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Approaches to the Shiji as an Early Work of Historiography

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Contents

Introduction ............................................................................. 1

I Views from Within

Bernhard Fuhrer
Sima Qian as a Reader of Master Kong’s Utterances ....................... 9

Juri L. Kroll
Toward a Study of the Concept of Linear Time in the Shiji .................. 31

Chi-hsiang Lee 李史杨
Sima Qian’s View of Zhou History in Shiji 《史記》中司馬遷的「周史觀」 ........................................ 41

Hans van Ess
The Friends of Sima Tan and Sima Qian .................................... 67

Wai-yee Li
Historical Understanding in “The Account of the Xiongnu” in the Shiji ......................................................... 79

Gitulia Bazzini
The Shiji chapter “Guji Liezhuan” (Traditions of Witty Remonstrants):
A Source to Look for Rhetorical Strategies in Early China .................. 103

Michael Nylan
Assets Accumulating:
Sima Qian’s Perspective on Moneymaking, Virtue, and History .......... 131

II Views from Beyond

Béatrice L’Haridon
The Merchants in Shiji: An Interpretation in the Light of Later Debates .......................................................... 171

Dorothee Schaab-Hanke
Inheritor of a Subversive Mind?
Approaching Yang Yun from his Letter to Sun Huizong .................. 193

Stephen Durrant
Ban Biao, Ban Gu, Their Five Shiji Sources, and the Curious Case of Chu Han chuanfu .................................................. 217
Introduction

For two millennia, the Shiji, truly a masterpiece of historiography and literature, has been read and studied not only in China but also in other East Asian countries, notably in Japan. Its authors, the two Western Han historians Sima Tan (c. 100 BCE) and his son Sima Qian (c. 145–c. 86 BCE), proudly gave it the title Taishigong shu, the Documents of the Grand Historian or the Grand Scribe or the Grand Astronomer, depending upon how one decides to translate the office that both historians were entrusted with by Emperor Wu of the Han. Having access to books and writings that must have been available in an archive or a library within the palaces in Chang’an and relying on many other sources, both Sima Tan and Sima Qian wrote down their view of the history of the world known to them down to their own times. Although their book was called a “true record” by early readers in the Han, it was also accused of being a slanderous work that criticized the Han dynasty. Maybe this is one of the reasons that, starting in the second century CE, the Taishigong shu was called Shiji, meaning “Records of the Scribes”, or perhaps “Historical Records”, a much more modest description of the contents of the book that might suggest it contains mere records and not the personal opinions of their authors. The tension that exists between the two ideas of a “true record” and of a historian’s more personal view of things has influenced the reading of many Chinese authors writing on the Shiji during the last two thousand years.

At least since Édouard Chavannes introduced the book to a European readership more than one hundred years ago in his masterful translation of and his copious notes to the first fifty chapters, the Shiji has become an essential element in Western scholarship on China and studying it has become an indispensable part of any respectable education in Chinese studies. Despite the hundreds of traditional Chinese, Japanese, and Korean commentaries that piled up over the centuries as well as the thousands of research articles and monographs that have been produced during the last hundred years by modern scholars, in both the East and the West, the book continues to puzzle scholars and will certainly continue to do so for many centuries to come.

Given the huge amount of scholarship on the Shiji in the East Asian tradition, the articles collected in this volume cannot achieve much more than offering some new insights from scholars who, with one exception, are working in a Western environment. Raising both old and new questions and trying to give answers that at least in Western scholarship on China have not yet been given, this collection also provides an overview of some of the latest discussions in the ongoing debate on the Shiji and its authors. At the same time, the authors endeavor to offer new perspectives and present discoveries and innovative interpretations of certain aspects of the Shiji that in our opinion, despite the existence of rich scholarship, have not been fully explored so far.

The authors originally gathered at a conference entitled “Shiji and Beyond”, organized by the Chiang Ching-kuo Foundation International Sinological Center in Prague in
The Shiji chapter “Guji Liezhuan”
(Traditions of Witty Remonstrants):
A Source to Look for Rhetorical Strategies in Early China

Giulia Baccini

In oratore autem acumen dialecticorum, sententiae philosophorum, verba prope poetarum, memoria jurisconsultorum, vox tragoedorum, gestus poae summorumactorum est requirendum.

In an orator we must demand the subtlety of the logician, the thoughts of the philosopher, a diction almost poetic, a lawyer’s memory, a tragedian’s voice, and the bearing almost of the consummato actor.1

The “Guji liezhuan”滑稽列傳, Chapter 126 of the Shiji 史記, is among the last chapters of the category “traditions” (liezhuan) appearing in Sima Qian’s 司馬遷 (c. 145-c. 90 B.C.E.) work.2 In the history of Chinese literature it holds a peculiar position, because it has been interpreted as one of the main early sources to investigate the topic of “humour” in classical China.3 In fact, it contains several anecdotes in which the protagonists are jesters (you 尤), in particular, it has been said that this chapter records their “humorous” speeches (as regards the question if these speeches are really just “humorous”), we will get back to the question if these speeches are really just “humorous” and whether they are expressing “funny, comic”. Thus, the association of the chapter with the topic of “humour” at first seems consistent. Since these anecdotes are embedded in a text which has been considered, certainly not without reason, as “historical”, the chapter has not only been used as an historical source to analyse the figure of the court jester in ancient

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1 I wish to express my sincere gratitude to Olga Lumová, Dorothee Schaub-Hanke and Hans van Ess for their thoughtful comments and suggestions, which helped me to make several improvements. I am also grateful to Esther Klein for her critical reading and corrections.

2 Cicero, De Oratore I.128 (trans. 89, 91).

3 In this paper I will consider Sima Qian as the author of the Shiji. Authorship issues relating to this chapter will be discussed below.
The Shiji chapter “Guji Liezhuan” (Traditions of Wit and Remonstrants) said”), which briefly comments and sums up the chapter. It records eight anecdotes about three different protagonists, from Warring States time (Chunyu Kun 淳于髡 and Jester Meng 萬景) to the Qin dynasty period (Jester Zhan 詹 堃). It also includes a long addition (26 篇) by Chu Shaoshun 車少虜 (ca. 105-ca. 30 BCE) of which perhaps the most famous part is the account of Ximen Bao 西門豹 (5th century BCE), the famous Warring States official who was faced with a case of witchcraft and regulated the water channels of Yezuo. 

In his brief prologue at the beginning of the chapter, the author quotes a saying that he attributes to Confucius: 孔子曰：“六藝於治一也。禮以節人，樂以發和，書以道事，詩以達意，易以神化，春秋以義。”

Confucius said: “Regarding the government [of a state], as far as the Six Disciplines are concerned, they are all equally [important]. The Rites help to give rules to men, the Music promotes harmony, the Documents record [past] historical events, the Songs help to express ideas, the Changes reveal supernatural influences, and the Spring and Autumn Annals show what is right.”

The words quoted here occur again in Chapter 130 of the Shiji with only slight modifications, which in turn seem to rework a passage of Dong Zhongshu’s 仲舒 (176–104 BCE) Chuangfu jiansu 莊懷箋疏. Among these three occurrences, it is only in this chapter that these words are quoted as being from the mouth of the Master (Kongzi yue 孔子曰). The introduction of Confucius’s voice strengthens the quotation, which serves to draw a connection between the narrative material presented in the chapter and the Six Disciplines (Luyi 六藝). The author then introduces himself, adding a personal judgment on the content of the anecdotes he will narrate:

In this section, I will closely look at the structure of the chapter, in the hope that my analysis will shed some new light on the character of the narratives and the intentions of the one who had decided to include them here. The “Guji liezhuan” is one of the few traditions of the Shiji to contain both a small preface (xian 頌), which introduces the subject, and a final appraisal (zai 賛), expressed by the standard formula taiwillgong yue kong公氏云, “the Grand Historian” 15

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16 An Fuguo (2005, 107–110, in particular 108) briefly discusses the historian’s appraisal, the section “Taishigong yue kong公氏云”. The other chapters containing a preface and a final comment are: chapter 119: “Xunzi liezhuan” 孫子列傳 (The Upright Officials), chapter 122: “Kongzi liezhuan” 孔子列傳 (The Great Sense), chapter 124: “Youzi liezhuan” 尹詁列傳 (The Zhongyi), chapter 125: “Ningzi liezhuan” 宁喜列傳 (The Flatterers).

17 Ximen Bao was an official serving the Marquis Wen of Wei (r. 496–396 BCE). Chu’s addition consists of two stories, one about Ximen Bao freeing Yezuo from sacrificing to the River god (Shiji 126,211–212, trad. in Lin 2009, 418f) and one about him creating an irrigation system (Shiji 126,213f).


Kun as a member of the Jixia Academy,25 and even though he states that those scholars who “composed books teaching on matters of [political] order and disorder,26 with which they sought favour from the rulers of the time”27 were too many to be all discussed in his work, he decides to include Kun’s among those worthy of being recorded.28 This could show the actual importance of Chunyu Kun in this context.29

The historian describes him as having a “broad learning and a strong memory”,30 and “not following any school in his studies”,31 a feature which seems common to most of the Jixia thinkers.32 Most importantly, we know from the historian that “in his remonstrances (jian shu) and persuasions (shui shu), he admired the conduct of Yan Ying 冬胤 (7–500 BCE), but worked hardest at deducing intent (cheng yi 丞意) and observing expressions (guan se 觀色).”33 Chunyu Kun, then, was aware of and esteemed the rhetorical ability of Yan Ying who was a famous minister and remonstrant of the same state;34 moreover, he tried to improve those qualities which enable one to perform a good and effective speech: before starting a performance one has to know

25 Bai Xi (1998, 68) states he was the first master (xiaosheng).
26 Sato 2003, 69f: “theoretical interest in the mechanisms of a society.”
28 After Chunyu Kun, the others with whom the historian deals with here are: Shen Dao 申道 (c. 350–c. 275 BCE), and Xunzi 孫子 (334–c. 233 BCE). The historian in the end of the chapter also quotes Gongshi Gongshu (c. 320–c. 250 BCE) and Mozi 孟子 (c. 480–c. 390) among others, stressing their value in constructing rhetorically well-arranged discourses; Shiji 74.2417–2550.
29 Sato (2003, 77) states that scholars attached to the Jixia academy held a rank “which was equivalent to that of a higher-ranking officer at the Qi court (shangfu chi hua 丞大夫).”
30 Trans. Niehansauer 1994b, 182. Regarding this quality, Cicero considers strong memory as one of the skills required by a good orator; according to him this quality can be a natural ability (De Oratore 1.128) or can be acquired through training (1.157).
32 Bai Xi 1998, 67–68.
33 Trans. Niehansauer 1994b, 182. Han Zhaoqiu (2009, 4196) states that here the phrase means: “to carefully observe someone’s words and expression and follow the ruler”.
34 This is also my understanding of “deducing intent (cheng yi 丞意)” and observing expressions (guan se 觀色), i.e. it implies that Chunyu Kun before daring to speak, carefully analyzed the ruler’s mood.
35 Yan Ying, also called Yanzi, was a famous minister of Qi. He is the protagonist of several anecdotes centred on his speeches. Schaberg (2001, 230–232, 279f) discusses some of his speeches contained in the Zouhua zhuan 諸侯之志. The Yanzhu chaqiu 塔諸之志 collects anecdotes in which Yanzi is the protagonist; mostly they are centred on his speeches, which aim to give advice to different rulers about government. Sato (2003, 205, 211–216) highlights the value of this text regarding the concept of Li for the Pro-Qin thinkers, in particular to Xunzi. Sima Qian also dedicates a biography to this character in his Shiji, the “Quan Yanzhu lianhuatong” 諸侯列傳 (Traditions of Guanzhu and Yanzi). In the final appraisal of this chapter (Shiji 62.2137), Sima Qian admits to have read the Yanzhu chaqiu — wu dou Yanzhu chaqiu 五都諸侯之志 — and expresses his appreciation toward Yanzi because he dared to directly remonstrate with his lord.
when and what to say observing the addressee of his discourse, in his case a ruler, King Wei of Qi (r. 356–320). The second character is Jester Meng 亜軹, who was a musician (yuaren 乐人) of Chu. According to the account in this chapter, he lived "more than one hundred years" (bai yu mian 朣年) after Chu during the court of King Zhaung Ji (r. 613–591 BCE). Regarding this claim, another Liu Zhiji 吕季及 (611–721 CE) had noticed that this is an error because Jester Meng might have lived two hundred years before Chu, but certainly not after him. However, Han Zhaoqi has noticed that the historian probably meant King Qingxiang 顷襄 (r. 298–263 BCE), whose name has been recorded several times mistakenly as Zhaung. According to this account, the jester would have lived nearly fifty or more years after Chu, given the chronological arrangement of the narratives. We could point out that the historian was quite imprecise in the historical details, but we will see, factual information was not his primary intent in this chapter.

35 This appears to be very similar to one of the abilities required by Roman orators, namely being able to fit to the rhetorical principle of decorum: "[decorum] corresponds to the necessary adaptation between the rhetorical discourse and the general communicative context in which it is produced or delivered by the orator and received by the public. This adaptation should take place, on the one hand, on all the levels which pertain to the referent of the text and to the text itself or the rhetorical discourse and, on the other hand, on those levels and distinct elements of the orator. The latter includes not only the rhetorical discourse but also the interaction between that discourse, the orator, the public, the referent of the text, and the context in which the rhetorical communication takes place." (Telleng-Cooperus 2003, 207.) Cicero stresses this description in eloquent orator: qui ad id quaecumque decet et possit accommodare orationem "he who can adapt his speech to all conceivable circumstances," Orator 121, as quoted in May 2007, 261–267.

36 In Shi ji 46,1855 the historian places him later than in the "Guji liezhuan", at the time of King Xuan of Qi (r. 319–301 BCE); Han Zhaoqi (2004, 3156, n. 94) states that this error is for King Wei of Qi. However, Sato (2003, 80) does not regard this passage as problematic. He seems to accept the possibility that Chu Yun served also under King Xuan, maybe because Chu Yun is mentioned in both stories (44/17, 68/B6), and Mengzi served this same king (319–321 BCE). In the "Guji liezhuan" only King Wei is quoted.

37 Shi ji 126.3200–3202. Jester Meng is not found in any previous texts, even in those which record the deeds of the other historical characters (e.g., Sunzi Ao, the King Zhaung, etc.).

38 Liang Yusheng 左玉盛 says that from the reign of King Zhaung of Chu to that of King Wei of Qi, 271 years had passed; see Takigawa 1999, 5036.

39 Han Zhaoqi (2004, 6150, n. 3, 6151) quotes Qian Mu, who explains this issue showing five examples. According to him, Sima Qian consciously in one anecdote of the "Guji liezhuan" used a character of the time of the first Zhaung, Sunzi Ao, and at the same time placed the story at the time of the second Zhaung.

40 Later in the narration the historian records that Jester Zhan lived "more than two hundred years" after Jester Meng (Shi ji 126.3202). Cui Shi 蔡 (cited in Takigawa 1999, 5031) says that, according to what recorded previously in the chapter, Zhan lived three hundred and seventy-eight years after Meng. If we take into consideration what Han Zhaoqi suggested, King Zhaung as King Qi Xiang (298 BCE), seventy-seven years passed; neither date coincides with the historian's indication.

41 Shi ji 126.3202–3203. This character, as Jester Meng, does not appear in any previous texts. The historian introducing him, again shows carelessness regarding the accuracy of historical details, see the note above.

42 Han Zhaoqi 2009, 6156, n. 2.

43 Shi ji 126.3197.

44 Shi ji 126.3198.

45 Shi ji 126.3199.
The anecdotes’ structures: tales of indirect remonstrance

As far as the narratives of these tales are concerned, Sima Qian, in compiling these anecdotes, followed the tradition of tales about remonstrance recorded in (late) Warring States texts such as Hanfeizi 韩非子, Guanzi 荀子子, Zuo zhuang左傳 and those political speeches collected later in Zhongguo ch 中国策. David Schaberg has devoted a major part of his research to the analysis of narrative strategies and structures of remonstrance tales. The common patterns he identified in several anecdotes of indirect remonstrance53 can also be found in the stories recorded in this chapter. Each anecdote can be divided into five sequences, a fact which suggests that the narrative patterns were consciously constructed. The five sequences are: 1) At the beginning, we have a ruler who behaves contrary to ritual propriety and indulges in selfish behaviour; 2) The remonstrator, here each of the three protagonists, pretend to entertain his lord with some sort of word play (riddle, poetry, etc.); 3) The performance of the remonstrator -entertainer engages the ruler in “a game of decoding”, in which he has to grasp the meaning underlying the protagonist’s speech; 4) The ruler uncovers the critique hidden behind the words (when this happens, if he laughs, this is the sign that he has understood the real meaning of the remonstrant’s speech); 5) The ruler is transformed and corrects his wrong behaviour or dismisses ideas that could damage his subjects.

A similar pattern can be identified in the stories about the protagonists of Shiji chapter 126 of which hereafter three examples will be adduced. The first anecdote recorded by Sima Qian is centred around the speech of Chu Shun, the protagonist, and runs as follows:

尧盛世時百姓善來，好為淫樂長夜飲，沈湎不治，帝政卿大夫。百姓荒亂，諸侯並侵，國且危亡。在於旦暮，左右莫敢諫，浮于酒色之淫而曰：“國中有大鳥，止王之庭，三年不言又不語，不知此鳥何也？”王曰：“此鳥不飛則已，一飛沖天；不鳴則已，一鳴驚人。”於是乃召諸令出高七十二人，貴一人，醜一人，養兵而出，諸侯震恐，皆聞齊地，威行三十餘年。在田因世家，

King Wei of Qi (278–230 BCE) liked riddles and was so given up to pleasure that he [often] spent the whole night drinking. He was so intoxicated by alcohol that he was not able to govern and had to entrust the affairs of state to his ministers. All the officials indulged in licentious attitudes and the feudal lords invaded the state. The state of Qi was in imminent danger of destruction, yet, from morning to evening, none of his courtiers dared to remonstrate. [Then] Chu Shun Kui tried to persuade54 the king with a riddle: “in the kingdom there is a big bird. It has alighted on the royal court. For three years it has neither spread its wings nor cried out. Do you know why it is doing it?” The king replied: “This bird may not have flown yet, once it does, it will soar into the sky. It may not have cried out yet, but once it does, it will astound everyone.” Then he summoned the magistrates of all seventy-two prefectures to the court, rewarded one, punished another, and led out his army. The feudal lords were alarmed and returned to Qi the land that they had overrun. King Wei ruled for thirty-six years, as is recorded in the chapter devoted to the Hereditary House of Tian Jingzhong.55

At its beginning, the anecdote presents a situation in which the ruler indulges in wrong behaviour. The King Wei of Qi is, in fact, totally committed to licentiousness (sequence 1). Chu Shun Kui is the only courtier who dares to remonstrate (jian 建),

53 Guang Shao (2004, 16) says that at this time Chu Shun Kui was already a member of the Ji Xia Academy.
54 Here the character shu/shou zhi has to be read as shui (to persuade).
55 This story with the riddle is quite identical to that found in the Shiji’s “Hereditary House of Chu” 周楚列祖, but here the protagonist is Wu Ju 吳扈 not Chu Shun Kui and the King is King Zhuang of Chu, Shiji 40. 1760. For further information see Takigawa, 1999, 503. This riddle appears also in the Hanfeizi at the “Yi zao” 穎負 chapter (story n. 19) HPZ 8.21. 973. In Liu Xiang’s 論語 Yuchu 11.57.2 (217–212 BCE), Chu Shun Kui asks Zhou Ji 周季 three more riddles. See also Liishi chunqiu 18/102.6, translated by Schaberg (2005, 204).
however, he does not openly criticize the ruler’s behaviour. He decides to trick him. He knows that the king “likes riddles” (xi yin 喜應), so pretending to entertain him with one of them, he actually uses the entertainment as a tool to remonstrate against his conduct (sequence 2). The king, at first unaware of Chunyu Kun’s plan, listens to Chunyu’s performance, trying to solve the riddle (sequence 3). King Wei then understands the covert critique (sequence 4). This passage is exemplified by the ruler’s answer, which already shows his being awakened (“it may not have cried out yet, but once it does, it will astound everyone”). Thanks to the remonstrance, the ruler understands his error. He corrects himself and regains the control of the government, saving his state (sequence 5).

Jester Meng in one anecdote deals with a problem of ritual propriety. His king loved his horse so much that he gave it all kinds of luxuries it wished, and as a consequence of overfeeding it, the horse died. The king wished that the horse should be buried with the ritual befitting the funeral of a high rank official, which was clearly an improper act (sequence 1). Moreover, he ordered that anyone who would dare to criticize his decision should be put to death. Only Jester Meng dares to talk to the king. This is how the anecdote goes on:

優孟聞之，入殿門，仰天大哭。玉賔而問其故，優孟曰：“馬者王之所愛也，以是國之堂堂之大，何去不事，而以大禮葬之，厚，請以人君禮葬之。”王曰：“何如？”侍臣曰：“臣請以周王之禮，文梓為槨，楩楓豫章為舖槨，發甲卒萬戶，老躑躅官，藉素褥於階，斎幾設賔位於殿堂，百官先於門祗者，皆以賓禮接之，諸侯聞之，皆大王之賢人而貴馬也。”).王曰：“寡人之過一至此乎！為之奈何？”優孟曰：“請為大王客賓葬之，以墮冢為槨，置之環邑，築之京觀，名之為蕃，若以葬者，衣以慈孝，葬於閭閻側。於是王乃使以賓禮葬之，名天下久聞也。

When Jester Meng heard about it, he went to the palace. He raised his eyes to Heaven and cried loudly. The king was surprised and asked him for the reason [of his crying]. Jester Meng said: “That horse was Your Majesty’s favourite. With a great state like Chu, one can get anything done. However, to bury it with the rite befitting a high official is too ungenerous. Why don’t you entomb it according to royal rites?” The king said: “How can it be done?” Meng replied: “Your minister suggests that the inner coffin has to be made of carved jade and the outer coffin made of the finest catalpa’s wood, and the layers that have to protect the coffin might be made of cedar, sweet gum, camphor tree and other precious wood. Send armed soldiers to excavate the coffin pit, while the old and weak will carry earth. Let the envoys from Qi and Zhao stay ahead co-presiding over the sacrificial rites, and the envoys of Han and Wei guard the back. Establish an ancestral temple, sacrifice a tailao, and institute a fief of ten thousand households to provide the offerings. [When] the feudal lords hear of this, they will know that Your Majesty despises men but cherishes horses.” The king said: “Did I go this far? What can I do?” Jester Meng said: “I request Your Majesty to bury the horse like the other livestock.” Use the fireplace as its outer coffin and a bronze cauldron as its inner coffin, present it with ginger and jujubes and give it magnolia barks. Offer a sacrifice of glutinous rice, carps and fish and bury it in men’s bellies!” So the king gave the horse to the official in charge of the Palace food, and prevented the fact from being heard in the kingdom for long.61

Before talking, the jester introduces himself with a gesture “that will draw attention to his figure of speech”;62 he “looks up to the sky and cries aloud” (yangtian daoxi 天大笑). After the speech it becomes clear that this gesture shows the jester’s disagreement with the ruler’s plan.63 Then, Jester Meng stages a vivid description of the arrangement for a luxurious funeral ceremony for the horse (sequence 2). The king first hears the jester’s plan and is, we can presume, amazed by the grandiose details presented; then gradually understands that there is another point in the jester’s answer (sequence 3). The king’s question (“Did I go this far?”) is the sign he has understood the remonstrance (sequence 4). Then, following the jester’s advice, he will abandon his former plan (sequence 5) and will feed his courtiers with the horse meat, which would be the proper conduct.

The last story with Jester Zhan, like all those concerning him in this chapter, is very brief, so its plot lacks narrative details. However, it also contains the five sequences. The story is recorded as follows:

二世立，又欲請其威，優孟曰：“善。王已雖無言，臣固將請之，漆城雖於百姓多費，然佳哉！漆城之請，民亦未之。”王曰：“善耳，為馬，鴛鴦為馬威。”

When the Second Emperor (230–207 BCE) came to the throne, he decided to lacquer the walls [of his capital]. Jester Zhan said: “Splendid! If you had not ordered this, Your minister would have certainly proposed it. Lacquer the walls, although it will cause suffering and costs to people, but what a fine

57 To worship the deceased horse.

58 The animals used in the tailao offering are an ox, a sheep and a pig.

59 Liusuo 尉是 the six domestic animals: the horse, the ox, the sheep, the chicken, the dog and the pig.

60 The Shiji Suowin (Shiji 126.3201, n. 5) says that li 如 is equal to li 里, a type of cooking tripod.


62 Schaberg 2005b, 214.

63 This gesture has a rhetorical meaning similar to the “looking up to the sky and laughing hard” (yangtian daoxi 天大笑) performed by Chunyu Kun when seeing the inappropriate gift prepared by the king for the purpose of asking help from other states; the second anecdote at Shiji 126.3198.
thing it will be! A lacquered wall is so bright and shiny that if enemies come, they will not be able to climb it. If you desire it, it will be done, [but] lacquering is easy, the only difficulty will be building a shelter large enough to dry it." So the Second Emperor laughed at this [wit], and in consequence of this gave up [his idea].

This story starts with the Second Emperor of Qin planning to lacquer the city wall, an action which is understood as a useless excess (sequence 1). Jester Zhan then, similarly to Jester Meng, pretends to agree with the Emperor’s plan and vividly describes its realisation (sequence 2). The Emperor first listens to his speech (sequence 3), then uncovers the critique. He laughs; this is the sign that he has understood the real meaning of the jester’s words (sequence 4). As Schaberg points out, the laugh marks the "moment of relief, when all obscurities are dispelled." This story ends, as the other two, with the ruler transformed by the remonstrant’s speech, as the Second Emperor dismisses his plan (sequence 5).

As far as all the speeches recorded in this chapter are concerned, some are embellished by two typical rhetoric devices: the riddle and jù-like poetry. As previously said, they both have the function of entertaining the listener and at the same time marking the quality of indirectness. This would deserve further discussion, but I will here focus on the examples cited.

As far as the speeches of the two jesters are concerned, the remonstrants achieved their aim by engaging in argumentation by reductio ad absurdum. First the jesters assume that the idea of their lord might well be put into practice; then they vividly describe the realisation of the assumption, showing that it leads to an absurd result (to cherish a horse more than the people in one case, and the construction of an enormous drying shed for the lacquered walls in the other). In the end both arguments show that the ideas should not be realized. This last step is left to the King. The remonstrants lead their lord along the line of reasoning, but they do not comment on or make manifest the result of their argumentation; they arrange the discourse so that the last step, the implausibility of the idea, must be self evident making the king able to understand it by himself. This kind of argumentation is considered very effective, especially "because of its supposed irony and use of ridicule or humour." This brings us back to the meaning of guji

The meaning of guji in the Historian’s view

The Shiji suoyin commentary says: "Gu means luan 湍, "chaotic", and ji 疑 has the same meaning. The men who can speak and argue quickly, regard as fei shih ("it is not so") what is shi shi ("it is so"), and explain shi as if it were fei. Their speeches can confuse what is different and what is the same (yi tong 益同)." This explanation identifies guji with a language ability, the skill to speak fluently and be able to play with words, to turn upside down what is regarded as common sense. To explain in more detail, the commentary cites a passage of the "Baju" 䚩偽 (Divining over position) poem from Chu ci 楚辭 in which the term guji occurs. It says: [Is it better to be incorruptible and upright and keep oneself pure, or be slippery (tuti 處於) and smooth (guji) like the hard and the leather?] In the poem, in which the lyric voice of Qu Yuan is questioning the attitude one should adopt towards life, the words tuti and guji have a similar pejorative meaning of "being slick and sly", and to be able to find a place in society and follow convention. In this passage there is no direct

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64 Shiji 126.3203. Trans. based on Yang and Yang 2002, 322, with changes.
65 Schaberg 20005b, 206.
66 Shiji 126.3197. Chunyu Kuan’s ability to talk using weiyi 受 言 (translated in Han Zhaoqi 2009, 3151, n. 62, as minyao 奇 言) is recorded in another anecdote in Shiji 46.1890. Here he dialogues with Zou Ji employing this tool. Ikeda Hideo 抱 繭 全 (1668-1749) states that this anecdote is worthy to be recorded in the "Guji liezhuan" (as quoted in Han Zhaoqi 2009, 3151) Tho Jie takes it as a tool for indirect persuasion is found in other anecdotes, see Fronten 1979-80 and Zhang 2008, 8, 209.
67 Shiji 126.3199. Hu Shiyong (1980, 9) and Wang Yuxi (2002, 2890) both state that the remonstrance by which Chunyu Kuan made the King of Qin stop drinking is a piece of jù poetry.
68 This particular feature was noticed by Qian Zhongshu (1979, 378). Arthur (2010, 147) defines reductio ad absurdum as: "The reductio is a way of refuting a proposition by showing that it leads to an absurdity, by reducing it to absurdity- hence the Latin name, which translates as ‘reduction to an absurdity’. Generally, of course, such a reduction cannot be achieved without enlisting the aid of the premises. But this very fact explains the rhetorical force of this style of arguing: you refute your opponent’s proposition by getting her agreement on a number of premises, supposing the proposition at issue, and then showing that together with those premises the supposition leads to an absurdity. Given those premises, therefore, the supposed proposition must be false.”
69 Arthur 2010, 156.
70 Jansen 2007, 2.
71 Shiji 126.3197, Shiji 71.2307, n. 2. This explanation is very similar to a passage found in Xunzi 1/2.24 ("Xuan shen" 循 聲), trans. Knobloch, 1988, 153: "This is an expression of virtuous acts, this is an expression of virtues of the - "To recognize as right (shì) what is right and as wrong (bié) what is wrong is called 'wisdom'. To regard as wrong what is right and as right what is wrong is called 'stupidity'." As Knobloch notices, this is also similar to the "tong yi" 聞 聳 (Identity and Difference) paradox of the Logicians (Hui Shì 會 聳, 380-305 BCE, and Gongxun Leng 侕 靈, ca. 325-250 BCE). In the Xunzi, it refers to treating different entities as though they were identical and identical entities as though they were different" (Knobloch, 1988, 150).
72 Shiji 126.3203.
73 Zhou Bingbao 2003, 231; Zhang Yushan 1986, 236. Trans. Knechtges 1970-1971, 83, n. 17: Hawkes (1959, 205) translates as: "Is it better to be honest and incorruptible and to keep oneself pure, or to be accommodating and slippery, to be compliant as hard and leather?" In particular tuti, here employed to mean "be able to understand people's mind and act accordingly".
74 This last meaning corresponds in particular to guji. See Zhou Bingbao 2003, 234, n. 21; Zhang Yushan 1986, 237, n. 5.
reference to language, but we may assume that the “slick and tasteful” behaviour can be reflected also in the way someone talks. Then, the commentary records the gloss of Cui Hao 朱藻 (381–450 CE), who deduces the term guji from a drinking vessel: “Guji is a drinking vessel, it pours wine all day without stop, like the speech of the jesters (paiyao 師耀) that comes out and becomes a literary piece; the words are inexhaustible (bu qiongqie 不窮竭), slippery as the wine that endlessly flows out of it.” In the image of the wine that constantly flows we find an allusion to the jester’s language skill, to his being able to talk endlessly. At last, Yao Cha’s view (533–606 CE) comment acknowledges the “humoristic” features of the word guji and records: “The speech is composed of witticism and is smooth; its clever remarks come out very quickly, so it is said ‘guji’.”

It is important to point out that the historian called his chapter guji but he did not explain what the word meant. He constructed the anecdotes such that the meaning is self-evident. As we can understand from the excerpts provided, even if two of the three protagonists are jesters, Sima Qian in reality had no interest in providing exact and detailed historical data on the “jesters” included in this chapter, neither did he want to provide a definition of the “guji” as a distinct social category. He dedicated this chapter to those people who, according to him, shared the guji quality, understood as the capacity to express an indirect remonstrance (fengjian 風箏) by entertaining speech and behaviour.36 Their language skill involves also the ability to be “humorous”, that is, pleasant to listen to, and able to make the listener smile or laugh. However, it is undeniable that the words expressed by Chunyu Kun and the jesters are nearer to a harangue than to a bon mot. This makes evident that the “guji”—a humorous feature characteristic of the protagonists’ speeches—is understood as a rhetorical tool for persuasion.

Martin Kern has pointed out that “Early China differs decidedly from the Mediterranean classical period. Nobody in pre-Han or Han China wrote anything even remotely comparable to Aristotle’s Peri poïétikēs (On the art of poetry) […] or Cicero’s De Oratore (On the Orator).”37 This is an interesting point to reflect on.

As far as De Oratore is concerned, Cicero, in his discussion on the ability required for a good orator, regarded speaking with “humour” as an essential skill. He tried to delineate a systematic analysis of this issue (De Oratore II. 216–219) dividing it in carillatio (“humorous or sarcastic tone which all one says on a particular occasion”), and dicatio (“witticism proper, which are sudden, sharp, and brief”).38 He, then, divided his explanation into five points: 1. “the nature of humour”, 2. “its source”, 3. “whether willingness to produce it becomes an orator”, 4. “the limits of his licence” and 5. “the classification of things laughable.”39 I would like to quote extensively the discussion of the third point. Cicero states as follows:

It clearly becomes an orator to raise laughter, and this on various grounds; for instance, merriment naturally wins goodwill for his author; and everyone admires acuteness, which is often concentrated in a single word, uttered generally in repelling, though sometimes in delivering an attack; and it shatters or obstructs or makes light of an opponent, or alarms or repulses him; and it shows the orator himself to be a man of finish, accomplishment and taste; and, best of all, it relieves and tones down austerity and, by a jest or a laugh, often dispels distasteful suggestions not easily weakened by reasoning.40

Edward Rabbie paraphrased this passage explaining that what Cicero meant is that “to arouse laughter indeed benefits the orator. […] Laughter secures him benevolence and admiration; it defeats the opponent; it leaves the audience with good impression; and above all, it takes away seriousness and sternness, and refutes things that cannot easily be disproven by means of actual arguments.”41 Regarding the speeches recorded in the “Guji liezhan”, Timoteus Pokora has pointed out that the protagonists of this chapter used “wit, irony and satire in such a way as to achieve their aim without running into difficulties and eventual punishment.”42 I agree on this, and this assertion is actually consistent with Cicero’s

80 De Oratore II. 218: Etenim cum duo genera siunt facieturam, alterum aquabitter in omne sermonem fiunt, alterum peracutum et breve, illa a veteribus superior caviintio, haec altera dicatio nomenata est. Grabe 1965, 187.
81 De Oratore II. 235: quasi sit; alterum, unde sit; tertium sitne oratoris, velrisum movens quantum; quantum, quae sint genera rutili. Trans. Sutton and Rackman 1942, 373.
82 De Oratore II. 236: Est autem, ut ad illud tertium veniam, est plane oratoris movens velium, vel quod ipsis hilaritas benevolentiam conciliat et, per quem scitam est, vel quod adhuc motus acumen acumen uno sese in verbo positum maxime respondent. utremorum etiam ubicumque ascendantur; vel quod frangit adversarium, velque instigat, velque deterret, velque frustrat: vel quod ipsum oratorum politiam esse hominem significant, vel quod eruditum, vel quod unum maximemque quaestis quoque vereritatem et felix est, idque, sique etiam, qua argumentis etiam non facile est, locus rure diffluat. Trans. Sutton and Rackman 1942, 373, 375.
84 Pokora 1973, 59. On the same page he states: “The ku-chi proposed serious criticism of the sovereign’s conduct and policy, using irony to present their remonstrances; but they did not have the pure jester’s licence—they were by no means sure of escaping punishment if they offended their ruler.” As far as the “jesters’ licence” is concerned, this concept is exemplified in the answer of Jester Shi (衛真 to Lj. 175 B.C.E.), the concubine of Duke Xian of Jin (676–651 B.C.E.), as it appears in the Gaoyu 當世 ("Huyu") 第十五章, section 300. Here the
explanation of why an orator has to employ humour in the arrangement of his speech. Humour has the positive effect of bringing relief to the audience; in this way it becomes easier to convey a message, even if it is a remonstrance. Employing humour makes it easier for the addressee to bear the critique embedded in the speech. This tool, then, makes the speech effective in a subtle way, because it does not express its message directly but instead plays with the disposition and the feelings of the audience.

Martin Kern adds that “one reason why there are no major early Chinese works on topics like rhetoric, grammar, and poetics might be that early China did not develop the professionalization and institutionalization of scholar-teachers, their disciplines, and their public arena in the way ancient Greece and Rome did.” This may be true; Cícero wrote his work out of his experience as an orator. However, the Shiji anecdotes, like the remonstrance tales recorded in Warring States-Former Han texts, could provide testimony of an effort to transform into a written and idealized form what was originally an oral practice. The rules for a well-arranged and effective speech, nevertheless, were never systematized in a text.

The protagonists of this chapter use speeches with the quality of guiji, because they were effective, but their aim was not only to win an argument, but also to elucidate a moral issue and move the decision of their ruler in the right direction. According to this chapter, eloquence and language ability have to be

jester gives advice to Li Ji on how to eliminate Li Ke 里克 (died ca. 560 BCE) at one point he states: 晋惠公，言惠公("I am a jester, for me no words are excessive"), which means that he has the license to speak without incurring punishment, see Qian Zhongshu 1979, 378. The rebellion and plot of Li Ji is recorded also in the Zhuan zhusheng (425, 426). The Zhuan zhusheng (425) records the death of Duke Xi of Lu (295–300); however, the character of the jester Chui is absent. He appears again only in the Guiling zhuan shi (327) but as a servant of the state of Qi. Here, the people of Qi made him dance under Duke Ding of Lu’s banner, to make fun of the Duke, and Kongzi suggested putting the jester to death for this insult (the tenth year of Duke Ding of Lu). This is the only incident in which the name of this jester is cited. This last anecdote is quoted again in Lu Ji’s Guiling zhuan shi (New Speeches) (5.59). Here, though, the name of the jester is Zhān sōng, the same name as Sima Qian’s jester. Kang Qinglian (2002), echoing the title of one chapter of Liu Xiang’s Shuangyuan, the “Shi nan” (Difficulties of the Persuasion), defines the speeches of the protagonists of this chapter as shi nan 诗难, “persuasions which do not create difficulties”, because the remonstrants are never punished.

55 De Oratione 1. 143 etiam illa cognomin, et acceptam, anteaquam de re diceremus, initio conciliandos eorum esse animos, qui audirent; “I had also been taught that, before speaking on the issue, we must first secure the goodwill of our audience.” Trans. Sutonius and Radkeman, 1942, 99.

56 See Rabbie’s (2007, 210) connection of humour with emotions.

57 Kern, 2003a, 389, n. 15.

58 Marjan Kern (2003c, 276) remarks (on the dialogues in the Zhuanzheng) saying: “This is not to suggest that these are orally composed or performed texts, but, like the speeches in historiographic narrative, they all are certain rhetorical representations of speech.”

59 This is what differentiate these speeches from mere examples of eloquence, which could be

paired with high moral values. The “humorous” quality is only a feature of their speeches, in which the principal aim is not to entertain but to educate, and their words are endowed with the capacity to bring about morally good action, because the speakers of the guiji words “practised the Way.”

Chu Shaosun’s addition: a different way to understand the term guiji.

This chapter contains a long section added by Chu Shaosun. He makes visible his addition by presenting himself and explaining why he adds passages to the chapter. In his self-presentation Chu seems to show an understanding of the term guiji which differs from that of Sima Qian; he says:

臣幸得從師於郯，而好諸外家之術。蓋不遺難，復見故事之法之六章，編之於左。又可以觀聖德，以示後世好事者書之，以濟世安邦。

Your servant has had the luck to become a courtier because of his training in the canonical learning, and he liked to read the transmitted words of other traditions outside court. He has allowed himself not to hold [his views] back and, in addition, wrote six zhang of guiji stories, adding them on the left (that is after those written by the Grand Historian). It is possible to read them to stimulate the feelings and [to keep them] in order to make those in later generations who like facts and events read them, and enjoy them.

This paragraph could be understood as a statement on the reading paradigm of Chu’s additional tales: they serve to “stimulate the feelings (yang yi 楊怡) and possibly as a source of reading pleasure; literally to read them “moves the hearts and stirs the ears” (you xin hai er 游心恵耳).” It seems that Chu Shaosun recorded these stories primarily for the amusing narrative they provide, leaving their possible didactic aims

easily come to mind when talking about language strategies. Already in the Lanfu we find harsh critique against those who play with words confusing the meaning of shi and fei (a reference to the Logicians and other debaters). One passage (Lanfu 1718.187; Jiaxuan 17.1.164) says that the sharp speakers can “overturn familiar families and states.” See also Lanfu 1511.164. It is interesting to note that Cícero also expressed a criticism against those officinae rhetorum who taught the ars rhetorica without a training in moral philosophy and other topics (see Grube 1967, 170).

In his concluding applause to the “Guiji liezhuan” chapter the historian says: 不待世故，不爭權利，上下無競操，人無害害，以道之信，作書籍者第六十六。 “Those people” were not dragged down by the customs of their times, nor did they fight for power or profit. There were never misunderstandings with [their] superiors and inferiors. They were not harmed by any man since they practised the Way; so I wrote the “Guiji liezhuan” (Shiji 130.3314). Trans. based on Pokora 1973, 54.


92 Shiji 126.3203.

93 Pokora 1973, 54.
The question of the authorship of the "Guji liezhuan"

Scholars have long discussed the authorship of the Shiji, trying to identify which chapters Sima Qian wrote, which parts were probably drafted by Sima Tan, and which by later authors. However, the debate is still open and maybe a definite answer will never be provided.

As far as "Guji liezhuan" is concerned, the authorship of the whole chapter has been questioned. Berk Bodde has stated that the first part of the chapter was not written by Sima Qian but by later interpolators, citing as a proof the appearance of the taboo character tan 田, the given name of Sima Qian’s father. In the chapter, the character is in fact found four times, three of which appear in the part supposedly written by Sima Qian. However, some Chinese scholars pinpoint the same issue, but instead ascribe those chapters which contain the character tan to Sima Tan. Moreover, several specialists in the Shiji’s textual exegesis never questioned Sima Qian’s authorship of the first part of the chapter. It is also important to point out that already Hu Shi (in Xi Hanren lin wen bu hu hao 西漢人論文不號) and Chen Yuan (in Shi hui jishi 史記考異) have stated that during Han times the rules about taboo characters were not applied so strictly; hence, an analysis of the authorship which is based only on the discussion of taboo characters is not sufficient to provide any reliable proof. However, highlighting some features of the chapter, and

94 Han Zhaoqin 2009, 6169, n. 4
95 Yang Yang 2001, 4332.
96 Han 2009, 30.1745, Suizheng 34. 1012.
97 The protagonists are mostly from Former Han times, in particular recorded as living under Emperor Wu’s reign: Attendant Guo (c. 161–85 BCE); Master Donggao (c. 161–85 BCE); Master Wang (c. 161–85 BCE); Lady Wang (c. 161–85 BCE); and Master Wang (c. 161–85 BCE). Only two are from the Warring States period: Chuyun Kan and Ximen Bao.
98 Pokora 1973, 54, 57. Remarked also by Ruam Zhisheng (1996, 360) and by Schaberg (2005b, 200). However this does not mean that Chu Shaoqun is not interested in didactic aims at all. In the chapter 20, for instance, he clearly states that his purpose is to add information about Han history, and that provide a more precise picture of the historical events in order to highlight those features which could lead the reader to understand a lesson; see Shiji 120.1073.
99 Shiji 126.3209H. This story reworks the literary motif of an envoy who is sent by his lord to in the background. These didactic aims are implied by yang yi, which could also be translated as “to broaden one’s knowledge”, “to express ideas” or “to express one’s will”!
100 In this case, since these stories can also entertain the reader, the mention of their possible didactic use reminds one of the way the presence of the “Xiaoshuo jia” 小說家 (Lesser sayings) category is justified in the bibliographical chapters: because even if superficial, Xiaozhuan have something “worth looking at” (keguan 可觀).
101 The stories recorded by Chu, in fact, are very heterogeneous and do not function as tales of remonstration. They are more focused on the clever wits and funny remarks of the protagonists. These, however, are primarily an expression of their acumen, and moral aims are seldom involved. Chuyun Kan, whom Sima Qian presented as successfully remonstrating with his ruler, appears again in one anecdote, but Chu Shaoshun presents him differently, as an able talker whose language ability is used only to acquire personal profit. Even if Chu Shaoshun tried to fill the gap of historical records regarding Han times (the period omitted by the shihshigong) adding stories which occurred during this period, his anecdotes are not presented in chronological order. They neglect the diachronic arrangement of the events that the historian often tries to offer, appearing more as a collection of stories than as a history of events according to the natural chronological order.

104 Bodde 1967, 110f.
105 See the analysis made by Li Changzheng 李昌鶴, quoted in An Pinggu 2005, 438–441.
106 Zhang Dake questioned parts of the Shiji in his Shiji wenxian yan bianxiang yanjiu 什記文獻校編考究 (that has been incorporated in the collection Shiji yanjiu jicheng 什記研究集成, edited by him), but never raised doubts about this chapter, see Zhang Dake 2005, 108–137; see also An Pinggu 2005, 443–456.
107 As quoted in An Pinggu 2005, 441. In the Fayan ik (Exemplary Sayings), written by the Han dynasty scholar Yang Xiong (53 BCE–18 CE), we find a phrase referring to Dongfang Shuo (a character that appears in Chu’s addition) which says: “the humorous men have the way of speaking and behaving; characteristic of the humorous men (c. 161–85 BCE) is that their words are not taken for real.” This phrase is glossed as hui yun hui xing 言笑之行 (literally: funny words funny behaviour), because in the commentary Chen Zhongguo says that the phrase, in reality, is a mistake for hui ik; Fayan 11B17.461. Then he says that the character tan found in the Shiji’s “Guji liezhuan” could be the same case of erroneous transmission; Fayan 11B17.461. It is true that all three occurrences would make sense with the two characters exchanged. The first occurrence is at the beginning of the chapter (Shiji 126.3197): 言笑之行 言語之行; “Even the speeches may subtly point out correct points and serve to settle disputes.” This could be emended to: “Even humorous speeches may subtly point out correct points as a gift.” ("Humorous" must always been understood in a broad sense). Another one regards the second protagonist of the chapter (Shiji 126.3200): 言語之行 言笑之行; “Jester Meng” was good in arguments and often indirectly admonished the king by speaking in a funny way.” This would
reviewing some features previously described, it is perhaps possible to identify some points which could say something about the author.

The first part of the chapter generally ascribed to Sima Qian shows an internal coherence which enables us to suppose a single authorial voice. The protagonists are consciously depicted in a particular way (coherence of descriptive features: physical features, language style etc.). All the anecdotes here also show a coherent narrative structure, identified in tales of indirect remonstrance, a narrative structure widely found in former Han times textual material belonging to a previous anecdotic tradition that Sima Qian is acknowledged to follow. Moreover, considering this chapter in the context of the whole Shi ji, the introductory words recorded in the preface demonstrate a point of view consistent with that expressed in the taishengong section of the autobiographical last chapter, chapter 130 of the Shi ji, and Chuyun Kun’s description as a worthy figure is also coherent with his brief biography recorded in chapter 74.

Several scholars, actually, have read in these small narratives a direct reference to Sima Qian’s own life time. The Qing scholar Bo Xiu 伯秀 in his Shu Shi ji gu ji zhan hou 書史治記傳後 read the account of the brave and worthy advisers depicted in the anecdotes as a criticism aimed at awakening Emperor Wu from his blind faith in tales of fangshi 方士 about immortals. Modern scholars too see references to Sima’s contemporary situation, perceiving in these characters, who honestly express their advice not to be afraid of punishment, a solide polemic against those ru 儒 (like Gongsun Hong 公孫宏, 200–121 BCE) who in their suggestions only followed Emperor Wu’s mood. It is well known that Sima Qian in 99 BCE received a harsh punishment because he spoke in defense of General Li Ling 李陵 (d. 74 BCE) who was defeated after a campaign against the Xiongnu.

be: “[Jester Meng] was good in arguments and often, being humorous, indirectly condemned the king.” The third, and last, occurrence by Sima Qian is written (Shiji 126 3201): “...for the sake of his son, Jester Meng...” “Jester Meng” wore Sunshu Ao’s clothes and hat, and clapping his hands began to talk (he is trying to imitate Sunshu’s way of speaking). This would be transformed into: “Jester Meng” wore Sunshu Ao’s clothes and hat, and clapping his hands joked with...

108 See Kern 2003b, 289.

109 Collected in Jiang Biao’s 江彪 Yuaxiang tong yi ju 影相通奇居, juan 2, as quoted in Yang Yanyi 杨燕益 1986, 721ff (also in Yang Yanyi 2005, 598).

110 Sima Qian, in his work, often uses the pattern of portraying figures of the past in an exemplary way; on the contrary, regarding the people of his time, especially those summoned by the Emperor Wu of Han, he does not refrain from harsh criticism. One example is the way in which he describes Gongsun Hong 公孫宏 (d. 121 BCE), a prominent ru scholar who served as prime minister (chengxiang 丞相) under Emperor Wu. In spite of his fame as an erudite, Sima Qian describes him as a two-faced man; see Shiji 112.2951. See also Shankman and Durrant 2000, 131–132.

111 See the analysis of this chapter in Han Zhaoqi 2005, 361–363, in particular 362.

112 Hanzhai 62.

Before this happened, his beloved father had probably died of humiliation after being left aside by Emperor Wu during the celebration of the feng and shan ancestral sacrifices. It should be pointed out that in chapter 126 the historian did not include in his narrative facts about his owns times. He presents us with tales of different figures from pre-Han times which may also be read as a way of attributing to the reign of worthy relations between a lord and his subjects (be they jester or ru); we may assume that such relationships did not exist during the Han dynasty. Following the reading which sees in some parts of the Shi ji a direct reference to Sima Qian’s own experience and polemical instances regarding Emperor Wu’s court, it is possible to speculate that Sima Qian conceived the “Guji liezhuăn” (Chapter 126) as a piece of indirect remonstrance itself. Chuyun Kun and the other protagonists used their rhetorical skills in order to influence the conduct of their kings, analogously Sima Qian, recording the deeds of those men who dared to criticise their ruler, may be sending a message to Emperor Wu, showing the ideal kind of relationship between the lord and his ministers.

Even though the authorship of this chapter has been at times questioned for its evident historical errors, it should be pointed out that factual accuracy is not always the most important feature in traditional Chinese historical and anecdotal writings. This chapter is not the only one that has been reproached with inaccuracy. For example, in the “Hereditary House of Duke Zhou of Lu” 賈拘公家 the historian added stories regarding the cultural hero Duke of Zhou 旦公 diverging from the facts transmitted by the orthodoxy tradition; in particular, a dialogue between the Duke and his son Bo Qin 伯禽, and a debate regarding King Cheng 成王 once he grew up. For this Sima Qian was criticized by later commentators, accused of using unreliable sources and petty talks. As Cao Weiguo has remarked, the historian added these accounts because they served to develop and highlight the worthy character of the Duke. David Schaberg has
pointed out that tales of indirect remonstrance were a feature of the shi (men of service) to express their identity in relation to the imperial power. Accordingly, the deviations from orthodox records, new details about characters never found in previous texts, and additional events contrasting with already existing material found in the Shiji could be consciously created by the historian because functional to the message he wanted to convey. Given these considerations, hence, even if there are no undeniable proofs to ascribe the authorship to Sima Qian, according to what was said above, it is quite plausible to suggest Sima Qian’s authorship.

Conclusions

The stories of Chunyu Kun and the two jesters became a well known part of Chinese literary tradition. However, it seems that their original main purpose as successful examples of remonstrance was mostly replaced by a reading which saw in them primarily a collection of entertaining stories; this is to say, the reading of Chu Shaosun eventually prevailed. This can be seen already in Yang Xiong 羊欣 (53 BCE–18 CE) who, dismissing fu poetry as a tool for moral instruction because it was ineffective in admonishing, stated that Sima Xiangru 司馬相如 (179–117 BCE) and other Han dynasty rhapsodists were “followers of Chunyu Kun and Jester Meng”, because they aimed to amuse rather than to provide amusement to their ruler. According to Sima Qian’s view, these two men performed fu that were real feng (remonstrance), while Yang Xiong considered them in deprecative terms and focused basically only on the “amusing” nature of their speeches. Maybe he read Sima Qian’s part with a different horizon of expectations from that implied by the historian, understanding the term guji in Chu Shaosun’s way.

Half a millennium later, Liu Xie 周顒 (ca. 465–ca. 520) mentioned Chunyu Kun and Jester Meng in the chapter “Xie yin” 楚辭 (of exalted and enigmatic) of his Wenxin daolong 文心雕龍. He quoted their wits as examples of the correct form of humour because they were aimed at correcting the wrongdoings of the kings. However, it seems to me that another reason for Liu Xie to mention them in this

122 Schuberg 2005b, 194–195. 123 Saying this do not mean that all the contradictions and twisting of historical facts found in the Shiji are consciously constructed. About the shi see the class that produced and transmitted the anecdotal tradition see Pines 2009. His discussion refers in a more general way to all the tales of indirect remonstrance, among which we also find the anecdotes with the jester-character, see in particular pp. 115–184; see also Schuberg 2005b, 194–195.

124 For the translation of fu poetry as rhapsody see Knechtges 1976.

125 Hanhu Shu 87.3575, the translation of the passage is in Knechtges 1976, 4; he states that Yang Xiong’s biography in the Hanhu is based on his autobiography.

126 Wenxin daolong 3/15.194.

chapter was that the most striking quality of their stories was not their ability in performing remonstrances, but the “humorous” feature of their speeches. It is possible to speculate that the humorous and witty reprimands of the protagonists made these anecdotes agreeable reading for later readers as well, readers whose primary interest may have been not only to use them as a historical source and who may thus not have been able to fully comprehend the historian’s original purpose. But no matter if they were criticized or praised, these stories were read anyway, most probably thanks to their humorously entertaining features.

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127 Wang Liqi in his Lidai xiaoshuo ji 近代笑話集 collected six different versions of the Qi yuans 歷代笑話 (Record of bright smiles), a Sui dynasty collection of humorous anecdotes: one gathering passages from the Leishuo 釋説, one from the Xu Biaochuan xueshi 謝氏學詩, one from the Guang shu 歌舞, one from the Pingju bian 聞曲編, one from a manuscript found at Dunhuang and one from the Taiping guanzhi 太平廣記. It is worth noting that this last version contains the two Shiji stories about Jester Zhan (Wang Liqi 1956, 23; Taiping guanzhi 164.1195).
 Giulia Baccini


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