the death of Lin Daiyu 林黛玉 at the end of the novel. The essay shows that in its treatment of gossip, as in everything else in that marvellous novel, *Honglou meng* maps its religious motifs onto a naturalist representation of human society with the greatest precision.

In a brief but wide-ranging "Postface," Stephen Owen offers an explanation for the intellectual unease that collections of gossip and anecdotes have caused among modern scholars of traditional China. Scholars during the past century have been eager to use the lively vignettes contained in those collections, but have not been able to guarantee the historical truth of those vignettes or to explain the varied epistemology of the collections that contain them. Owen proposes that this unease derives from a discrepancy between a Western literary tradition that is preoccupied with historical truth, and that makes sharp distinctions between truth, falsity, and fiction (and between direct and indirect discourse), and a Chinese literary tradition that has allowed greater compass for "degrees of probability" (p. 218), for "the enduring interest in playing on the margins of belief" (p. 222). Scholarly unease has been compounded by the discrepant social associations of this literary aesthetics of credibility, modern academics having often been puzzled to find in the writings of the most erudite literati subject matter they might deem suitable for lowbrow publications sold in supermarkets (*The National Enquirer*, *Weekly World News*), not for authoritative books found in scholarly libraries.

Although, as stated above, gossip and anecdote provide an effective conceptual focus to the essays in this volume, the easy movement between these two terms at times obscures their important differences, leading to occasional neglect of social action on one side, and of written form on the other. If we accept Graham Sanders's definition of "gossip" ("The content of gossip is meant to affect the social status of the person or group of people being talked about, either to denigrate it or to enhance it," p. 88) and Xiaofei Tian's definition of "anecdotes" ("small stories" that are "complete in themselves" and that "give the illusion of the real," p. 38), it becomes

clear that gossip is an historical phenomenon, primarily oral, while anecdote is a literary form, whether oral or written. The transitive nature of gossip requires that its purveyors have some hope, however remote, of affecting the subject of their talk—the reversal of a decision, the denial of a promotion, the exposure of a secret—and hence that the person be alive, the events current. This means that gossip is transient as well as transitive, and that it can be captured in its living form only for a brief period, in a letter, in a newspaper, or in a magazine. Thereafter, gossip transforms into a different genre of speech or writing: rumour, talk, oral tradition, or history. The exchange of such talk still sustains social networks, but it has lost its more defining transitive effect. When Truman Capote says that “all literature is gossip,” and Oscar Wilde writes that “History is merely gossip,” they do not only make “hyperbolic claims for gossip” (as Jack Chen explains, p. 13), but make a deliberate category mistake for gnomic effect: literature treats *the kind of matter* that one finds in gossip; history draws information from *what was formerly* gossip.

Some of the essays in *Idle Talk* neglect such distinctions between gossip and talk, between gossip and anecdote. The designation of anecdotes about late emperors and dead poets as “gossip” may be a deliberate category mistake (perhaps an emphatic reversal of the unease about hearsay among earlier scholars), but it leads occasionally to a neglect of the necessary transformations of formless, anonymous gossip by time and by writing. The strength of Anna Shields’s essay derives in part from its precise attention to the gradual permutation of literary gossip into literary history, from Li Zhao’s hopes of diminishing the reputation of his rivals, to Wang Dingbao’s 王定保 (870–940) use of the *Guoshi bu* as a source for a history that celebrates the intellectual integrity of Li Zhao’s nemeses. Our necessary reliance on written sources, moreover, makes it difficult to imagine those texts as part of an environment that remained dominated by the oral transmission of knowledge, and that may have regarded written documents as suspect rather than authoritative. This raises the question, for example, whether the peculiar historiographical decision of Sima Qian and Ban Gu may not have been their corroboration of oral traditions with written documents, rather than the reverse.

As will be obvious, however, such critical reflections continue the debates conducted within the volume under review, and demonstrate its valuable lessons rather than refuting them. The individual essays in the volume make substantial contributions to the scholarship on their period and field, and the volume as a whole provides guidance for the study of genres of literature that are the subject of renewed scholarly attention in recent and forthcoming monographs.

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