

*Anecdote, Network, Gossip, Performance: Essays on the Shishuo xinyu.* By Jack W. Chen. Harvard-Yenching Institute Monograph Series 124. Cambridge, MA and London, England: Harvard University Press, 2021. Pp. xii + 278. \$60.00/£48.95.

The *Shishuo xinyu* 世說新語, or *Recent Accounts from the Talk of the Ages* in Jack Chen's rendering, is among early medieval China's best-known works of prose. Attributed to the prince Liu Yiqing 劉義慶 (403–444), the collection of anecdotes informed historical writings such as the *History of the Jin* (*Jin shu* 晉書) and supplied the template for dozens of imitations in China and Japan. Its thirty-six chapters were organized by traits of character, abilities, and behaviour that included, for example, "On Discernment and Insight" (ch. 7), "On Nimble Realization" (ch. 11), "On Being Unconstrained" (ch. 23), and "On Temper and Irritability" (ch. 31). Although the initial chapters of the *Shishuo xinyu* (hereafter SSXY) concerned civic and moral virtues, and the fifth (*Fangzheng* 方正, "Square and Upright") was titled after a term of recommendation for political appointment, subsequent headings reflected a quest that began during the late second century to understand human nature in manifold aspects beyond the criteria of Confucian morality. Richard B. Mather, whose annotated translation remains the SSXY's standard resource in English, pointed out a fundamental opposition in the work between upholders of "Moral Teaching" (*mingjiao* 名教) and advocates of "naturalness" (*ziran* 自然), and remarked that it was the latter group—"inclined toward Taoism in their philosophy, unconventionality in their morals, and non-engagement in their politics"—whom the compiler favoured.<sup>1</sup>

A starting point for Jack Chen's remarkably innovative study is Qian Nanxiu's analysis of the practice of character appraisal during the Wei-Jin period (220–420), of which the SSXY provides the fullest record. Qian proposed that the introduction of new traits and abilities that were not necessarily related to office-holding but represented the cultural values of an emerging medieval elite was an act of "self-fashioning" that defined the community and the status of persons within it. Observing that appraisals in the SSXY usually compared persons very close in character or achievement, she described the additional difficulty of assessing traits whose meaning was not fixed or stable (e.g., "singular behaviour," *duxing* 獨行) and the challenge of being called upon to judge one's own self. In Wei-Jin

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<sup>1</sup> Liu I-ch'ing (Liu Yiqing), *Shih-shuo hsin-yü: A New Account of Tales of the World*, 2nd ed., commentary by Liu Chün (Liu Jun) 劉峻, translated with introduction notes by Richard B. Mather (Ann Arbor, MI: Center for Chinese Studies, University of Michigan, 2002), p. xviii.

practice, character appraisal became an art of verbal expression, and the aptness of an evaluator's utterances affected not only the social standing of the individuals compared but also the evaluator's stature.<sup>2</sup>

In broad overview, the subject of *Anecdote, Network, Gossip, Performance* is the SSXY community. Chen's engagement with the dynamics of character appraisal at the level of the anecdote is similar to Qian's. He also considers the SSXY to be the product of an elite community's creative self-fashioning and agrees that its members greatly esteemed evaluative ability. Unlike most other scholarship about the collection as a whole, however, Chen forgoes approaching its contents via the framework of the chapter titles. Taking social talk in the form of gossip, evaluation, and wit as contents common to all chapters, he reconceptualizes the SSXY's structure in terms of connections among the interlocutors. The first part of his book presents maps of person-to-person connections, based upon instances of contact among the 720 individuals in the anecdotes,<sup>3</sup> and elaborates on the maps' patterns. Chen concedes that the SSXY's aesthetic dimensions and intertextuality are flattened when it is treated as a network. What the strategy achieves is "to foreground the ways in which talk circulates within communities and across generations, connecting different cliques and groups" (p. 60). Later chapters introduce ideas from social and linguistic theory about the nature of reputation, performance, praise, insult, and ritual. Here he examines "families of anecdotes" that concern the same person or repeat the same situation with different actors. Chen's groupings bring attention to the means by which relative status was established, and questioned, within the community of "gentlemen of repute" (*mingshi* 名士). They also highlight intellectual issues and values which, in the parlance of current literary criticism, are "thematized" by dint of their repetition. An example is the trait of sincerity, a cultural value that cuts across the SSXY's chapters and brings into association not only figures active during different historical periods but also partisans from both sides of the Confucian / Daoist divide.

Chapter One, "A Textual History of the *Shishuo xinyu*," is as thorough an investigation as may be found of the history of the work first known as the *Shishuo*.

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<sup>2</sup> Nanxiu Qian, *Spirit and Self in Medieval China: The Shih-shuo hsin-yü and Its Legacy* (Honolulu, HI: University of Hawai'i Press, 2001), pp. 26–31, 44–52. Cited by Chen, pp. 128–29, notes 13–14.

<sup>3</sup> This total, larger than Mather's 626 persons, includes secondary characters known only by their roles which rounded out the scene of an anecdote. Chen's lines of connection are between named persons.

Key points of the bibliographic record and miscellaneous references are: (1) the work's attribution to Liu Yiqing came late, in the bibliography of the *History of the Sui* (*Sui shu* 隋書; compiled in 636); (2) manuscript copies that circulated before a woodblock edition was published in the twelfth century had existed in different sizes, i.e., in different numbers of scrolls (*juan* 卷), and were in other ways inconsistently described; and (3) the now standard text follows the woodblock edition of the twelfth century or, more precisely, one of its closely related transmissions. For the sake of a full textual history, Chen presses on to consider printings, annotations, and critical commentary through the modern day. The chapter's conclusion returns, however, to the problem of the mutability of medieval writings. Regarding the sole surviving manuscript of the SSXY—a fragmentary copy that is presumed to date from the Tang and largely matches several portions of the SSXY as we know it today—Chen remarks that the conformity does not negate the messiness of the manuscript tradition in which variance was the norm. It may, however, enable us “to live within the illusion that 700 years of textual circulation, reading, and editing does not make too much of a difference” (p. 58).

The mapping of networks in Chapter Two, “On Social Networks,” uses arcing lines to connect persons who speak with one another in the 1,130 anecdotes, as well as to connect silent witnesses to their exchange and third parties who are referenced but not present. Each of the seven graphs is weighted, such that the font size of a name depends on the frequency of its occurrence. At first glance, readers will be reminded of the maps of inflight magazines where curved lines radiate most densely to and from cities that are major hubs for travel, and fewer spokes lead to destinations less frequently scheduled.<sup>4</sup> An important difference is Chen's visualization of historical chronology. In a macro-view of the entire network (figure 1), groups of persons at the far left were active from the late Han (at a starting point of approximately A.D. 120) through the first half of the Three Kingdoms period. Scrolling progressively to the right, we find people from the Wei (220–265) and Western Jin (265–317) down to men who took part in founding the Liu-Song in 420. The area densest with criss-crossing arcs, called “edges,” represents the early decades and florescence of the Eastern Jin (317–420). This is the prime time of the SSXY's social talk.

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<sup>4</sup> Chen's maps of networks are set upon a map of China. For earlier versions that detail the geographic origins of the families that dominated the time period spanned by the SSXY, see “The *Shishuo xinyu* as Data Visualization,” co-authored with Zoe Borovsky, Yoh Kawano and Ryan Chen, in *Early Medieval China* 20 (2014): 23–59.

The names marking three nodes of massive size will not surprise historians. Wang Dao 王導 (276–339), the minister who played a leading role in the government’s transfer south of the Yangtze, is the first in temporal order. Also in the trio is Xie An 謝安 (320–385), the cultural doyen of his age and guardian of the state, who appears in almost 10 per cent of the SSXY’s anecdotes. Second only to Xie’s seventy-five edges are the fifty-nine lines that connect to Huan Wen 桓溫 (312–373), the military commander who recovered lost territory by campaigns in north China and almost succeeded in usurping the dynasty. Notwithstanding these persons’ impact on the course of history, Chen argues that visibility in the SSXY owed primarily to social significance. Many emperors and powerful military leaders do not appear in the anecdotes. Second-tier figures, of the order of prominence immediately following the top trio, often held minor positions in government, if at all. The exception to the rule is the height of the Western Jin (figure 4), when numerous intellectuals and accomplished writers served at court. Previously, during the latter half of the Three Kingdoms and early Jin (figure 3), the “Seven Worthies of the Bamboo Grove” (*Zhulin qixian* 竹林七賢) have the strongest presence. During the waning Han and late Eastern Jin (figures 2 and 7), networks lost density with the disappearance of prominent social and cultural circles, and exhibit small congeries of individuals that are weakly tied to or isolated from other groups. To illustrate connections among persons of disparate occupations and interests, Chen ends the chapter with a chain of six anecdotes that in succession link the late Han recluse-scholar Xu Zhi 徐稚 (97–168) with Madame Yu Yao 庾姚 (fl. late fourth century), an aunt of Huan Wen’s son, Xuan 玄 (312–373). These persons are respectively featured in the SSXY’s first anecdote and its last one. The excursion through two centuries of time underscores the “small world” of the collection, while also suggesting resonances among the anecdotes that transcend their categoric organization.

The role of gossip in human experience is examined in Chapter 3, “On Gossip and Reputation.” According to the sociologists Chen cites, talking about others constructs and sustains group identity. In aggregate, the judgements made in gossiping are integral to a person’s reputation, which cannot be a privately held notion but is “found in the beliefs and assertions of an extensive number of other individuals” (p. 94). Since the SSXY’s anecdotes are often comparative, the favourability of a person’s portrayal can change in accordance with the counterpart. In his youth, Hua Xin 華歆 (157–231) was hoeing a field with Guan Ning 管寧 (158–241). When a gold coin was unearthed, Hua picked it up as Guan continued hoeing. On another occasion, the friends were reading together when a lavish carriage passed by the gate. Hua rushed out for a closer look while Guan again

remained indifferent. Chen interprets this anecdote as an allegorization of the paths the two later took. Susceptible to worldly temptation, Hua went on to hold ministerial positions during the reigns of Cao Cao 曹操 (155–220) and his heir. After fleeing the turmoil at the end of the Han, Guan refused to join the Wei court. On the other hand, a story pairing Hua Xin with Wang Lang 王朗 (d. 228) depicts Hua favourably for his far-sightedness and staunch fidelity to a commitment. Wang Lang's characterological inferiority, in and of itself, was later affirmed by Zhang Hua 張華 (232–300), who scorned him for derivative behaviour lacking in originality—a cardinal flaw in the eyes of the elite community. The centre of another set of narratives is Chu Pou 褚裒 (303–349), whose exceptional ability to “know others” (*zhi ren* 知人) was accompanied by a disinclination to speak. By way of Xie An's praise for Chu (“Though Chu Pou did not speak, the aspects of the four seasons nonetheless were complete in him,” p. 108), Chen locates the original combination of the traits of discernment and silence in Confucius's defence of his own reticence to speak. Two of the anecdotes recount the rude treatment Chu Pou received as a fresh arrival in the South, by parties of southern grandees and banquet-goers who did not recognize him by sight. Their consternation and panic to make amends, when Chu finally introduces himself, showed a profound embarrassment not to have acknowledged one of their own. Chu's reputation had evidently circulated south of the Yangtze before his physical person. As Chen further notes, language is required to call the social network into presence—even if this is simply to state one's name.

Chapter 4, “On Performance, Praise, and Insult,” moves from situational behaviour to displays of discursive skill. If the truthfulness of the brief anecdote comes from invoking exemplary moments that produce the effect of the real (discussed in pp. 10–12), analogous distillations of a larger whole occur in the SSXY's succinct representations of character. An important clarification in this chapter is the abiding interest in qualifications to hold office. Some images of praise, such as “the Ganjiang [sword] of our age” (p. 126), convey the traditional idea of being a worthy implement of the state. Other commendations reflect the influx of new cultural values. For instance, Pei Kai 裴楷 (237–291) was chosen to direct the Personnel Office for his inexhaustible capacity in philosophic conversation (“All the day he does not flag” 經日不竭). Praise is sometimes rendered in rich similes that imply the inadequacy of language to capture a person's totality. An example by Pei Kai is: “When I look at Shan Tao 山濤 [205–283], it is like climbing a mountain and looking out: a remoteness that is deep and faraway” (p. 132). The creative ingenuity of such descriptions most strongly supports Chen's thesis that utterances in the SSXY are public acts performed for an audience. The

treatment of insults begins with the use of familiar pronouns for “you” (*ru* 汝; *qing* 卿) when a deferential term (*jun* 君; *gong* 公) is expected. But not all transgressive uses of the familiar were meant to be insulting. The wife of Wang Rong 王戎 (234–305) justified her lapse in etiquette by her love for him and their intimacy. Thus, “If I don’t call you ‘you’ [我不卿卿], who else would have the right to call you ‘you?’” (p. 146) Most amusing to this reviewer are instances when a target of humiliation turns the tables on his insulters—as when two guests of Cai Mo 蔡謨 (281–356) pressured him to describe how he did not measure up to a certain eminent figure, and Cai riposted that the man never had such guests as them.

A transitional figure for Chapter 5, “On Competence and Composure,” is Sun Chuo 孫綽 (fl. 330–365). A great literary virtuoso, Sun applied his gift for words to falsely insinuate close relationships with distinguished figures who were deceased. Caught in the act, he blurted out the desire that drove this contemptible means of social climbing: “You should also take stock of me!” (p. 148) In Chapter 5, Chen posits that composure, which entails “a withholding of affect and action,” is a performance of self-mastery that “stands at the heart of the *Shishuo*’s core aesthetic and ethical values” (p. 160). At an extreme, political instability and factionalism provided plentiful opportunities to face death with composure. At his execution, Xi Kang 嵇康 (223–262) showed no change in his demeanour. Playing the “Guangling Melody” (*Guangling san* 廣陵散) on his zither, he regretted only that he had begrudged sharing the tune, for now it would be irretrievably lost. The “public” of this anecdote voices emotions suppressed (or sublimated) by Xi. Three thousand students of the Grand Academy petitioned to have him named their teacher; the regent who ordered his death later regretted it. Other stories take place in the arena of “pure conversation” (*qingtan* 清談), of which metaphysical debate was a subset.<sup>5</sup> Debates starring He Yan 何晏 (c. 190–249) and Wang Bi 王弼 (226–249) make evident that the *SSXY*’s record is little interested in the contents of their expertise in “Arcane Learning” (*Xuanxue* 玄學). Rhetorical manoeuvres to outdo the other are the focus. Because the bouts’ loser, the elder He, overcame whatever disappointment he might have felt to submit gracefully to Wang’s intellectual prowess, he bolstered his reputation as someone able to know and celebrate the talents of others. Chen remarks that Xie An’s composure seemingly made explicit the talent that had been shrouded during his reclusion, “revealing him as the person to steer the ship of state” (p. 184). Among the anecdotes he interprets are those that describe Xie’s leisurely return to a game of chess, after

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<sup>5</sup> On this subject, see pp. 14–17, 118–21.

learning of his nephews' victory over the invading armies of Fu Jian 苻堅 (338–385), and his nonchalant recitation of a poem while knowingly walking into a trap set by Huan Wen to assassinate him. Xie seemingly knew also that the outcome would depend on the power of his composure.

Chapter Six, “On Ritual and Mourning,” first examines the purpose of ritual observances and the question of the importance that should be attached to the spirit of their performance—as formulated in selections from the *Book of Rites*, the *Analects*, and their commentaries. These provide a good understanding of the idea that mourning rituals served to moderate unbearable emotion and to prevent excesses that cause severe harm to the bereaved. One of the quotations prioritizes the mourner's spirit of sorrow over adherence to the ritual's outer form (p. 198). Yet some details of the back-and-forth do not seem relevant to the anecdotes that follow, which mainly depict unconventional and excessive expressions of grief. Another difference, as Chen points out, is that the *Li ji* 禮記 did not conceive of a world in which mourners were self-consciously aware of being judged by an observing audience (pp. 204–5). Ruan Ji 阮籍 (210–263) was seen at a banquet, after the death of his mother, to flout mourning regulations by consuming ale and meat. The party's host defended him by observing that Ruan had become emaciated by his grief. In another version, Ruan manifested the sincerity of his grief at his mother's interment by crying out and vomiting blood. Readers may particularly enjoy Chen's interpretations of a family of anecdotes in which mourners pay tribute to the departed's fondness for the braying of donkeys by imitating the sound themselves.

Chapter 6 is followed by a final essay, “The View from Across the River.” Addressing the admittedly unsolvable question of why the SSXY's stories were collected in the first place, Chen here refines a conjecture that their preservation owed to nostalgia for a bygone past. He observes that the sentimental longing expressed by early settlers in the South was for people, places, and events in north China of which they had first-hand experience. As the post-émigré generation came of age, however, speaking of the past became “a way to demonstrate one's belonging to a certain cultural community” (p. 228). Manuscripts of miscellaneous stories that were concurrently in circulation, and being critiqued for their veracity during this second phase of remembering the past, can be considered precursors to the “textualized nostalgia” of the SSXY.

A future printing of this excellent study could resolve a few problems. The maps in Chapter Two are difficult to read when it comes to interconnections among persons of low prominence. Names overlap or are in a font too small to be legible. Although the publisher makes available digital versions that can be

magnified (<https://asiacenter.harvard.edu/publications>), it would be ideal to reprint the graphs in larger format. The appendix titled “Persons Appearing in the *Shishuo xinyu*” lists some one hundred persons and surely refers only to individuals who appear in the study. I also noticed the omission of Cai Mo from the index, and that a page number in the last footnote is a typographical error (p. 234, n. 38). Of course, these correctible problems do not detract from the quality of Chen’s study nor from the methodical presentation of his findings. Chen has introduced new ways of reading and understanding the *Shishuo xinyu*, an especially impressive achievement in light of all the scholarship that precedes him. There is much to relish in this learned yet highly readable book.

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***Political Communication in Chinese and European History, 800–1600.*** Edited by Hilde De Weerd and Franz-Julius Morche. Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2021. Pp. 633. €192.00.

“Political communication,” as used in the title of this stimulating volume, is a broad concept. Most obviously it covers the efforts of the states—and, in Europe, of two organized, hierarchical, churches claiming significant earthly powers (Roman Catholic and Greek Orthodox)—to get their messages out to the public, and to receive certain messages from and about those over whom they claimed dominion. But it also covers a variety of public and private communications among the state’s subjects, and between them and local officials, that bore in one way or another on political projects: projects that ranged from personal office-seeking to promoting a particular interest or preferred policy to commemorating past events in ways that had implications for current policy. Many of these latter communications moved through networks that look more or less horizontal when compared to the steeply vertical channels of formal government; but they were never completely so, being permeated by numerous inequalities of status, wealth, and condition.

The book includes a mix of explicitly comparative essays, often jointly authored, with essays that focus on a European or Chinese topic but make brief reference to the other region. After a very thoughtful introduction, the remaining contributions