

THE ORIGINS OF CHINESE NARRATIVE PROSE: FIFTEEN COLLECTIONS FROM “THE HISTORY OF THE HAN DYNASTY”*

As far as we know the first usage of the combination 小說, *xiaoshuo* (lit: “minor (petty) expressions”) appears in Zhuangzi's writings (庄子, 369—286 BC):

If, having taking a bamboo stick and a rope, one comes to a roadside ditch and begins to fish for fry, it is then hard to obtain a big fish; and telling petty tales (小說) for the sake of pleasing a district chief — is just as far from great accomplishments!” [1]

In this case *xiaoshuo* does not imply narrative prose at all, but rather a discourse about “petty” (小, *xiao*) matters as opposed to discourses of the elevated Way; in the best-case scenario these are some amusing “tales” meant to entertain its listeners.

The most known of the early interpretations of the term *xiaoshuo* is within the section of “Yi wen zhi” (藝文志, “Treatise on Art and Literature”) from the thirtieth *juan* of “Han shu” (漢書, “The History of the Former Han Dynasty”) by Ban Gu (班固, AD 32—92) (*fig. 1*), which says:

The trend of *xiaoshuo* school (小說家), evidently, starts from *beiguan*. It is that, which took shape from conversations on the street, gossips in the alleys, formed from that which was heard and told on one's way. Confucius once said: “It is certain that one has something to learn even on a narrow path, but if one strives for a remote [goal], he can soil himself [following this path], and that is why a noble man does not turn to it” [2]. However [a noble man] does not do away with [such paths] [3].

It speaks of rather specific written monuments depicting some base — in the spirit of Zhuangzi — stories of everyday and folk nature, which apparently had a lot in common with folklore — since Ban Gu draws a parallel with *beiguan* [4].

Ban Gu listed the names of fifteen texts of the school of *xiaoshuo*, the content of which, by all appearances, was rather diverse; attitude to it is also expressed un-

equivocally: in essence *xiaoshuo* is “a narrow path”, “a small way” (小道), where a noble man — *jun-zi* can undoubtedly derive something useful, but he has to be aware that “small ways” to attaining the great aim, that is the understanding of the Tao, do not guide by any means, and therefore one may “soil himself” following it; thus a noble man is cautious and gives credit to “narrow paths” — exactly what they are deserving: “The best of what minor rural experts have also needs to be gathered one thing to another so that it will not get lost in oblivion”. Out of this, as a matter of fact, the Chinese tradition of narrative prose literature has been formed. In order to be able to imagine which texts in particular provide the basis for Chinese narrative prose, let us particularly dwell on the list of Ban Gu.

Hou Zhong-yi (侯忠義, born in 1936), a modern Chinese philologist, believes that, judging by the names of collections cited by Ban Gu and his commentaries, as well as by the commentaries to “Han shu” of Yan Shigu, the lost works are divided into three categories: (i) works of historical nature; (ii) works of philosophic nature; and (iii) works of magic nature [5]. Unfortunately, of all these texts only names have come down to us whereas the collections themselves were lost before the reign of the Sui Dynasty (i. e. before 581). And we namely happen to deal with the names and indirect evidences. As it was already stated, the list of Ban Gu has fifteen names. These are:

1. “Yi yin shuo er shi qi pian” (伊尹說二十七篇, “Stories of Yi Yin in Twenty Seven Chapters”). Commentary: “The exposition is shallow and poor; looks as though it was written later”.

Yi Yin (伊尹, 1751?—1649? BC), a semilegendary ancient Chinese politician, high official and culinary expert, is known by the fact that although he came from lower classes since his childhood he displayed remarkable ability, comprehending book wisdom on his own, which in time allowed him first to become famous in cookery, and then make an amazing career — from

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