

Anecdotes in Early China

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When the Duke of Xue served as chancellor of the state of Qi, the queen consort of King Wei of Qi died. There were ten young women whom the king esteemed. The Duke of Xue wished to discover whom the king desired to install, so he could implore the king to appoint that particular woman as his new queen consort. If the king heeded his advice, he would win the favor of the king and he would earn the respect of the newly appointed queen consort; but if the king did not heed his advice, he would not be graced with the king's favor and he would be disdained by the newly appointed queen consort. [Therefore] he wished to discover in advance which woman the king desired to appoint in order to encourage the king to appoint that very woman. So subsequently he crafted ten pairs of jade earrings, one of which was more beautiful than the others. He presented them to the king, who then distributed them among the ten young women as gifts. When they all sat together the next day, the duke spied out the whereabouts of the most beautiful pair of earrings and urged the king [that the woman who now wore them] be made the new queen consort.²

薛公相齊，齊威王夫人死。有十孺子，皆貴於王，薛公欲知王所欲立，而請置一人以為夫人。王聽之，則是說行於王而重於置夫人也。王不聽，是說不行而輕於置夫人也。欲先知王之所欲置以勸王置之，於是為十玉珥而美其一而獻之，王以賦十孺子。明日坐，視美珥之所在而勸王以為夫人。³

This colorful narrative is found in the *Han Feizi* 韓非子 (Master Han Fei), a voluminous text that lays out the politico-philosophical views of Han Fei 韓非 (ca. 280–233 BCE). An influential thinker of noble descent, he once served as advisor to the monarch who would be known to the world as the First Emperor of China. The brief narrative recounts an event that supposedly took place in the century before Han Fei’s lifetime, when China was divided into various states that battled each other for hegemony. It features two historical figures: Tian Yinqi 田因齊, better known as King Wei of Qi 齊威王 (r. 356–320 BCE), who was one of the most powerful rulers of his day; and his youngest son, Tian Ying 田嬰, who was enfeoffed with Xue 薛 and is also known as Lord Jingguo 靖郭君.⁴ The event involving these two men unfolds in the royal palace of the large state of Qi in the period following the passing of the queen consort. It is described succinctly and rather matter-of-factly, even when it details the duke’s considerations (“If the king heeded his advice . . .”), and could be read as a factual depiction of a moment in Chinese history. However, brief as it may be, the story also teaches a valuable lesson, namely that clever strategies enable us to discover the hidden inclinations of others, even of those in power, and to use this knowledge to our advantage—a lesson Han Fei was keen to share with his readers. Most readers in his day, but even today, over two thousand years after the story was first committed to writing, would probably admire the duke’s clever scheme and agree that as a piece of literature, the story is quite entertaining.

The earrings story bears all the hallmarks of what is generally dubbed an “anecdote,” as we shall demonstrate below. Anecdotes similar to the one presented here are part and parcel of the literary tradition of early China, which typically refers to the period from the Zhou Dynasty 周 (ca. 1045–256 BCE), through the Qin Dynasty 秦 (221–206 BCE), to the former half of the Han Dynasty 漢 (202 BCE–220 CE). This formative period in Chinese history is marked by social, political, and economical turmoil as the monarchs of the Zhou house lost their political authority, especially after a disastrous military defeat in 771 BCE forced them to abandon most of the royal domain and move their capital eastwards. This gave rise to centuries of incessant warfare among competing states, which led gradually to the birth of the foundational dynasties of imperial China, the Qin and Han. The disintegration of a unified social order sparked fundamental questions about how to (re)create order in the world, as well as in one’s personal life, and it served as a breeding ground for ideas on politics, ethics, society, military, history, and so on. Anecdotes played an important role in the fermentation,

presentation, and transmission of these ideas, and as a result they can be found in a wide array of texts from this period, ranging from those often categorized as historical to works of a more philosophical nature.⁵ We find them in commentarial traditions associated with the canonical *Chunqiu* 春秋 (Spring and Autumn Annals), such as the *Zuozhuan* 左傳 (Zuo Commentary) and the *Gongyangzhuan* 公羊傳 (Gongyang Commentary); in philosophical writings such as the *Mozi* 墨子 (Master Mo), *Zhuangzi* 莊子 (Master Zhuang), *Yanzi chungqiu* 晏子春秋 (Spring and Autumn Annals of Master Yan), *Lüshi chungqiu* 呂氏春秋 (Spring and Autumn Annals of Mr. Lü), and *Huainanzi* 淮南子 (The Master of Huainan); in collections of anecdotes, such as the *Hanshi waizhuan* 韓詩外傳 (Han's Supplementary Commentary to the Odes), *Shuoyuan* 說苑 (Garden of Illustrative Examples), *Xinxu* 新序 (Newly Arranged [Anecdotes]), *Zhanguo ce* 戰國策 (Stratagems of the Warring States), and *Lienüzhuan* 列女傳 (Biographies of Exemplary Women); and in historical writings such as the *Guoyu* 國語 (Discourses of the States), *Shiji* 史記 (Records of the Historian), and *Hanshu* 漢書 (History of the [Former] Han Dynasty). Judging by the sheer number of texts and the wealth of anecdotes they contain, in early China anecdotes constituted a pool of material that anyone could draw upon to ornament and illustrate a speech, a commentary, or a written treatise, and as such they served as powerful building blocks in arguments.

While anecdotes are well known to anyone with even a slight acquaintance with early Chinese literature, they have received surprisingly little scholarly attention as a distinctive form of writing.⁶ Scholars in China have been studying early Chinese anecdotes for some time now, resulting in several monographs, anthologies, and academic articles, but interest in other parts of the world only seriously coalesced in the past fifteen years or so.⁷ Since then, anecdotes have featured in the important and groundbreaking monographs by Wai-yee Li, Yuri Pines, and David Schaberg, which focus on their rhetorical functions in the *Zuozhuan* commentary to the *Chunqiu*.⁸ Anecdotes are also the subject of a handful of published academic articles by Albert Galvany, Jens Østergård Petersen, Sarah A. Queen, David Schaberg, Paul van Els, Kai Vogelsang, and others, several of which explore the relationship between anecdotal narrative and philosophical argumentation.⁹ Most recently, Jack W. Chen and David Schaberg have published an edited volume titled *Idle Talk: Gossip and Anecdote in Traditional China*, which provides a wonderful complement to the present volume as it picks up where this volume leaves off historically, to address anecdotes in Chinese history after the era we here identify as early China.¹⁰

The present volume is the first English-language book-length study to focus on the rhetorical function of anecdotal narratives across several literary genres of early China. In this volume we seek to clarify the nature and function of early Chinese anecdotes by raising the following questions: What are their characteristic features? What are their generic boundaries, that is to say, how do they relate to other types of narrative? What degree of historical authenticity do they display? How malleable were the stories? What different framing techniques did authors use to fit stock anecdotes into larger narrative contexts? What was the rhetorical power of anecdotes when used in argumentation? How does the early Chinese preference for using anecdotes in argumentation differ from modes of argumentation preferred in other eras and cultures? In addressing these and other questions, this book will advance the idea that anecdotes were an essential rhetorical tool that early Chinese writers used effectively to persuade their audience of one or another point of view.

Characteristic Features of Anecdotes

What is an anecdote? The word is used frequently and casually, for instance in utterings such as “they like to tell anecdotes about . . .” or “there is anecdotal evidence that . . .,” but a clear definition is not as evident as it may seem. Scholars have analyzed characteristic features of anecdotes for several decades now, predominantly on the basis of anecdotes in German, English, and other European languages, and their findings have made their way to dictionaries, encyclopedias of literature, and so on. This section discusses what anecdotes are, and what they are not, according to the literature. The next section will discuss how anecdotes in the Chinese tradition correspond to, and differ from, the more general understanding of anecdotes.

In their bare essence, anecdotes are brief narrations of events. They are created whenever and wherever people gather and talk—at dinner tables, in taverns, and so on.¹¹ Someone witnessed an event, or heard about it, and tells others about it.¹² Relating events to others is part of the human experience, which is why anecdotes have been around for the longest of times. It is therefore all the more remarkable that the term *anecdote* remains ill-defined to this day, as Lionel Gossman notes in his seminal paper on the topic.¹³ The term finds its roots in the Greek word ἀνέκδοτα, meaning “things not given out,” which is to say, “things unpublished.” It was used as the title of a posthumous collection of unpublished writings by

the historian Procopius of Caesarea (6th century), who had in his lifetime published a number of official histories in which he spoke favorably of the contemporaneous Byzantine emperor Justinian I (r. 527–565). In stark contrast, his unpublished writings reveal in great detail—and with much contempt—numerous scandalous doings of the emperor, his wife, and their entourage. Here is an example of the alleged depravity of emperor Justinian and his wife Theodora:

There was in Constantinople a man by the name of Zeno, grandson of that Anthamius who had formerly been Emperor of the West. This man they appointed, with malice aforethought, Governor of Egypt, and commanded his immediate departure. But he delayed his voyage long enough to load his ship with his most valuable effects; for he had a countless amount of silver and gold plate inlaid with pearls, emeralds and other such precious stones. Whereupon they bribed some of his most trusted servants to remove these valuables from the ship as fast as they could carry them, set fire to the interior of the vessel, and inform Zeno that his ship had burst into flames of spontaneous combustion, with the loss of all his property. Later, when Zeno died suddenly, they took possession of his estate immediately as his legal heirs; for they produced a will, which it is whispered, he did not really make.¹⁴

Passages such as these would assuredly infuriate the powers that be, which was why, for fear of retribution, Procopius did not include them in his published histories, though they were eventually published after his death.¹⁵

During the Renaissance, following the rise of cities, a true leisure class, and the cult of the individual, anecdotes began to shake off their “association with the merely scandalous,” as Clifton Fadiman notes, and they no longer remained unpublished.¹⁶ As a result, in the centuries that followed the meaning of the term gradually broadened to amusing trivialities about people’s lives, which eventually led the *Oxford English Dictionary* to define *anecdote* as “the narrative of a detached incident, or of a single event, told as being in itself interesting or striking.”¹⁷

As accounts of single events, anecdotes are marked by brevity, or rather, by a lack of complexity, as they do not contain complex storylines, character developments, etcetera. The event related in the anecdote unfolds in a limited setting of time and space, and typically involves no more than

a handful of actual persons, mostly prominent figures in society: rulers, statesmen, authors, actors, artists, athletes, and so on. Here is an example of a modern anecdote that describes a remarkable event in the life of Ansel Adams (1902–1984), the famous American landscape photographer:

During his early years Adams studied the piano and showed marked talent. At one party (he recalls it as “*very liquid*”) he played Chopin’s F Major Nocturne. “In some strange way my right hand started off in F-sharp major while my left hand behaved well in F major. I could not bring them together. I went through the entire nocturne with the hands separated by a half-step.” The next day a fellow guest complimented him on his performance, “You never missed a wrong note!”¹⁸

As can be seen from this example, anecdotes are “directly pointed towards or rooted in the real,” as Joel Fineman puts it.¹⁹ They generally relate real events involving actual people, mostly of some renown, whether from the past or still alive. This is not to say that the events actually happened as described, because anecdotes may have been “passed around by word of mouth or borrowed by one writer from another.”²⁰ In fact, they may very well have been invented in the first place. The historicity of anecdotes is therefore often somewhat doubtful, as their veracity may be difficult to determine.²¹ For example, Ansel Adams’s story can only be verified by those who attended the bacchanalian party (and stayed sober enough to remember the event), and Procopius’s revelations are even more doubtful. In the passage on Zeno’s ship, we find it “whispered” that the imperial couple forged the governor’s will, and in the same chapter it is reported that “one man said” he witnessed Justinian walking to and fro with his head detached, whereas “another” said he was there when the emperor’s face all of a sudden changed into a shapeless mass of flesh. Reliable historical writings require more than just a few dubious eyewitness accounts before portraying the emperor as a headless zombie, so to speak, and it is therefore understandable that anecdotes are sometimes dismissed as mere hearsay, rumor, or gossip.²²

These concerns hardly matter for those who produce and consume anecdotes. They value anecdotes not primarily as *historically accurate* depictions of events, but as *literary* depictions of events. Although anecdotes are somehow pointed toward or rooted in the real, they have something literary about them, Fineman notes, something that distinguishes them from other, non-literary ways to refer to the real.²³ One present-day anecdote-monger

goes so far as to write that anecdotes are “not about facts,” adding that “with anecdotes, story is everything.”²⁴ As cleverly crafted stories, no matter how brief, anecdotes have a beginning (situation or exposition), middle (encounter or crisis), and end (resolution).²⁵ In the Ansel Adams anecdote, for example, the beginning describes the situation by mentioning the time (“his early years”) and place (“at one party”) of the event; the middle part describes the out-of-the-ordinary event; and the closing sentence delivers a witty punchline.

The punchline indicates that anecdotes such as this one aim for a smile on the reader’s face. Indeed, humor is an important function of anecdotes, and humorous anecdotes are known to spread most widely. This is not to say that all anecdotes are humorous, as “there is plenty of room for the quieter anecdote whose value lies in the illumination of character or the inculcation of a moral lesson.”²⁶ Whether anecdotes prompt delectation or contemplation, an important function—broadly speaking—is diversion, as anecdotes are somehow considered interesting or amusing.²⁷

Although anecdotes are understood as detached and freestanding narratives, they often do not occur on their own but as part of larger narrative contexts, such as biographies, histories, speeches, and essays. Indeed, “the anecdote appears to be both sufficient to itself and yet to gesture to its incompleteness, always invoking a larger whole into which it needs to be inserted. Anecdotes are memorable, often personal narratives that open up something beyond them, and they are capable of uncovering the neglected, the strange, or the unfamiliar that lies within a more familiar narrative.”²⁸

In sum, anecdotes can be described as short, freestanding accounts of particular events in the lives of actual persons, most of whom are of some renown.²⁹ The accounts are rooted in reality, but their historicity may be doubtful. They should be seen as literary constructs, often with a tripartite structure. With a didactic message or a witty punchline, they are narrated as being somehow interesting or entertaining. They rarely stand on their own, but often form part of larger narrative structures.

Anecdotes in Early Chinese Texts

The characteristic features of anecdotes outlined in the previous section are developed by scholars who worked primarily on the European and American literary traditions, not on the literary tradition of early China. Interestingly, the brief narratives that pervade early Chinese literature share many of these

features, but also diverge from them in important ways. We shall now turn our attention to the early Chinese anecdote. By defining its characteristic features, we hope to contribute to a fuller understanding of the rich potential of anecdotes as a distinct literary form.

Time, Place, and Protagonists

Early Chinese anecdotes can also be described as short, freestanding accounts of single events. The time frame of the anecdote typically corresponds to the duration of the event, possibly with brief references to the lead-up and the outcome of the event. The locales tend to fall within common stereotypes that provide a discrete context (a royal court, battlefield, gateway, river-bank, bridge), though idiosyncratic settings occasionally appear. The *dramatis personae* that participate in the event are few. In the earrings anecdote, translated above, the two main characters are the powerful king and his clever son, both clearly identified to add context and status to the anecdote, with the deceased queen consort and the court ladies as nameless supporting cast. Other anecdotes feature well-known figures from China's extensive past, such as the Duke of Zhou 周公 (r. 1042–1036 BCE), Duke Wen of Jin 晉文公 (r. 636–628 BCE), King Fuchai of Wu 吳王夫差 (r. 495–473 BCE), King Goujian of Yue 越王勾踐 (r. 496–465 BCE), Kongzi 孔子 (551–479 BCE), better known to Western readers as Confucius, and Sunzi 孫子 (ca. 545–470 BCE), also known as Sun Tzu. These actual historical persons fascinated the creators of anecdotes, as well as their readers, all of whom belonged to the literate upper echelons of society. Occasionally the main characters are clearly fictionalized, such as the Confucius character in the *Zhuangzi*, who in some passages espouses teachings that are obviously at odds with how he is portrayed in other texts. In addition to anecdotes about prominent figures, and in stark contrast to anecdotes in other traditions (outlined in the previous section), early Chinese texts also contain numerous anecdotes featuring people who remain unnamed. In most cases, the anecdotes merely characterize the unnamed protagonists and identify the state where they were from. For example, “in Chu there was someone who was skilled at being a thief” 楚有善為偷者 or “among the inhabitants of Song there was one who had obtained jade” 宋人有得玉者. In addition to unnamed people, and in even starker contrast to anecdotes in other traditions, early Chinese anecdotes occasionally portray fictional entities, such as the talking animals, trees, skulls, and personified abstractions (e.g., Bright Dazzlement 光曜 and Non-Existence 無有) made famous in the *Zhuangzi*. In form and function,

anecdotes involving unnamed or even nonhuman protagonists are similar to those involving prominent historical figures. For example, the *Han Feizi* presents an anecdote about an unnamed man of wealth in the state of Song right after an anecdote involving Duke Wu of Zheng 鄭武公 (r. 771–744 BCE), and the text explicitly uses both to exemplify the dangers of speaking one's mind.³⁰ Similarly, the *Huainanzi* sandwiches an anecdote featuring the anthropomorphized entities Gaptooth 齧缺 and Ragbag 被衣 between anecdotes featuring well-known rulers of the state of Zhao 趙 in the fifth century BCE, and it links all three anecdotes to an enigmatic canonical scripture.³¹ In other words, early Chinese authors use one and the same narrative form for short stories involving historical persons, unnamed persons, animals, objects, abstractions, and so on. Just because the main character is not a famous person, or not even a human being at all, does not seem to disqualify these short stories as anecdotes in early Chinese literature. In terms of the *dramatis personae*, early Chinese anecdotes appear to be somewhat more accommodating than their counterparts in other literary traditions, where short stories about unnamed people, animals, and so on, are more likely to be categorized as jokes, fables, and so on, than as anecdotes.

Length

As depictions of single events, depictions that are short enough to be committed to memory and recited aloud in conversation or debate, early Chinese anecdotes tend to be brief. This means that they generally contain no more than a few dozen Chinese graphs, although longer exemplars also exist. Interestingly, even different versions of the same anecdote can range widely in length. For example, the Chinese text of the earrings anecdote related above contains just over a hundred graphs. An alternative version of the same anecdote, presented below, consists of about eighty graphs, while another version presented below, runs less than forty graphs. Importantly, the main story line remains the same across the different accounts, which are clearly recognizable as distinct accounts of one and the same event.

In spite of their relative brevity, early Chinese anecdotes, much like their counterparts in other literary traditions, often have an identifiable beginning (situation or exposition); middle (encounter or crisis), and end (resolution). In the earrings anecdote, for example, the main characters and the problem of finding a new queen consort are introduced at the beginning; the duke's scheme is explained in the middle; and the final part suggests how he successfully gained influence with the king.

Some anecdotes may have been so well-known that even a brief reference was all that was necessary to call up the narrative. A simple reference to Lady Boji of Song 宋伯姬 (6th century BCE), for instance, would call to the minds of an educated audience the tale of a noble widow who chose to die in a fire rather than commit the ritual impropriety of leaving her palace without a proper escort, thus providing an opportunity to debate the deeper moral implications of her actions.³² Should Lady Boji be remembered as a misguided matron who failed to correctly prioritize conflicting moral obligations or should she be commemorated as an exemplary martyr who was willing to die to preserve her purity? Many anecdotes similar to the one about Lady Boji achieved an almost proverbial status, and even today, numerous Chinese sayings typically consisting of four graphs each (such as “the King of Qi spared an ox” 齊王舍牛) function as a shorthand for anecdotes from early China, which truly bespeak their lasting popularity.

Historicity and Factuality

Early Chinese anecdotes typically relate historical events, but they were not necessarily intended or understood as relating events that actually occurred. The anecdotes lie on a “continuum of historicity” ranging from the generally unexceptionable historical examples to more questionable examples, to parables with no pretense of factuality.³³ It is highly unlikely that readers would have considered stories involving talking trees and skulls as real, and even when the main protagonists are historicized figures who share identities with recorded figures from the historical annals of China’s hoary past, and who imbue the tale with an air of historical authenticity, it is not certain that these anecdotes were taken at face value, or even intended to be taken at face value. Authors in early China had different modes of narration at their disposal, and they opted for a different mode when presenting the reader with factual accounts of events.³⁴ So it seems that authors and readers expected the anecdotes to be *potentially* historically accurate, even if they did not believe them to be *actually* factually true. Consequently, anecdotes recount events that are either potentially true (such as the earrings story) or obviously false (such as the stories of talking trees and skulls in the *Zhuangzi*). In sum, similar to anecdotes in other literary traditions, historicity is not the main concern of early Chinese anecdotes, as their value resided elsewhere, for example, in their ability to persuade, instruct, or entertain.³⁵

Variations and Valences

Given the appeal of anecdotes, and their rhetorical, didactic, or entertaining powers, it is not surprising that the same basic anecdote, with variations, appears across a number of texts or in some cases, even within a single text. For example, the earrings anecdote appears not only in the *Han Feizi*, but also in the *Zhanguo*, a collection of anecdotes on warfare and political manipulation in and among the various states that divided China in the Warring States Period 戰國 (453–221 BCE). The *Zhanguo* version reads as follows:

The queen consort of the king of Qi died. There were seven young women who were all close to him. The Duke of Xue wished to discover whom the king desired to install, so he presented the king with seven pairs of earrings, of which one was more beautiful than the others. When he observed the whereabouts of the most beautiful pair of earrings the next day, he urged the king to install [the woman who now wore them] as the new queen consort.

齊王夫人死，有七孺子皆近。薛公欲知王所欲立，乃獻七珥，美其一，明日視美珥所在，勸王立為夫人。³⁶

There are notable differences with the *Han Feizi* version quoted earlier. Only about a third the length of that version, the *Zhanguo* version is more concise and less detailed, as it does not mention the posthumous name of the king, or spell out the thought process of the duke (“If the king heeded his advice . . .”). In addition, the number of favorite court ladies is listed as seven in the *Zhanguo*, as opposed to ten in the *Han Feizi*. It is unclear how much of this is significant. For instance, the different numbers of court ladies could be meaningful, but it could also be a textual variation of little importance, much in the same way that in our own day and age two accounts of the same event will inevitably differ in the details. Similarly, the relative brevity of this version could be meaningful, but it could also be simply due to different literary preferences, eloquently elaborate versus conveniently concise.

That said, variations in anecdotes very often were *not* simply the result of errors in transmission or mere literary preferences. Instead, they were by

design quite deliberate as they enabled the various transmitters of the tale to highlight different aspects of a core story to serve different arguments. These differences—as we show below, and as several chapters in this volume demonstrate—carried significant intellectual valences. They enabled a given anecdote to speak from multiple perspectives depending on its transmitter who operates in a wider web of intellectual and cultural discourse and debate.

Framing Techniques

Framing strategies further distinguished similar anecdotes from one another and served to underscore the different purposes they served in a given text or texts. Whether entertaining, moralistic, or deployed for other rhetorical purposes, anecdotes did not stand on their own, but were part of larger structures of meaning, such as a commentary, an essay, or a debate. In these contexts, various framing techniques served to determine particular readings of the anecdote at hand. This framing worked on several levels—both implicit and explicit—and with varying degrees of narrative complexity.

The earrings anecdote from the *Han Feizi*, translated at the beginning of our essay, provides an apposite example. The anecdote occurs in a series of chapters titled “Chushuo” 儲說 (Collection of Illustrative Examples), in which several political “guidelines” (*jing* 經) are explained through “illustrative examples” (*shuo* 說). The latter mostly consist of series of anecdotes.³⁷ In the case of the earrings anecdote, the chapter is structured as follows:

- Opening statement
- Guideline 1 + references to illustrative examples 1
- Guideline 2 + references to illustrative examples 2
- Guideline 3 + references to illustrative examples 3
- Illustrative examples 1
- Illustrative examples 2
- Illustrative examples 3

The chapter opens with the statement that “there are three methods for a lord to maintain control over his ministers” 君所以治臣者有三. It then briefly outlines these three methods as important guidelines in governance. The second of these guidelines is outlined as follows:

The ruler of humankind is the hub of benefit and harm. The spokes are many, yet they all converge at the ruler. For this reason, if his preferences are revealed, then his subordinates will have a way to get to him, and the ruler will become befuddled; if the words he speaks are circulated widely, then his ministers will challenge his words, and the ruler will no longer be godlike.

人主者，利害之輶轂也。射者眾，故人主共矣。是以好惡見則下有因，而人主惑矣；辭言通則臣難言，而主不神矣。³⁸

This guiding principle warns the ruler not to let his feelings or ideas be known, for otherwise his underlings will challenge his directives, or worse, they will use this knowledge to manipulate him. A list of references to relevant anecdotes follows the description of this guiding principle. It includes the following formulation: “I will shed light on this [guideline] with [the illustrative example of] Master Jingguo’s gift of ten pairs of earrings” 明之以靖郭氏之獻十珥也. Master Jingguo is another name for the Duke of Xue, and hence this formulation is an explicit reference to the anecdote that occurs below in the same chapter. The reference makes it easy for the reader to locate the illustrative anecdote further down in the chapter. In sum, in the *Han Feizi* the earrings anecdote is explicitly marked as an illustrative example in a larger argument that warns the ruler against disclosing his thoughts and feelings.

A different and implicit framing structure informs the version of the earring anecdote in the *Zhanguo*. In that text, chapters are organized by state, and each chapter includes numerous anecdotes relevant to the history of its respective state. The earrings anecdote appears in a series of six linked chapters that tell the history of the state of Qi. The specific chapter in which it occurs focuses on the words and deeds of Lord Jingguo and his son. The earrings anecdote adds substance to the chapter by presenting one episode in the history of Qi, namely the event that followed the demise of the queen consort. The framing of the anecdote, as part of a series of historical anecdotes that focus on the two lords, suggests that the main purpose of the earrings anecdote in this text is historical, as it seeks to reveal the manipulative qualities of Lord Jingguo’s character which informed the rise of this powerful courtier in the state of Qi. However, the historicity of the *Zhanguo* has been questioned since the time of its creation, and scholars nowadays generally agree that the *Zhanguo* is “very unreliable as a history book and was probably never intended to serve as one.”³⁹ Instead, it is often described as a handbook of rhetoric, or a manual of persuasive

speaking.⁴⁰ Still, the text lacks fundamental qualities of a textbook, as Paul R. Goldin suggests, and is perhaps best seen as a collection of anecdotes that illustrate the art of intrigue.⁴¹ The underlying idea of the *Zhanguo*, as outlined by the Han Dynasty compiler of the text, is that enlightened rulers in times of peace transform the populace by serving as models of virtuous behavior. This was not the case in the Warring States Period, the era covered by the *Zhanguo*, when rulers allegedly were no beacons of virtue and the slow process of transforming the population by moral education proved inefficacious in the face of the proliferating crises and emergencies. Only short-term strategies and tactics as methods of expedience would help to maintain stability in those trying times. Therein lies the role of the counselors at the courts, who used schemes and stratagems, tailored for specific crises or emergencies, to assist the benighted rulers of their day. Although no handbook in the strict sense of the word, the *Zhanguo* contains anecdotes that illustrate to counselors what to do or to avoid for their schemes and stratagems to work. The first priority for the counselors is to gain access to the ruler. The clever trick with the earrings is instrumental in this regard, as it points Lord Jingguo to the lady that was most beloved by the king. By promoting that particular lady, he demonstrates that he truly understood the king, which increases his chances that the king would turn to him for advice in the future. Thus, in contrast to the *Han Feizi* where the anecdote serves to warn rulers not to display their likes and dislikes to their underlings, in the *Zhanguo* it provides those underlings with the very tool to influence their ruler.

Yet another framing structure informs the version of the story that occurs in chapter 12, “Daoying” 道應 (Responses of the Way) of the *Huainanzi*, an encyclopedic politico-philosophical treatise that was written under the auspices of Liu An 劉安 (ca. 179–122 BCE), the King of Huainan 淮南王. The *Huainanzi* version reads as follows:

The queen consort of the king of Qi died. The king wanted to appoint a new queen consort but had not yet decided who it would be, so he directed his ministers to deliberate the issue. The Duke of Xue, hoping to discover the king’s choice, presented him with ten pairs of earrings, one of which was especially beautiful. The next morning he asked about the whereabouts of the most beautiful pair of earrings and urged that the woman who now had them should be appointed queen consort. The king of Qi

was delighted by this and thereafter respected and valued the Duke of Xue even more.

Thus, if the intentions and desires of the ruler of humankind are visible on the outside, he will fall subject to the control of his subjects.

Therefore the *Laozi* says, “Block the openings, shut the doors, and all your life you will not labor.”⁴²

齊王后死，王欲置后而未定，使群臣議。薛公欲中王之意，因獻十珥而美其一。旦日，因問美珥之所在，因勸立以為王后。齊王大說，遂尊重薛公。故人主之意欲見於外，則為人臣之所制。故《老子》曰：「塞其兌，閉其門，終身不勤。」⁴³

Here, the earrings story is followed by a brief statement in which the meaning of the story, as understood by Liu An and his collaborators, is made explicit (“if the intentions and desires of the ruler of humankind are visible on the outside . . .”), and another brief statement quoted from the *Laozi* 老子 (Old Master), the foundational scripture of Daoism that was a major source of inspiration for those who created the *Huainanzi*. In and of itself, the *Laozi* quotation is rather enigmatic. What does it mean to “block the openings” or “shut the doors,” and why would the result of these actions be that “all your life you will not labor”? By linking this quotation to the earrings anecdote, the *Huainanzi* suggests that blocking openings and shutting doors are figurative ways of encouraging people to keep their preferences to themselves, and that the phrase “all your life you will not labor” is another way of saying that as a ruler you will stay in power and have others work for you. In other words, the *Huainanzi* uses this anecdote to explain the highly enigmatic *Laozi* in a specific way, but at the same time it uses the *Laozi* to read the anecdote in a specific way. Hence, the anecdote is situated within a formal framing structure: a quotation from an authoritative text or person caps the story and suggests a particular reading of both the cautionary tale and the saying attributed to Laozi. On the one hand, the *Huainanzi* shows what particular anecdotes mean by reference to an authoritative text. On the other hand, it bolsters the authority of that authoritative text by showing that the meanings it contains are prefigured in the fabric of events described by the anecdotes. By linking the two—historical anecdote and canonical quotation—Liu An moreover displays his mastery of both Chinese history and canonical literature, thereby presenting himself as an

authority to his readers, most notably the emperor to whom he presented his work in 139 BCE.⁴⁴

In sum, anecdotes were nested in a variety of framing structures that served different rhetorical purposes. They could range from the relatively simple framings discussed above to highly elaborate narrative tapestries.⁴⁵ The significance of other framing examples will be taken up by several of the chapters included in this volume. Collectively the chapters demonstrate the fruitfulness of a methodology committed to analyzing anecdotes *in situ*, within the very significant framing structures that determine how they are to be read and understood. As we will see, not only does such a methodology reveal the rhetorical functions of anecdotes within given texts and across texts, it also promises to shed new light on the archeology of early Chinese texts, providing insights into the manner in which texts were formed.

Genre

Scholars still disagree, writes Gossman, as to “whether the anecdote can properly be considered a particular form or genre, like the novel, the maxim, or the fable.”⁴⁶ Genre or not, as basic building blocks in much of the prose writing in early China, anecdotes can be seen as a distinct type of writing that is closely linked to several important forms of historical writing and philosophical argumentation. Occupying the liminal space—replete with their panoply of creative potentialities—between history and philosophy, they complement or contrast with these other types of writings in significant ways. In order to gain a better understanding of early Chinese anecdotes as a “genre,” it may be helpful if we sharpen their boundaries by distinguishing them from related types of historical and philosophical writings.

Anecdotes and Historical Genres

Anecdotes in early Chinese texts often feature historical figures as they recount events in Chinese history. Even if their historicity is questionable, anecdotes may be seen as a form of historical writing, and they are clearly related to other historical genres. In this respect, early Chinese anecdotes resemble those in other traditions. For instance, Gossmann notes that anecdotes in the European tradition have “always stood in a close relation to the longer, more elaborate narratives of history, sometimes in a supportive role, as examples and illustrations, sometimes in a challenging role, as the repressed of history.”⁴⁷ The longer historical narratives, preferred in the Euro-

pean tradition, were interspersed with anecdotes as illustrative examples to throw additional light on people or events. That the source of the anecdotes often could not be verified was part of their appeal, as they added color to the elaborate historical narratives that did meet contemporaneous fact-checking standards. Moreover, coming from unofficial sources, they could present an alternative to the “official” historical narratives that may have been stylized to meet certain (moral) standards. Still, their questionable credibility meant that they were often considered of lesser importance, and sometimes looked down upon as mere gossip or hearsay, which explains why their role in the European historiographical tradition remained ancillary to more exalted historical genres.⁴⁸

Whereas anecdotes were considered of lesser importance in historical writings in the European tradition, they occupied a more central position in early Chinese historical writings. In several of his publications, David Schaberg has called attention to the importance of the anecdote within the Chinese historiographical enterprise, asserting that anecdotes were “the basic form of historical narrative—and therefore the basic stuff of historical knowledge itself.”⁴⁹ In Chinese historiography, the anecdote was a very versatile mechanism by which the past could be rendered meaningful. That is to say, alongside other ways of deriving meaning from the past (looking for patterns in long records of events, quantifying developments and trends, etcetera), the “anecdotalization” of historical events and figures made it possible to impregnate each moment in history with discrete meaning. This had both instrumental and normative implications. It was instrumental because it made the past usable as a source of authority (important in an intellectual setting that largely lacked a body of “revealed” precepts). Normative, in that being able to show what the past meant was the chief way of demonstrating control over the past, which in itself had been a touchstone of authority in a Chinese social context since Shang 商 times (ca. 1500–1045 BCE) or before. The *Huainanzi*, as we showed earlier, is a perfect example in that Liu An asserts his authority by linking historical anecdotes to canonical quotations, thereby demonstrating his mastery of both the past and the classics.

As a text that consist mostly of anecdotes strung together without much attention to an overall structure, the *Zhanguoce* that we discussed earlier might be taken to contradict the idea that anecdotes never appear gratuitously. But we would assert that this text is another example of how anecdotes were used as primary historiographical tools in making the past meaningful. Each anecdote lends itself to generating an array of meanings for the event it encapsulates, thus taken together they provide the reader

with a means to decipher what the past signified. This, we suggest, is a key norm distinguishing early Chinese historiography from classical European historicism. Early Chinese historiographers were not determined to uniquely recover the past as it was, but rather were worried that the past had not truly been redeemed from oblivion unless one could read some meaning in it. They were not horrified by the prospect that the past could be understood to have multifarious and divergent meanings, as long as it could be demonstrated to have meant *something*.

Given the historiographical significance of anecdotes, it should come as no surprise that they are closely associated with various types of historical writings. A survey of the historical writings of early China presents an interesting mix of historical forms from the *Shangshu* 尚書 (Ancient Documents) and *Chunqiu* to the *Shiji*, *Hanshu*, and later dynastic histories. With their associated anecdotes, each served a particular historical function and fueled a particular dimension of the early Chinese historical and historiographical enterprise as vehicles for historical preservation, reflection, recollection, remembrance, and imagination. As various chapters in this volume demonstrate, distinguishing the different forms and objectives of historical writings provides an important context for clarifying the boundaries between history and anecdote, as well as understanding their differing rhetorical functions.

Arguably the most famous historical treatise of early China is the *Shangshu*, also known as the *Shujing* 書經 (Book of Documents). Revered as one of the Five Classics of Chinese literature, it predominantly narrates the pronouncements of important figures from the (mythical) beginning of Chinese history up to the seventh century BCE. Tradition holds that materials that were not used in the compilation of the *Shangshu* were collected in the *Yi Zhou shu* 逸周書 (Remaining Zhou Documents), a compendium of documents on the history of the Zhou Dynasty up to the sixth century BCE.⁵⁰ These two texts were long seen as the main, if not the only, representations of what we would call a “documentary” (*shu* 書) mode of historical writing. Recently procured bamboo slip manuscripts that date from the Warring States Period, now in the collection of Qinghua (Tsinghua) University 清華大學, contain texts that present-day researchers have identified as resembling the aforementioned texts.⁵¹ It thus appears that this “documentary mode” was not restricted to the *Shangshu* and *Yi Zhou shu*, but employed more widely in early China and may even be seen as a distinct genre of writing. In her seminal article on this topic, Sarah Allan sets out to define this genre as “any text, which claims to be a contemporaneous record

of a speech of an ancient king.”⁵² As a contemporaneous record of direct speech, it “demands an acceptance of historical authenticity: this is not a historical record or an interpretation. There is no intermediary: it is what kings and ministers actually said.”⁵³ It is precisely in this feature of contemporaneousness that documentary narratives differ from other forms of historical writings, including anecdotes: the latter typically make no pretense of being contemporaneous records (as indicated, for instance, by the fact that protagonists in anecdotes are often referred to by their posthumous name). Although documentary and anecdotal types of writing transmit information concerning the past, they do so differently, as the former endeavor to “remember and preserve” while the latter seek to “recollect and reflect,” as Rens Krijgsman observes in his contribution to this volume.

A different type of historical narrative can be found in the *Chunqiu*, another one of the Five Classics of early China. The term *chunqiu* 春秋, which literally means “spring and autumn,” marks the passage of time and was used in the titles of chronicles compiled under the auspices of the rulers of the various states that divided China during the Zhou Dynasty. To date, only the *Chunqiu* from the state of Lu 魯 survives. This *Chunqiu* is a terse court chronicle of events in the state of Lu from 722 to 481 BCE. Its brief chronological entries record a very limited range of significant state events such as military actions, diplomatic meetings and treaties, deaths and funerals in the ruling family and of high officials, rituals and sacrifices, battles, invasions, and events that affected crops such as floods, frost, and pestilence, and astronomical phenomena. No attempt is made to attribute cause or motive, or describe the attitudes, thoughts, or feelings of the historical figures recorded. Moreover, historical figures are mentioned by state and title or kinship to the ruling house devoid of further description.⁵⁴ Here is a typical *Chunqiu* entry for the year 668 BCE, or the twenty-sixth year in the reign of Duke Zhuang of Lu 魯莊公 (r. 693–662 BCE) translated in accordance with the *Gongyangzhuan* commentary:

Twenty-sixth year. Spring. The lord attacked the Rong.

Summer. The lord returned from the Rong attack.

Cao put to death its great officers.

Autumn. The lord joined men from Song and men from Qi and attacked Xu.

Winter. Twelfth month. *Guibai* day. First day of the month.
There was a solar eclipse.

二十有六年，春，公伐戎。夏，公至自伐戎。曹殺其大夫。秋，公會宋人，齊人，伐徐。冬，十有二月，癸亥，朔，日有食之。⁵⁵

As this example shows, entries in the *Chunqiu* are extremely terse. Events that must have had a dramatic impact in real life, such as the invasion of another state, are here compressed into single sentences, one after the other without explanation or illustration. Such terse statements are not exclusive to the *Chunqiu* from the state of Lu. For instance, Mengzi 孟子 (Mencius) remarks that the states of Jin 晉 and Chu 楚 had texts similar to the *Chunqiu* from Lu.⁵⁶ These texts did not survive, but several early Chinese manuscripts that have recently surfaced, such as the *Biannianji* 編年記 (Record of Sequential Years) and the *Xinian* 繫年 (Sequence of Years), contain similar terse annalistic statements, which means that we can probably speak of an “annalistic” (*chunqiu* 春秋) mode of historical writing.⁵⁷ The historical aims of the dry and formulaic annalistic mode differed markedly from the documentary mode discussed above. Whereas documentary narratives purport to be contemporaneous accounts of speeches by kings, annalistic records contain no speech and do not purport to be contemporaneous. The latter also differs markedly from the anecdotal type of narrative. Annalistic histories have no identifiable didactic or literary value—salient features of anecdotes—and reading the terse chronicle entries “is no more intellectually or esthetically engaging than reading a telephone book,” as Yuri Pines wittily remarks in his contribution to this volume. Although anecdotes can be sharply distinguished from annalistic records, they do play a role in the three famous commentaries associated with the *Chunqiu*, as the *Zuo*, *Gongyang*, and *Guliang* commentarial traditions all deploy anecdotes as a hermeneutic strategy to reflect upon the meaning and significance of the historical events and figures at hand. Indeed, the richly textured anecdote constituted a literary form well-adapted to fill out the terse and laconic entries of the *Chunqiu*, as Sarah A. Queen demonstrates in her contribution to this volume. In fact, these commentaries, particularly the *Zuozhuan*, which stands as the most important source of many later anecdotes, can be said to form the beginning of the Chinese anecdotal tradition.

The distinct historical aims and literary forms of writings in the documentary and annalistic modes clearly set them apart not only from each other, but also from later historical writings such as the biographies (*zhuan*