



RESEARCH ARTICLE

Textuality and Performance: Citations of Personal Literary Collections in Liu Xiaobiao's Annotations to *Shishuo Xinyu*

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Shishuo xinyu is a collection of anecdotes about prominent historical figures of the Eastern Han, Wei, and Jin periods (ca. 3rd-4th centuries CE). Its contents are concerned with social discourse, and have often been analyzed in relation to the practice of character evaluation among the Wei-Jin elite. Several decades after its completion, *Shishuo xinyu* was expanded with a lengthy commentary by the Liang (502-557) scholar Liu Xiaobiao (462-521), in which Liu annotates the text with excerpts from nearly five hundred other works. This study focuses on the seventeen instances in which Liu cites the contents of the personal literary collections (*bieji* 別集) of individuals who appear as characters in *Shishuo xinyu* anecdotes, a sample of Liu's annotations which highlights the role literary compositions play in *Shishuo xinyu*'s narratives of character evaluation. I argue that these annotations contribute to the base text an interest in the literary and material properties of written texts that is at times quite different from *Shishuo xinyu*'s interest in conversation and embodied performances. This pronounced interest in the textuality of social exchange and character evaluation not only changes the reader's perspective on the base text, it also reflects literary and scholastic concerns specific to the manuscript culture of the Southern Dynasties period in which Liu Xiaobiao lived.

《世說新語》彙集了東漢至魏晉時期士人的軼事趣聞，並記錄了魏晉名士的言行風貌。在《世說》成書數十年後，梁朝學者劉孝標為其作註。劉註長期以來被學界視為中國中古時期目錄學的重要資料來源。本文通過分析劉註中十七次引用《世說》人物所撰的別集，探討這些文學作品如何擴展《世說》人物風評的敘事。研究表明，劉註對文本性和文學性注入了更強的關注，這與《世說》原文重在記錄人物言行的取向形成了對比。此外，劉註對人物風評別集的引用，不僅改變了讀者解讀《世說》原文的視角，還反映了在劉孝標所處的南朝手稿文化特有的文學和學術意涵。

Keywords: *Shishuo xinyu*, Liu Xiaobiao, Manuscript culture, Personal literary collections, Southern Dynasties literature, history

關鍵詞： 世說新語，劉孝標，手稿文化，別集，南朝文學，史

Most scholarly editions of the fifth-century anecdote collection *Shishuo xinyu* 世說新語 (*A New Account of Tales of the World*) contain the annotations added to the text by Liu Xiaobiao 劉孝標 (aka Liu Jun 劉峻, 462–521). These annotations more than double the length of the text, and offer crucial assistance decoding *Shishuo xinyu*'s often confounding references to the same historical figures with multiple epithets, nicknames, and titles. But the annotations are not just explanatory notes: They complicate *Shishuo xinyu*'s representations of historical figures by quoting from nearly 500 other sources, which often greatly expand and even contradict the anecdotes to which they are appended.

The potential for Liu Xiaobiao's scholarship to supplement and correct errors in *Shishuo xinyu* was acknowledged early on, with Tang scholar Liu Zhiji 劉知幾 (661–721) noting the way the annotations “pluck out the faults and illuminate the falsifications” (摘其瑕疵，偽跡昭然) of the text (ST, 17.446). In doing so, and by mentioning the text at all in his sweeping historiographic critique, he also presumes that the reason one would consult *Shishuo xinyu* would be for its potential to provide historical knowledge. And yet, Liu Zhiji remains critical of the annotated *Shishuo xinyu*. He chastises Liu Xiaobiao for using such a flawed work as the foundation for his scholarship. Rather than annotate a work of history proper like *Hanshu* 漢書 or *Shiji* 史記, he “became attached to petty tales told in winding alleyways, narrowing his focus on a trivial and vulgar work.” (留情於委巷小說，銳思於流俗短書) (ST, 5.123). For Liu Zhiji, the problem is not with the annotations, but with the text they are appended to.

Translator Richard Mather notes, “The writing of history seems not to have been the intention of the author” of the text (Mather 2002, xiii). Jack W. Chen similarly points out that the text “is not actually interested in historiographic representation” of the same sort that can be seen in works of standard historiography (Chen 2021, 9). If we accept that *Shishuo xinyu* is not a work of traditional historiography, and yet do not simply dismiss it as the work of a bad, unorthodox historian, what is it? The text is long and idiosyncratic — this is not a question that can be answered quickly and comprehensively. Mather stresses how the anecdotes, fictionalised or embellished as they may be, highlight the contrast between historical figures who displayed contrasting ideals of “naturalness and conformity”, and that the text tends to endorse the former, those whose actions and words exhibit “peace, tranquility, withdrawal, freedom, and unconventionality” (Mather 2002, xviii). Others have stressed the way the characters in the text embody these traits, and the way they are narrated and described. Nanxiu Qian explains, “Most episodes focus not so much on recounting the details or progression of an event as on capturing the emotional and personal characteristics of the participants,” and notes the way this interest in emotion and personality is also reflected in the titles of the text's thirty-six chapters (Qian 2015, 296). Chen elaborates on the way this structure highlights what the hundreds of characters who appear in it have in common, creating an inventory of traits shared across members of elite society in the early medieval period (Chen 2021, 13–14). He also connects the text's interest in personality types to the early medieval practice of character evaluation. This practice informed bureaucratic appointments and promotions and, perhaps more importantly, also greatly affected one's social standing. Such evaluations were made on the basis of talent for conversation and rhetorical performance: talent for debate, wit, and, indeed, even the ability to evaluate the performance of others eloquently and succinctly could greatly affect one's reputation within what Chen refers to as the “ongoing community of

conversation” (Chen 2021, 17). *Shishuo xinyu*, then, does not just document historical evidence about the individuals who participated in this community. Rather, it manifests a representation of the community itself, and presents it as a multi-generational network that connects the past to the present. The focus of the text on traits and talents demonstrates a shared set of rhetorical techniques and discursive practices. Its organisation into chapters based on these traits – and not according to chronology or geography – allows this community to transcend time and space.

Liu Xiaobiao’s annotations fill in the ephemeral moments captured in *Shishuo xinyu* anecdotes with voluminous additional information. Though these annotations push the text closer to what Liu Zhiji and other medieval readers might have recognized as historiographic, this is not all they do. Rather than using the annotations to transform *Shishuo xinyu* into something it is not, the goal of this study is to think through the ways in which Liu Xiaobiao’s notes work with the text, enhancing and augmenting a reading of the text as an extended engagement with the dynamics of social performance and character evaluation. In the long history of scholarship on Liu’s annotations, many have concentrated on their bibliographic value, studying how they preserve information about countless texts that would have otherwise been lost, a practice which largely disassociates the contents of the annotations from the anecdotes to which they are appended.¹ Others, such as contemporary scholar Qin Zhen, have shown that there is great value in reading the annotations in context, as they often provide details that are fundamental to understanding the nature of the rhetorical performances captured in the base text (Qin 2017). My study of the annotations is in some ways a continuation of this project, closely examining the contents of individual annotations in relation to the anecdotes to which they are appended. Here I aim to showcase instances in which these anecdotes do not just provide helpful information, but actually draw the reader in to the text’s engagement with social performance and character evaluation, allowing the reader to participate in the same acts of discernment and evaluation performed by the historical figures who appear in the pages of *Shishuo xinyu*.

To do so, I focus on a narrow cross-section of Liu’s annotations, those which quote directly from the collected literary writings (*bieji* 別集) of historical figures. Most of the other texts Liu cites in his annotations are narrative historiography.² That is to say, the annotations expand the base text of *Shishuo xinyu* by quoting from what we may call “secondary sources”: biographies, dynastic histories, and other materials composed “after the fact” by historians or, perhaps, the family members or associates of the individuals they describe. These narrative sources include alternative versions of the *Shishuo xinyu* anecdotes to which they are appended, but also other information and stories. Citations from *bieji* are distinctive for the way they use “primary source” content, that is, texts presented as the compositions of those who appear as characters in *Shishuo xinyu* anecdotes. These quotations often grant the reader access to compositions that are either briefly quoted or alluded to within the anecdotes themselves. While distinct from many texts Liu cites, citations of *bieji* are not unique: some of the narrative historiographic sources Liu quotes may themselves quote literary compositions, and Liu occasionally also

¹ On the earliest examples of this practice, see Nicoll-Johnson 2018, 220–222.

² For an overview of texts Liu cites, see Zhao 2013; For a “distant reading” of some patterns in Liu’s citation practice, see Nicoll-Johnson 2018, esp. 230–239.

quotes individual literary compositions, such as a *fu* 賦 or *shi* 詩, without indicating whether it came from a *bieji* or any other container text. Moreover, as we shall see, the *bieji* Liu cites also contained biographical details about the authors whose works they collect. My focus on *bieji* citations is thus not intended to suggest that Liu uses this small corpus to do something radically different from his other annotations. Rather, this small group of citations may be considered a representative sample of Liu's annotations, but one which highlights the role literary compositions play in *Shishuo xinyu*'s "community of conversation". Although my first goal is to demonstrate how these excerpts draw the reader into this community, I also argue that the annotations' focus on textuality is transformative. As Cheng Yu-yu has noted, the anecdotes of *Shishuo xinyu* are intensely concerned with the details of embodied physical performance. They capture not only speech and conversation, but also gesture, facial expression, and physical activity, with narrative description serving to represent the ephemeral details of embodied performance not captured through dialogue alone (Cheng 2006). By shifting the readers' focus away from these details of embodied performance towards textual matters, and by drawing attention to the important function of reading and material texts elided in the base anecdotes, Liu's annotations encourage a very different form of evaluative practice.

I will begin with an overview of all citations of personal literary collections in Liu's annotations, which will also provide the opportunity to describe the way these annotations draw from both the literary compositions contained within the collections as well as their prefaces and other paratexts. The next section focuses on the most common form of literary collection citation, in which a lengthy excerpt from a composition is quoted in order to provide the reader access to a text that is referred to within an anecdote. Some anecdotes not only refer to literary texts, they also dramatise the act of composition, or otherwise describe the activity of writing. The next section focuses on these cases. Here I demonstrate that, by granting readers access to more information about the texts at the centre of each anecdote, Liu's annotations reverse the relationship between text and commentary, transforming *Shishuo xinyu* anecdotes into supplemental comments on the literary pieces themselves. In the final section, I turn my attention to the clearest examples of the annotations' pronounced interest in textuality in contrast to *Shishuo xinyu*'s focus on orality and physicality: cases where the annotations illuminate the role of textual compositions and exchanges in events that *Shishuo xinyu* represents as embodied performances or oral exchanges.

Text and Paratext: Personal Literary Collections as Sources of Biographical Information

Liu Xiaobiao refers to seventeen personal literary collections throughout his annotations to *Shishuo xinyu*. Although these texts would now be referred to as *bieji*, the word *bieji* itself does not appear in the annotations. Instead, these texts are identifiable as such thanks to a simple, consistently applied naming format: Liu labels each such text he cites with the name of the person whose writings it contains, followed by the word *ji* 集 ("collection"). Liu sometimes provides both family name (*xing* 姓) and

personal name (*ming* 名), but in most cases his citations provide only the personal name (*ming* 名). These abbreviated references are intelligible only because in each case the full name of the person appears in the text preceding the citation of the collection, whether in another of Liu's annotations or in the text of the anecdote to which it is appended. This is an important reminder that these annotations are meant to be read in the context of the anecdotes to which they are appended.

For simplicity's sake, I will refer to the individuals whose writings are gathered in these collections as their "authors." But these figures were not necessarily the authors of all writing that appears in these collections, nor can we presume them to have been responsible for their compilation and editing. In fact, many of Liu's citations of literary collections do not quote literary pieces by the "authors" of each collection, but biographical details *about* such authors, and other metatextual details about the literary pieces themselves. The annotations make this distinction explicit. They will indicate, for example, that they are drawing from the "preface" (*xu* 叙) to a collection before quoting it, and will similarly identify either the title or the genre of the piece when quoting from one of the "author's" writings. Although *xu* is used most frequently, annotations also refer to contents labelled *xu* 序 and *lu* 錄. These are likely to have referred to different paratexts. For example, one citation of the literary collection of Xi Kang refers to its *xu* 序, while another refers to its *xu* 叙, suggesting two different paratexts contained within the same collection. But the portions of these paratexts that are cited all contain biographical details about the "authors" of their collections, or other historical information about the pieces they contain. The presence of these additional components has been confirmed in other studies of *bieji* history, which have also shown that the writing of these paratexts were often closely related to the composition of biographies in dynastic histories (Zhao 2019). I use the term "paratext" as a collective reference to all such materials to distinguish them from the "contents" of each collection, that is, the texts that we can understand to have been composed by the authors of these collections.

Shishuo xinyu annotations cite biographical details from the paratexts of literary collections of five authors: Xi Kang 嵇康 (ca. 223–ca. 262), Xiahou Zhan 夏侯湛 (243–291), Cai Hong 蔡洪, Liu Jin 劉瑾, and Gao Rou 高柔. While Xi Kang is one of the most famous poets of the era, and Xiahou Zhan is also known from several other historiographic sources, the other three are today very obscure. In Xi Kang's case, both *Sanguo zhi* 三國志 (Record of the Three Kingdoms) and *Shishuo xinyu* annotations quote from paratexts to his literary collection alongside a variety of other literary and biographical material, creating a confusing and often contradictory account of Xi Kang's life. This has been the subject of much scholarship, as has the study of the transmission of his literary works to the present.³ For Cai Hong, Liu Jin, and Gao Rou, the problem is not the abundance of contradictory biographical sources, but the opposite: these fragments are the only known sources of biographies for each of these three figures.

The citations from Xiahou Zhan's collection, which will be discussed in greater detail below, suggest that Liu Xiaobiao would have cited other sources of general biographical information if they were available to him. Liu's annotations quote a short biographical narrative about Xiahou Zhan from

³ See, for example, Liu 2018, Chan 1996, and Cui 1999.

Wenshi zhuan 文士傳 (“Biographies of litterateurs”), a collection of biographical narratives he cites frequently throughout the annotations, immediately before quoting additional biographical details from the preface to Xiahou Zhan’s literary collection (SSXY 4.71).⁴ Other annotations demonstrate that Liu Xiaobiao had access to dozens of other historiographic works, including dynastic histories, collections of biographies, and independently circulated biographies of individuals (*biezhuan* 別傳). It is thus likely that biographical data for Cai Hong, Liu Jin, and Gao Rou was scarce even in Liu Xiaobiao’s time, necessitating the use of these paratexts for even basic biographical details. Even so, the particular biographical details quoted from these paratexts relate to the contents of the anecdotes to which they are appended. The paratexts are thus likely to have contained other information, but because Liu Xiaobiao did not find it relevant to any of their appearances in *Shishuo xinyu*, it has been lost.

The biographical details contained in the paratexts to literary collections are not always directly related to literary composition, but each detail Liu cites is always relevant to the anecdote to which it is appended. The information provided about Liu Jin, for example, is genealogical, but provides details that allow readers to understand relationships among figures only alluded to in the base anecdote (SSXY 9.87). Occasionally, citations illuminate social relationships affirmed through textual composition, in addition to providing biographical detail relevant to figures who appear in anecdotes. This is the case for Gao Rou. All surviving biographical details derive from the citation of a paratext of his literary collection in *Shishuo xinyu* annotations. The collection is cited in the annotations to an anecdote in which Gao Rou’s failure to receive a positive response for any of the numerous memorials he has submitted is blamed on the fact that he has taken up residence far from the capital and lacks a high-ranking title (SSXY 26.13).

The biographical details from the paratext confirm his estrangement and eventual return to the public sphere. The most fascinating detail in this annotation, however, is not biographical, but bibliographic: the quotation clarifies that the preface to Gao Rou’s collection was written by Sun Tong 孫統 (fl. 4th cent.), the brother of the relatively well-known poet Sun Chuo 孫綽 (314–371). This kind of information, about who was actually responsible for compiling a literary collection, is rare. *Sanguo zhi* and its annotations provide examples of collections personally compiled by their authors, as well as Chen Shou’s role in compiling a collection of Zhuge Liang’s writings long after the latter’s death (Li 2014). It is also known that several versions of Tao Yuanming’s 陶淵明 (365–427) collected writings circulated in the early medieval period, and that prefaces were drafted for two of these posthumously created collections by their compilers, Yang Xiuzhi 楊休之 (509–582) and Xiao Tong 蕭統 (501–531) (Tian 2005, 10; 209; 289). Gao Rou’s own dates of birth and death are not known, but details in *Shishuo xinyu* confirm that he was a contemporary of Sun Tong. In this anecdote he is discussed as a contemporary by Xie Shang 謝尚 (308–357), and in his only other appearance in the text, he converses with Sun Chuo. Whether Sun Tong was also responsible for compiling Gao Rou’s collection,

⁴ Citations of *Shishuo xinyu* refer to the chapter number and number of the anecdote in sequence within that chapter across all standard editions. References to details contained only in a single edition or translation of SSXY will cite that edition. All translations are my own but have been made with reference to Mather 2002. I will note where my interpretations differ significantly from Mather’s in footnotes.

and whether this occurred during Gao Rou's lifetime or shortly after his death, cannot be known. But this incidental reference to Sun Tong as author of the preface to his collection confirms that such pieces could be composed by an author's contemporaries. This also suggests that, like obituaries, letters, and other social genres, the composition of a preface offered another way to perform and solidify social bonds.

In this particular case, Sun Tong's role as author of the paratext of Gao Rou's literary collection also casts Gao Rou's conversation with Sun Chuo in a new light. In another anecdote, Sun Chuo writes a text that articulates his commitment to living as a recluse and describes building a rural estate in Zhejiang, and spending time tending to a pine tree there. Gao Rou appears again in this anecdote. He chides Sun Chuo, observing that the pine tree may be "elegant and charming" (楚楚可憐), but it will never be sturdy enough to be useful as a pillar or beam (SSXY 2.84). Not only can Gao Rou's comments on the pine tree be interpreted as a jab at Sun Chuo's decision to live as a recluse rather than making himself useful to the state, Yu Jiayi has observed that he may have chosen his words deliberately, to call to mind the name of Sun Chu 孫楚 (d. 293), Sun Chuo's grandfather (Yu 1984, 141). As Mather notes, Gao Rou's own reluctance to be of use to the state already renders this criticism somewhat less cutting (Mather 2002, 73). But the added detail of the presumably amicable relationship between Gao Rou and Sun Chuo's brother Sun Tong offers additional encouragement for readers to treat this exchange as light-hearted mockery rather than genuine contempt.

Although the biographical details cited from the paratext of Gao Rou's literary collection are immediately relevant to his appearances in *Shishuo xinyu* anecdotes, it is also worth noting why such details were recorded in the paratext of his literary collection in the first place. The excerpt quoted in the annotations to this anecdote focuses on the fact that Gao Rou was able to live contentedly in his estrangement from the capital thanks to the company of his wife, a beautiful and erudite daughter of the Huwu 胡毋 family. It goes on to explain that when Gao Rou finally did leave for the capital, the two sent letters to one another that were "elegant and touching" (清婉辛切) (SSXY 26.13). This suggests that the letters had reached a broader audience, and perhaps even that this preface was written to explain the presence of these letters in Gao Rou's literary collection. The citation of these details in connection to this anecdote, however, gives them the new purpose of justifying Gao Rou's refusal to leave home, presenting his apparent reclusion and lack of ambition in a more sympathetic context.

Engaging the Reader in the Evaluation Process

Citations from the literary collections of Liu Jin and Gao Rou are appended to anecdotes which do not even mention, let alone quote from, texts composed by their authors. This is not the case for most other citations from literary collections in Liu's *Shishuo xinyu* annotations. In the majority of such cases, literary collections are cited to provide longer excerpts or summaries of pieces that are mentioned or quoted in brief in *Shishuo xinyu* anecdotes. Space does not permit full consideration of all such cases, but two examples will help to demonstrate the way they invite readers to participate in the

process of evaluation. Xiahou Zhan's literary collection is cited in the annotations to a *Shishuo xinyu* anecdote that concerns the evaluation of a set of poems he composed, but which does not actually quote these poems (SSXY 4.71). In the anecdote, Pan Yue 潘岳 (247–300) praises Xiahou Zhan's attempts to “recreate” the poems from the *Classic of Poetry* (*Shi jing* 詩經) that had been lost long before his lifetime.⁵ The same event is also described in Xiahou Zhan's *Jinshu* biography (JS 55.1491–1499). The details quoted from the paratext of Xiahou Zhan's literary collection elaborate on his efforts to “complete” the *Classic of Poetry*, listing the titles of the poems and explaining that Xiahou Zhan's compositions were collectively referred to as his “Zhou poems” 周詩, which is what they are called in this anecdote.⁶ An additional annotation quotes one of the poems of the set in its entirety.⁷ When Xiahou Zhan's *Jinshu* biography addresses his composition of the “Zhou poems”, it does so only by recounting Pan Yue's admiration of them in a passage that closely follows the *Shishuo xinyu* anecdote (JS 55.1499). The two excerpts from Xiahou Zhan's collection are thus the oldest extant source of this information.

Both *Shishuo xinyu* and *Jinshu* are interested in Xiahou Zhan's “Zhou poems” only for their ability to elicit praise from Pan Yue. His comments are the true focus of this anecdote, the poems themselves serving merely as their inciting incident. The nature of Pan Yue's praise is also important, as it treats the poem as a conduit to understanding Xiahou Zhan's personal character. Pan Yue exclaims that Xiahou Zhan's poetry is “Not merely gentle and elegant — it also reveals a nature of filial and fraternal concern” (非徒溫雅，乃別見孝悌之性).⁸ Liu Xiaobiao's annotations return the focus to Xiahou Zhan's literary creations. The inclusion of the poem allows the reader to become the evaluator. With access to the text of this piece, not only can readers appraise Xiahou Zhan's composition and see for ourselves the personal qualities it calls to mind, we can also evaluate the merits of Pan Yue's evaluation.

Even in anecdotes in which written texts appear, *Shishuo xinyu* still tends to focus on the ephemeral, embodied aspects of textuality, by examining the ways literary texts are composed, recited by their authors, and received by their audiences. In these cases, the annotations again recentre readers' attention on the more durable presence of the text itself. This is certainly the case in a brief anecdote found in the “Speech and Conversation” (“Yan yu” 言語) chapter of *Shishuo xinyu* (SSXY 2.72). In it, Wang Tanzhi 王坦之 (330–375) requests a debate between the historians Fu Tao 伏滔 (fl. 364) and Xi Zuochi 習鑿齒 (d. 384?) on the topic of the historical figures of their respective home regions,

⁵ On discussions of these poems in other texts, see Rusk 2012, 42–43, 99.

⁶ While other citations of paratexts treat *xu* as part of the text's title, e.g. *Hong ji lu yue* 洪集錄曰, “the *lu* of [Cai] Hong's *ji* says...”, this citation reads “Zhan's collection contains their *xu*, which says...” 湛集載其敘曰. But the *qi* 其 here is somewhat ambiguous—this could thus either be a preface written specifically for the Zhou poems, or the preface to Xiahou Zhan's collection in its entirety.

⁷ This annotation does not cite Xiahou Zhan's collection by name, reporting instead only “*qi shi yue*” 其詩曰, which could be interpreted as referring to “a poem [from his aforementioned collection] says...”, “a poem [of Xiahou Zhan] says...” or “a poem [from the aforementioned Zhou poems] says...”

⁸ Mather (2002, 138) reads the first part of this comment as a critique of the potential derivativeness of imitative poems such as these: “These are no vain rewarmings of the ‘Court Songs’.”

Qingzhou 青州 and Chu 楚. When their arguments and rebuttals are complete, Wang Tanzhi presents the essays to Han Kangbo 韓康伯 (d. ca. 385), and asks for his thoughts. Han Kangbo at first says nothing. When asked why he has nothing to say, he remarks, “There is no one to endorse, and no one to reject” (無可無不可).⁹ Here again the focus is on the evaluation of the text rather than the text itself. In this case, *Shishuo xinyu* showcases Han’s diplomatic, if enigmatic, response, which can be appreciated even without any information about the debate he is evaluating. Nevertheless, the annotations draw from Fu Tao’s collection to provide a lengthy summary of both sides of the debate. Even in abbreviated form, the annotation is several hundred characters long, many times longer than the anecdote. As in other cases, this allows readers to participate in the evaluation. Here, there are even more layers of evaluation, because the debate itself turns out also to involve character evaluation, in which the names and accomplishments of dozens of historical figures are marshalled in order to advocate for the superiority of each historian’s own region. Readers of the excerpt can draw their own conclusions about the relative merits of the figures listed and use them to evaluate the quality of each participant’s response as a whole. In so doing, they may also judge whether Han Kangbo’s response is appropriate. But, perhaps most importantly, the overwhelming length of the cited text creates a contrast with Han Kangbo’s spoken response that makes its piercing brevity stand out all the more, making it clear that the debate’s true victor is neither Fu Tao nor Xi Zuochi, but Han Kangbo. By granting readers access to portions of the text that *Shishuo xinyu* mentions but does not reveal, the annotation only enhances the impressively succinct and witty oral performance that is the centrepiece of the anecdote.

Scenes of Composition and Recitation

Two additional anecdotes not only allude to texts quoted in the annotations, but also dramatise the composition of these literary works. In the first of these two, literary composition is itself a social activity, and the evaluation of the piece and its author begins before the writing is finished. In it, Huan Wen 桓溫 (312–373) commissions Yuan Hong 袁宏 (ca. 328–ca. 376) to compose a piece on his campaign in the north (SSXY 4.92). Yuan Hong completes a draft, then shows it to Huan Wen and a few others. Though all are moved by the composition, Wang Xun 王珣 (349–400), a member of the audience, remarks that it could be improved with the addition of a pair of lines that ended with the

⁹ Han Kangbo’s response is challenging to interpret and translate because it makes use of a passage of *The Analects* whose original context demands a different reading. In *The Analects* 18.8, Confucius distinguishes himself from historical figures who made decisions based on fixed moral principles, opting instead to remain flexible. Thus in Arthur Waley’s translation *wu ke wu bu ke* 無可無不可 becomes “I have no ‘thou shalt’ or ‘thou shalt not.’” (Waley 1989, 222). Han seems to be using it simply to comment on a situation in which neither a positive nor a negative response can be made.

word *xie* 寫 (“express”), to continue the rhyme scheme of the previous lines. Yuan Hong begins immediately, grabbing a brush and extemporaneously composing the final two lines, complete with the requested final word.

The first of two passages appended to this anecdote in the annotations cites several lines of the piece from Yuan Hong’s literary collection, including the two lines added at Wang Xun’s request:

I have heard in legends passed down, it is said that the Lin was captured in this field.¹⁰ / A numinous creature whose birth portends good fortune, how could its corpse have been given to the warden? / I lament the anguished tears of Confucius, which were truly anguished and not feigned. / How could a single creature be worthy of such pain? / Indeed, this pain was felt on behalf of all the world. / Emotions endlessly stir in my mind, facing the flow of the wind I express them alone.

聞所聞於相傳，云獲麟於此野。誕靈物以瑞德，奚授體於虞者。悲尼父之慟泣，似實慟而非假。豈一物之足傷，實致傷於天下。感不絕於余心，溯流風而獨寫。

The added *xie* 寫 rhymes with words ending each of the preceding couplets.¹¹ And yet, the couplet that precedes it feels conclusive enough to have marked the original end of the stanza. Providing the entire passage allows readers to judge whether the added euphony justifies the addition.

A citation of an alternative version of this anecdote appears immediately after the passage from the piece itself.¹² This version preserves the same conclusion – the quickly improvised addition of a new pair of lines – but changes nearly everything that leads up to this event. While *Shishuo xinyu* mentions only Yuan Hong, Huan Wen, and Wang Xun, this version also places Fu Tao at the scene, and even has Huan Wen instruct Fu Tao to read Yuan Hong’s composition. From there, the alternative version continues to deviate from the *Shishuo xinyu* text:

Yuan Hong once sat with Wang Xun and Fu Tao in attendance upon Huan Wen. Wen ordered Tao to read his poem. Upon reaching the line “Indeed, this pain was felt on behalf of all the world,” the rhyme changed. He [Huan Wen?] said, “The profundity of what you have recited in this stanza shall last a thousand years. Now, the rhyme shifts after ‘all the world’, but what it is conveying (*xie song* 寫送) seems to have not yet been completed.” Fu Tao then

¹⁰ The capture of the mythical Lin 麟, typically translated as “unicorn,” refers to the final event chronicled in the *Spring and Autumn Annals*, signifying both Confucius’ completion of the text as well as his sorrow at the appearance and capture of the creature. Although thought to appear as an omen foretelling the rise of a great ruler, the injury and capture of the creature causes Confucius to conclude that there is no such golden age to come.

¹¹ The rhyme is apparent in reconstructed Middle Chinese (MC): *ye* 野 (MC yaeX), *zhe* 者 (MC tsyaeX), *jià* 假 (MC kaeX), *xia* 下 (MC haeX), and *xie* 寫 (MC sjæX). MC pronunciation drawn from Kroll, *A Student’s Dictionary of Classical Chinese*.

¹² The text credits this version to *Jin yangqiu* 晉陽秋 (“Annals of the Jin”), attr. Sun Sheng 孫盛 (302–373), but this is likely an error. *Jin yangqiu* documented events of the Jin dynasty only up to the reign of Emperor Ai 晉哀帝 (r. 361–365) (SS 33.958). Huan Wen’s campaign to the north occurred in 370. An annotation to an earlier portion of this anecdote cites the sequel to this text, *Xu Jin yangqiu* 續晉陽秋 (“Continued Annals of the Jin”), compiled by Tan Daoluan 檀道鸞 (fl. 5th cent.); it is likely that this citation also refers to this text, rather than the *Jin Yangqiu* of Sun Sheng.

remarked, “The addition of a line ending with ‘express’ (*xie* 寫) would perhaps be a slight improvement.” Lord Huan said to Hong, “Sir, try to think of a way to add this!” Hong immediately added the lines, and Wang and Fu both proclaimed their excellence.

宏嘗與王珣、伏滔同侍溫坐，溫令滔讀其賦，至「致傷於天下」，於此改韻。云：「此韻所詠，慨深千載。今於『天下』之後便移韻，於寫送之致，如爲未盡。」滔乃云：「得益『寫』一句，或當小勝。」桓公語宏：「卿試思益之。」宏應聲而益，王、伏稱善。

In this rendition, Huan Wen and Fu Tao provide the most important input to Yuan Hong, while Wang Xun merely admires the result. The initial comment on the “incompleteness” of the line seems most likely to have been made by Huan Wen, although the speaker is not explicitly identified. When Fu Tao encourages Yuan Hong to make the addition, he seems to draw inspiration from these comments to suggest the rhyme word *xie* 寫, and Yuan Hong likewise uses the notion of unending thoughts and unfinished expression in the new lines he composes. The anecdote presents poetic composition as a truly collaborative activity, and one that is carried out in lively conversation rather than through solitary, silent composition. Members of the audience of the text, not its author, are responsible for its performance. Their conversation about the piece not only prompts its revision, it also provides the inspiration for the content of the new lines, a detail that only becomes apparent when this anecdote is read alongside the text of the poem drawn from Yuan Hong’s collection.

There are many differences between the two versions of this anecdote. Different people appear in each version, the poem is presented in writing in one and read aloud in the other, and the feedback and praise of the poem are delivered by different people in slightly different ways. The base anecdote emphasises the brilliance of Yuan Hong’s extemporaneous composition, and the alternative version details the role of evaluation and critique in the process of collaborative composition. One does not need to read the composition itself to understand the events of either anecdote, especially if one is primarily interested in the delivery of praise, dialogue, and social performance typical of *Shishuo xinyu*.

The citation of the poem from Yuan Hong’s literary collection draws the reader away from the scene of the composition and recentres our attention on the textual artifact of this event — the literary composition itself. As with earlier literary collection citations, this allows us to decide for ourselves whether the extra lines improve the poem. Here, it also establishes evidence to which either of the two conflicting accounts can be anchored. The common element is the advice to add additional lines to extend the rhyme with the word *xie*, a detail that is “confirmed” through the evidence provided in the text of the piece itself. Although the anecdotes contradict one another, either one would be a plausible explanation of how Yuan Hong’s piece *might* have been completed. If the preservation of the alternative account of the piece’s composition destabilises the historicity of the *Shishuo xinyu* base anecdote, the inclusion of the text of Yuan Hong’s composition restores a sense of balance. The two anecdotes may no longer be acceptable as a historiographic account of a social gathering, but they retain their value as explanations of why Yuan Hong’s piece ends the way it does, albeit potentially apocryphal ones. Moreover, when read as such, these explanations also enable another layer to the final lines of Yuan

Hong's composition: in light of the possibility that Yuan Hong's composition was completed only thanks to the meddling of well-intentioned but unsolicited co-authors, it is hard not to read the final lines of the poem, "Emotions endlessly stir in my mind, facing the flow of the wind I express them alone", as a light jab at his companions.

Another dramatisation of textual composition in the same chapter features Huan Wen's son, Huan Xuan 桓玄 (369–404). Huan Xuan ascends a tower on the Jiangling city wall, and, whether soliloquising or addressing an unmentioned audience, declares his intent to compose a dirge (*lei* 誄) for Wang Gong 王恭 (styled Xiaobo 孝伯, d. 398). He begins to vocalise, then puts brush to paper and composes the dirge in a single sitting (SSXY 4.102). Here, although writing is portrayed as a solitary activity, it is still a kind of performance. Unusually, the anecdote ends here. There is no discussion of any reaction to this performance, nor any evaluation of the dirge itself. The annotations make up for this, first with a quotation from *Jin An di ji* 晉安帝紀 ("The Annals of Emperor An of the Jin") to assure readers that "the beauty of Huan Xuan's literary writings towered above his generation" (玄文翰之美，高於一世), then with an excerpt from Huan Xuan's literary collection. As with the citation of Yuan Hong's collection above, this excerpt serves the basic purpose of corroborating key details from the anecdote, namely, that Huan Xuan indeed composed a dirge for Wang Gong. Curiously, the text cited in the annotations is not the dirge itself, but its preface. The passage quoted in the annotation begins by announcing Wang Gong's bureaucratic titles and the date of his death in plain prose, then shifts into rhymed couplets of four-character lines. The metrical portion of the passage may represent either the dirge itself or another part of its preface.¹³ In the seventh and final couplet quoted, the author restates his intent to compose a dirge. The quotation ends here, followed by a remark from the annotator that states, "The text is long, and will not be recorded in full" (文多不盡載). While the anecdote focuses readers' attention on the theatrical display by the dirge's author, the annotations once again draw attention back to the textual remnant of this performance.

Although the excerpt is too short for a full evaluation of the piece on its own merits, it is certainly enough to remind readers that a literary text is something that can be distinguished from the circumstances in which it was composed. But with access to both the piece itself and the anecdote's description of its inspiration and composition, new interpretive possibilities are created. The quoted passage speaks of "streams and hills" (川嶽) and laments the death of its subject as "A mountain pass stripped of its tall trees, a grove razed of its old bamboo" (嶺摧高梧，林殘故竹). Having just read an anecdote describing how the author was inspired to write the dirge after climbing to the top of a tower, it becomes possible for readers of the annotated *Shishuo xinyu* to imagine a connection between the sights the poet surveyed and the words he then rushed to put to paper. In both of these

¹³ Dirges in *Wen xuan* (WX 56.2433–57.2482) routinely include prefaces (*xu* 序), which often end with similar declarations of intent. The preface to Cao Zhi's dirge for Wang Zhongxuan 王仲宣 also uses four-character lines. It is thus likely that the excerpt here does not quote any text from Huan Xuan's dirge itself, only its preface.

cases, the quotations from the subjects' literary collections encourage readers to reverse the relationship between base text and commentary, reading the *Shishuo xinyu* anecdotes instead as the explanatory comments that add depth to our understanding of the literary texts they quote.

Oral Performance and Textual Exchange

In another case, a citation from a literary collection encourages further consideration not just of the immediate circumstances of the text's composition, but also of the broader social and political circumstances under which it was created. The anecdote consists of a single short statement about the contents of a written text: "Huan Wen said in a memorial, 'Xie Shang is straightforward and direct in spirit and emotion, and achieved a great reputation among the people at a young age'" (桓宣武表云：「謝尚神懷挺率，少致民譽。」) (SSXY 8.103). The annotation supplies additional bibliographic detail. It identifies the text as a memorial Huan Wen wrote after conquering Luoyang, then quotes a longer portion of the memorial that includes text before and after the short statement of praise included in the anecdote. From this context, it is clear that Huan Wen's memorial was written to recommend that Xie Shang 謝尚 (308–357) be given political and military control over the newly acquired territory. Without the annotation, this anecdote resembles many other entries in this chapter of the text, devoted to "Appreciation and Praise" ("Shang yu" 賞譽): a prominent individual praises the personality or accomplishments of another, with no further dialogue or consequences mentioned. Annotations like this one, attributed to the very documents in which the praise was first articulated, provide a unique window into the textual dimension of praise and evaluation in the early medieval period. This annotation also makes explicit the notion that character evaluation was directly connected to both military and bureaucratic career advancement. Comments that in another context might have been mere flattery or rhetoric are here revealed to be part of a text composed to perform a specific function, intended for the attention of those with the power to accept or reject Huan Wen's recommendation. But the presence of this memorial in Huan Wen's collection also demonstrates the potential for such texts to serve additional functions for other readers, whether as historical evidence, models for future compositions, or objects of aesthetic appreciation.

Two final cases similarly highlight the role of texts as material objects and tokens of social and political exchange in the *Shishuo xinyu* anecdotes to which they are appended. These cases are unique in that they complicate our perspective on the events described in the base anecdotes by revealing the textual dimension of events that *Shishuo xinyu* presents as embodied performances and oral conversations. The first of these two interesting cases appears in the annotations to an anecdote in which the statesman Yu Liang 庾亮 (289–340) encourages the recluse Zhou Shao 周邵 (d. 335) to return to officialdom. Classified among other examples of "Blameworthiness and Remorse" ("You hui" 尤悔), the anecdote details the immense regret Zhou Shao experiences after returning to public service, which causes his death. The first half of the anecdote, however, is much lighter, with elements that are almost farcical:

Yu Liang wanted to recruit Zhou Shao, but Zhou Shao steadfastly refused him with increasing stubbornness. Whenever Yu would visit Zhou he would enter from the southern gate of his house, so Zhou would leave through the back. Once, Yu was able to sneak inside, and Zhou had no chance to escape. They ended up talking all day long. When Yu asked for some food, Zhou served him some simple vegetables, which Yu forced himself to eat with an air of extreme eagerness. The two talked over recent events, discussed Yu Liang's recommendation, and agreed to share the burdens of their era with one another.

庾公欲起周子南，子南執辭愈固。庾每詣周，庾從南門入，周從後門出。庾嘗一往奄至，周不及去，相對終日。庾從周索食，周出蔬食，庾亦彊飯，極歡；並語世故，約相推引，同佐世之任。

(SSXY 33.10)

The anecdote ends with Yu Liang's persuasion but, unlike many others, no details about their conversation are provided. Instead, the narrative emphasises the physicality of their encounter, and its embeddedness in the interior, domestic space of Zhou Shao's estate.

The two annotations appended to this passage both address Yu Liang's attempted persuasion of Zhou Shao, but because the anecdote implies that Yu Liang made multiple attempts it cannot be said that either actually contradicts the information provided in *Shishuo xinyu*. The first, drawn from the geographic treatise *Xunyang ji* 尋陽記 ("Record of Xunyang"), also emphasises the physicality of their encounter:

Zhou Shao, styled Zinan, accompanied Zhai Tang of Nanyang to live as a recluse on Mount Lu in Xunyang. When Yu Liang was appointed to Jiangzhou, he caught wind of Zhai and Zhou's reputations, so he tightened his belt and donned his walking shoes to pay them a visit. When they heard that Yu had arrived, they turned and fled to avoid him. Later, Yu Liang went out secretly. He proceeded directly to a grove of trees where Zhou Shao was hunting birds, then approached Zhou Shao to talk to him. After he returned, he said "This person can be recruited."

周邵字子南，與南陽翟湯隱於尋陽廬山。庾亮臨江州，聞翟、周之風，束帶躡履而詣焉。聞庾至，轉避之。亮後密往，值邵彈鳥於林，因前與語。還，便云：「此人可起。」

In this excerpt, Zhou Shao's reluctance to consider offers of appointment is again made literal through his avoidance of any face-to-face contact with Yu Liang. After this, the *Xunyang ji* text diverges from the base anecdote in describing an outdoor encounter. But by portraying Yu Liang visiting Zhou Shao during a leisurely hunting excursion, the text reiterates the remoteness and rusticity of Zhou's estate in a way that complements the simple fare he offers Yu Liang in the *Shishuo xinyu* version. Both texts eschew dialogue and instead use narrative details to illustrate Zhou Shao's comfort in rural isolation, and Yu Liang's dogged commitment to luring him out of retirement.

The citation from Yu Liang's collection, an excerpt from a letter addressed to Zhou Shao, appears immediately after the text from *Xunyang ji*. It presents their interaction instead as a one-sided textual exchange, a textual performance by a writer for a readerly audience of one. The letter is brief, but it reiterates the same themes as the anecdotes that precede it:

Within the commandery of Xiyang, the population registry does not reflect reality. Without one who is pure and honest, how might this roaming and evasive populace be pacified? I have inquired about this both within the court and among the commoners, and all say that it must be you, sir. I offer up this message to you today and humbly request that you accede to the post, and do not decline.

西陽一郡，戶口差實，非履道真純，何以鎮其流遁？詢之朝野，僉曰足下。今具上表，請足下臨之，無讓。

In his letter, Yu Liang appeals to Zhou Shao's "purity and honesty" (*zhen chun* 真純), qualities that his principled life of reclusion demonstrates. His claim that both members of the court and the local population were clamouring for Zhou Shao to leave retirement suggests that Zhou Shao had managed to establish a reputation for himself within the court as well as among the local populace. Considering Xiyang was nearly two hundred kilometres away from his estate on Mount Lu perhaps this is mere flattery. The specific issue in Xiyang that Yu Liang notes appears to refer to the issue of inaccurate census numbers that plagued Eastern Jin and Southern Dynasties tax collection efforts.¹⁴ Yu Liang here sees Zhou Shao's retreat to his rural estate as an asset. Zhou Shao's immense, fatal regret for having abandoned his principles to accept an official position suggests that his commitment to reclusion was genuine, but in this letter, Yu Liang is counting on the possibility that Zhou Shao was fashioning himself as a recluse precisely to demonstrate the moral refinement required of high officials.¹⁵ The existence of this letter does not necessarily contradict the *Shishuo xinyu* or *Xunyang ji* accounts of Yu Liang's personal visit to Zhou Shao's estate. It is easy to imagine Yu Liang sending a letter before visiting in person, and just as easy to imagine Zhou Shao ignoring it, prompting Yu Liang's later visit. But while the anecdotes dramatise Yu Liang's pursuit and Zhou Shao's resistance through conversation and physical interaction, the letter reminds us that the exchange of texts was also a part of Eastern Jin social and political activity, and its appearance in Yu Liang's collection testifies to the preservation and broad circulation of the documents produced in this written discourse.

The second is another case in which the annotations reveal the presence of a text in an event *Shishuo xinyu* represents as an in-person conversation. In doing so, it not only draws our attention to the easily overlooked role of material texts in early medieval social discourse, it also illuminates the peculiar consequences of the transmission of these documents within the flux of manuscript culture. It concerns Cai Hong 蔡洪 (fl. late 3rd cent.), an obscure figure from the Kingdom of Wu. Upon the

¹⁴ On these census issues, see Crowell 1990. Mather's translation suggests it may instead refer to a generally unruly populace: "The inhabitants of the one commandery of Hsi-yang fall short of the truth." Mather, 512.

¹⁵ On affectations of reclusion by those seeking bureaucratic appointments, see Berkowitz 2000, 118-125.

conquest of Wu by Jin, Cai Hong travelled to Luoyang to seek employment with the new regime. Cai Hong is known only from his appearances in two *Shishuo xinyu* anecdotes and their annotations, along with a single brief mention in the *Jinshu* biography of one of his contemporaries (JS 92.2383). As was the case with other obscure figures discussed above, Liu Xiaobiao relies on the paratext of Cai Hong's literary collection to provide basic biographical details, which are consistent with his sole appearance in *Jinshu*. The cited excerpt from the paratext of Cai Hong's collection provides his style name and place of origin, then reports that he was talented and skilled in discourse. Most importantly, it then explains that he served the Wu court prior to its conquest by Jin in 280, upon which he then became a retainer in the government of his home region, and was nominated to the rank of *xiuca* 秀才 (SSXY 2.22). Both Cai Hong's talent for debate as well as his status as a former subject of Wu are immediately relevant to this anecdote, which depicts Cai Hong as a visitor to Luoyang, during which he is referred to as a "remnant of a fallen kingdom" 亡國之餘. This insult prompts him to offer a spirited defence of the virtues of men of the south. As is the case for other biographical details appearing in other annotations, they have not been preserved randomly, but were selected precisely because of the context they provide for the anecdote to which they are appended.

Cai Hong's status as a "remnant of a fallen kingdom" is relevant to his second appearance in the text as well. Here, Liu quotes from one of Cai Hong's compositions rather than the preface to Cai Hong's collected works. The passage he quotes provides an alternative version of a conversation in which Cai Hong advocates for greater attention to men from the fallen state of Wu. In the base anecdote, an unnamed interlocutor asks Cai Hong to describe the prominent figures of Wu kingdom. He responds with a lengthy monologue that addresses the accomplishments and reputations of seven figures. Among them are Gu Rong 顧榮 (270–322), the noted poet Lu Ji 陸機 (261–303), and his younger brother Lu Yun 陸雲 (262–303), all relatively well known figures. The other four, Wu Zhan 吳展, Zhu Dan 朱誕, Yan Yin 嚴隱, and Zhang Chang 張暢, are all obscure, with no appearances in any other extant text. Based on Cai Hong's comments, however, all were held in high esteem in his time. In the base anecdote, Cai Hong concludes his list with an extended sequence of compliments emphasising their talents for writing and conversation (SSXY 8.20). Cai Hong's lecture is delivered in parallel prose: it follows strict metrical patterns, introducing each figure with a phrase eight characters in length, and completing each introduction with a five-character expression of praise of its subject, each with the function word *zhi* 之 in the middle of the phrase. He ends his speech with a concluding summary that follows an even stricter pattern, consisting of twelve six-character lines that each use the verb *wei* 為 ("to be" or "to treat as") as the fourth character. The intricacy of his composition, presented here as a spontaneously delivered speech, lends his comments the tone of elegant oratory in a way that plain unmetred prose would not.

Citing a letter contained in Cai Hong's literary collection, the annotations provide an alternative version of his lecture. In the letter, addressed to the regional inspector of an unnamed area named Zhou Jun 周俊, Cai Hong describes a gathering in the Jin court in which the participants discussed men of Wu. His letter then reports that what he actually said in this conversation was not written down. Instead, after the event concluded, he was instructed to organise his thoughts in writing. What follows is clearly a version of the evaluations that appear in the anecdote, with numerous additions and omissions. Most

notably, there is no mention of Gu Rong, Lu Ji, or Lu Yun, and it does not include the twelve-line conclusion that emphasises the literary and rhetorical talents of the figures listed. Moreover, while the *Shishuo xinyu* anecdote is pithy and lyrical throughout, Cai Hong's letter includes details in plain prose that elaborate on each person's bureaucratic posts under the Wu, and explains how each person listed avoided service to the new regime after the fall of the kingdom: Wu Zhan "closed his doors to guard his integrity, receiving no guests" (閉門自守，不交賓客), while Zhu Dan "has now returned to reside at home" (今歸在家), and Yan Yin "left his post after the conquest of Wu" (吳平，去職). His discussion of Zhang Chang makes no reference to official service to Wu or otherwise, saying only that he "dwelt among whetstones and black soil, and yet was neither ground down nor stained" (居磨涅之中，無淄磷之損). After each of these unique comments, however, the letter repeats the same aestheticised, politically neutral descriptions as the base anecdote. But these additions make the absence of Gu Rong, Lu Ji, and Lu Yun in the letter all the more conspicuous, as all three of these men did join the Jin bureaucracy after the conquest. Though they share many details, the cited letter emphasises service to Wu in contrast to subsequent refusal to join the Jin court, while the anecdote version focuses only on literary talent and moral character.

As he does throughout the text, Liu Xiaobiao intervenes here to offer commentary on the discrepancy between the cited source and the base text. His comment does not mention this more nuanced shift in emphasis between the two versions, but it does address the absence of both the brothers Lu as well as the twelve lines of praise that conclude the anecdote, which Liu Xiaobiao suspects have been added to *Shishuo xinyu* from an unnamed source. Moreover, his comment makes no mention of the omission of Gu Rong, instead noting that the cited letter in fact named sixteen individuals.

There is another factor that complicates efforts to untangle the details recorded in these various texts to create a single coherent historical narrative. *Taiping guangji* 太平廣記 preserves a text that combines Cai Hong's list of talented men of Wu with Cai Hong's first appearance in *Shishuo xinyu*, in which he offers an erudite retort in defence of Wu after being mocked as a "remnant of a fallen kingdom" (TPGJ 173.1276). Here, Cai Hong first confronts stereotypes about southerners with examples of legendary figures from antiquity who hailed from marginalised regions as he does in his first *Shishuo xinyu* appearance, and then responds to another remark from the same unnamed interlocutor with the same list of more recent Wu figures he provides in the second anecdote. The text of this section follows the *Shishuo xinyu* anecdote rather than the longer account quoted from the letter in Cai Hong's collection. *Taiping guangji* attributes this narrative to a text called *Liu shi xiaoshuo* 劉氏小說 ("Minor tales of Sir Liu"), which may refer to another text compiled by *Shishuo xinyu* compiler Liu Yiqing.

This narrative adds a layer of complexity to Cai Hong's already confusing set of appearances in *Shishuo xinyu*. Despite annotating the passage with biographical details from Cai Hong's collection, Liu Xiaobiao adds another comment to the end of the anecdote that casts doubt on the factuality of the entire exchange. This comment notes that the same response is attributed elsewhere to another

former Wu subject, Hua Tan 華譚, and concludes by saying that he finds the *Shishuo xinyu* attribution of this exchange to Cai Hong is implausible.¹⁶ The existence of the *Taiping guangji* narrative offers a possible explanation of the source of this alternative version of the story, especially if one accepts the attribution to Liu Yiqing. But it does not explain why a speech attributed to one southerner sojourning in the north could be attributed to another, and then combined with details from an unrelated letter to form a new hybrid narrative. Though Liu Xiaobiao himself does not believe this attribution, someone else must have, or, in the very least, would have had some reason to repurpose this anecdote, and on these possibilities Liu Xiaobiao is silent.

In some cases, correlating the details from the various sources cited throughout the annotations can create surprising coherences, and provide answers to questions that readers might not have otherwise thought to ask. In others, however, it only creates further confusion. These confusions illustrate the problem with attempting to read *Shishuo xinyu* as history, at least if one presumes that the historical record should provide a single narrative of “what really happened”. To contemporary readers armed with the expectation that all history told through narrative involves creative, inventive choices, the existence of multiple accounts of the same events invites a different kind of comparison – not to determine which account represents the truth, but to better understand the purposes these varying accounts served, and the effects their differences create for readers. While Tang readers like Liu Zhiji may have seen the many discordant accounts of Southern Dynasties history as a failure to produce a single authoritative historical record, these alternative accounts have provided contemporary scholars with many opportunities to perform this kind of analysis. Examining the construction of historical narratives and selective preservation of historical materials is particularly illuminating when it comes to matters of great political or ideological significance, and such an approach would certainly be fruitful in a deeper examination of the varying depictions of the exchanges between Wu remnants and Jin officials in these accounts.¹⁷

Liu Xiaobiao does not question the historicity of Cai Hong’s speech about Wu luminaries in his second *Shishuo xinyu* appearance. Nevertheless, the details provided in his annotations further complicate any attempt to read the anecdote as an account of a historical event. To read any narrative anecdote as a historical record requires one to assume the existence of a transcription or other record produced by an eyewitness or participant in the original event. But such anecdotes rarely describe the means by which they were documented. At first glance, Liu Xiaobiao’s inclusion of Cai Hong’s letter appears to do just that. But the letter explicitly states that, although Cai Hong first delivered these comments orally, no transcription of this event was produced, and the letter was instead prepared from memory after the event. If our goal was to get to the bottom of “what really happened”, this detail, along with the substantial discrepancies between the speech in the anecdote and the contents of the letter in the annotation, would all present insurmountable challenges. Instead, it is more productive to consider the way these differences allow each text to perform different functions. There is both a

¹⁶ As above, the source of this conflicting passage is not named. But a story featuring Hua Tan that closely resembles this *Shishuo xinyu* anecdote is preserved in JS 52.1452, as well as a citation of *Wenshi zhuan* in TPYL 464.2263b.

¹⁷ On the possibilities afforded by critical readings of contradictory accounts of early medieval figures, see, for example, Wells 2015. On the importance of recovering the perspectives of Wu historians, see Tian 2016.

political and an aesthetic dimension to these differences. While Cai Hong's letter provides the perspective of a defiant Wu loyalist eager to demonstrate the principled reclusion of his contemporaries, the version in the anecdote, in keeping with focus of the chapter on "Appreciation and Praise", highlights only their literary talent and cultivated personalities. Aesthetically, the condensed, patterned language of the speech makes it a more impressive example of oratory. Likewise, the extended prose commentary offered in the letter version allows Cai Hong's pronouncements on each individual to function as a *zhuan*-style biography in miniature, providing the conventional biographical details of each person's style name, history of bureaucratic appointments, and a brief statement of praise illuminating the distinctive traits of each. Although Liu Xiaobiao either overlooks or politely ignores the political and historiographic implications of the discrepancies between the two letters, by providing both texts side-by-side the annotations allow readers to evaluate examples of both oral performance and written composition, reminding us that the "paper trail" linking embodied interactions to their representation in textual anecdotes is often missing from the historical record.

Conclusion: The Annotated *Shishuo Xinyu* as a Liang Text

Liu Xiaobiao's citations of personal literary collections allow readers to participate in the acts of appraisal performed by the historical figures that appear as characters in *Shishuo xinyu* anecdotes. However, the kinds of evaluation such annotations enable are limited. The annotations enhance our ability to interpret and evaluate the textual traces left behind by these figures, but, by drawing our attention to the documents in which these traces are preserved, cannot help but bring us further from the ephemeral, embodied performances that are captured in *Shishuo xinyu* anecdotes. To conclude, I would like to reflect on how this transition – through which a text concerned with the nuances of social performance becomes one almost overburdened with attention to the production and preservation of documents – reflects the literary and scholastic culture of Liu Xiaobiao's own era.

Historian Hu Baoguo has characterised the Southern Dynasties as a period during which the accumulation of textual knowledge became paramount among the elite. As evidence for this development, he notes the steadily growing sizes of private and imperial book collections, the increasing importance of breadth of erudition across multiple fields of discourse and scholarship, and increasing preference for the honorific title *xueshi* 學士 ("learned gentleman") over *mingshi* 名士 ("renowned gentleman") (Hu 2009). Xiaofei Tian has traced a concurrent intensification of attention to literary collections, beginning around the fifth century and continuing through the end of the Southern Dynasties. As Tian writes, during this period literary collections usurped the "masters text" (*zishu* 子書) as the predominant textual form through which an individual's reputation was established (Tian 2006, 475–477). This expansion of attention to literary collections and literary writing can also be seen in the field of character evaluation.

This is most visible within *Shi pin* 詩品 ("Gradings of poets"). That text evaluates the poetry of 123 writers, many of whom also appear in *Shishuo xinyu* anecdotes, and assigns each to one of three

rankings. Importantly, though the text is focused on pentasyllabic poetry and includes many nuanced observations and judgments about literary style, the evaluations also address other aspects of each figure's life, personality, and accomplishments. They do so using terminology derived from the longer tradition of character evaluation, *Shishuo xinyu* included. This lexicon also serves as a foundation for the text's new language of literary criticism as well (Wixted 1983, 232–233). *Shi pin* evaluates and ranks writers according to characterological and literary critical analysis. The *Shishuo xinyu* base text is primarily interested in recording details related to the former, while also showcasing scenes in which literary evaluation is performed by others. By supplementing this with longer excerpts from the writings themselves, the annotated *Shishuo xinyu* allows readers to move from evaluating the performances and personality traits of its characters towards evaluating literary writing. It is thus not insignificant that *Shi pin*'s compiler, Zhong Rong 鍾嶸 (469–518), was a contemporary of Liu Xiaobiao.

As we have seen, however, Liu's annotations do more than just provide the basis for future literary evaluations. They consistently draw attention to the presence of texts in *Shishuo xinyu* anecdotes, illuminating not just the literary qualities of the texts they contain, but also their performative capacity as functional documents, their ability to convey messages across great distances, and, perhaps most importantly, their potential to either record information for future generations or to distort and complicate it through the creation of divergent manuscripts. The results of these complications are also on display in the annotations, but when such variation occurs it is significant that the versions preserved in texts cited in the annotations tend to emphasise the presence of material texts, where the *Shishuo xinyu* anecdote either diminishes it or elides it completely. This preoccupation with textuality is also very much a part of the annotations' status as a late Southern Dynasties composition, when the culture of "textual knowledge above all" described by Hu Baoguo gave rise to a generation of scholars, Liu Xiaobiao among them, devoted to organising, rewriting, and reassembling the contents of earlier texts into a host of new compendia, anthologies, bibliographies, and encyclopedias.¹⁸

It is in this regard that Liu's choice of *Shishuo xinyu* as a base text becomes particularly poignant. It is not the case that *Shishuo xinyu*'s preoccupation with the ephemeral social performances of Wei-Jin figures meant that those in the period it covers had no interest in the textual legacy of the past, far from it. As Robert Ashmore has shown, investigation of the ways in which texts facilitate (or hinder) their readers' ability to connect with figures of the distant past was a major current of Wei-Jin thought (Ashmore 2010). Likewise, Wendy Swartz has shed light on the complex intertextuality of literary compositions produced in this period (Swartz 2018). And, as Jack W. Chen notes, not only is *Shishuo xinyu* itself the product of an ambitious compilation enterprise, the anecdotes it contains also address nostalgia and the challenges of establishing a connection with the past through the preservation and creation of new texts, the conversations they describe often capturing "the beginnings of a textualized nostalgia that anticipates the compilation of the *Shishuo*" (Chen 2021, 229). Indeed, Hu traces the beginnings of the trend towards the accumulation of textual knowledge to the Eastern Jin. It is the

¹⁸ On this culture of textual production, see chapters two and three of Tian 2007.

annotations' pointed interest in the practical matters of textual creation, dissemination, and preservation that makes them feel particularly in line with Liang scholastic interests. But the texts Liu cites often originate much earlier, as Liu draws from the historiographic and compilational efforts of those from the era documented in *Shishuo xinyu* to his own present in the Liang. This is why it remains difficult to say whether the addition of these elements to *Shishuo xinyu* via annotation should be understood as the product of a scholarly culture unique to the Liang, or if it may be seen as another way *Shishuo xinyu* manifests a multi-generational community, one defined by a shared interest in scholastic and bibliographic pursuits in addition to character evaluation and social performance.

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