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## Review of Books

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ANECDOTE, NETWORK, GOSSIP, PERFORMANCE. ESSAYS ON THE SHISHUO XINYU. By JACK W. CHEN. pp. 278. Cambridge Mass., Harvard University Asia Center, 2021.  
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The *Shishuo Xinyu* or *Tales of the World* is a collection of anecdotes and character sketches of a large number of musicians and painters from the Han to the Jin dynasty (c. 120–420 AD), put together in the period of the Northern and Southern Dynasties (420–589 AD). Although traditional Confucian subjects such as virtuous conduct and the affairs of state are included, the stories have traditionally been regarded as works of fiction rather than history. Jack Chen's title to his book of scholarly essays immediately announces that his approach to the anecdotal work is to be a literary one, presenting new readings of social life, live performance and culture in the broadest sense.

The interrelated essays of the book which cover the themes of—social networks, gossip and reputation, performance, praise and insult, competition and composure, ritual and mourning—are preceded by Chen's take on the title which he represents as 'Recent Account from the talk of ages' (p. 5). He intends to convey the notion that the anecdotes are of universal interest and so still worth reading. After dealing with the title, he embarks in the first chapter on examining the text. The *Shishuo* consists of thirty-six chapters dealing with diverse subject matter which includes exemplary conduct (1), elegant composure (6), renewing oneself (15) slander and malice (32) just to pluck out a few chapters at random. Within these chapters as a whole there are 1,130 anecdotes and the appearance of over seven hundred individuals, named and unnamed. Chen has listed those named in an Appendix.

He follows his chapter on the text and the meaning of anecdote—a form that “insists on some exemplary aspect of an individual character” (p.13)—with a consideration of the networks involved in the collections which he presents in visual form. This network visualisation becomes highly technical but it is designed to show each person found in the *Shishuo* and their interaction with anyone else in the anecdotes. The next chapter is somewhat easier on the reader, exploring gossip and reputation. Rather than dwelling on the conventional, malicious nature of gossip, Chen wants to show how gossip illustrates important features of Chinese culture and society and the way social networks relate to social hierarchies. So far as reputation is concerned, anecdotes about two households—the Hua and the Chin Ji illustrate how different types of behaviour can be found to be praiseworthy: one family has a puritanical approach to what is expected of its members; the other a more relaxed, warm informality but both maintain happiness and harmony.

A significant portion of the anecdotal collection deals with speech and we are told that “the figures in *Shishuo* are often celebrated for their discursive virtuosity, with numerous anecdotes commemorating the perfect rejoinder or well-crafted remark” (p. 123). Conversation is key and wit may even be disguised in gentle irony as in the case of the notable historian Yuan Hong visiting Xie An who

makes fun of the fact that his friend has written a serious book about what he had talked about just for fun. Other anecdotes deal with sometimes unconventional behaviour. Both Dai Liang and Sun Chu are characters that amuse others by braying in imitation of donkeys. While Dai restrains himself from braying at his mother's funeral (she was keen on the sound), Sun Chu does not desist from doing so at his patron's funeral, startling but amusing all the mourners. The latter's unconventional behaviour has to be understood in the context of a society where norms imposed by conventions are, in fact universally comprehended.

The anecdotes can highlight subtle aspects of social behaviour quite distinct from those of a Western perspective. An example is where insults are considered. Xie An's wife insults Sun Chou and his brother but they are not present to hear the insults. That does not greatly matter because the real purpose of the insult is to harm their public reputation, over which they have no control. That dispels the Western notion that the hearing of the insult by the person and his reaction to it is its most important characteristic.

Although many anecdotes are drawn from daily experience, it does not mean that as a body of commentary they ignore classical sources, such as Confucianism. Confucius's teaching on rituals, honesty, harmonious balance, discernment and many other subjects are absorbed in these anecdotes but given their own particular twist. Nor are historical references to real events absent: for example stories about the military exploits of Emperors are present but the evaluation of those exploits may be different from that recorded elsewhere in 'serious' histories.

Jack Chen's book is a highly learned guide to *Shishuo*, backed by detailed scholarship throughout. The only drawback for the current reviewer is that for that very reason, the reader can be diverted from the charming simplicity and directness of the tales themselves.

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MAKING MONGOL HISTORY: RASHĪD AL-DĪN AND THE JAMI' AL-TAWARIKH. By STEFAN KAMOLA. Edinburgh Studies in Classical Islamic History and Culture. pp. 309. Edinburgh, Edinburgh University Press, 2019.

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Rarely has the exploration of a literary masterpiece produced such insights into Iranian cultural and political history as has Stefan Kamola's scholarly yet dramatic presentation of the life and work of Rashīd al-Dīn Faḍl Allāh (1247–1318) in *Making Mongol History: Rashid al-Din and the Jami' al-Tawarikh*. Kamola has approached this complicated task with clarity and thoroughness to provide unexpected revelations and new understanding of the Mongol impact on Iran, of the region's literary development and of its theories of statehood. He accomplishes this by examining literary activity and styles in Iran from the beginning of the Mongol conquest in the 1220s through the influences of Islamic, Chinese, Christian and European movements to the first presentation of Rashīd al-Dīn's historical treatise in 1304 and its subsequent changes through the fifteenth century. Rashīd al-Dīn's pre-eminent position during the height of il-Khānid power in the courts of the brothers, Ghāzān (1295–1304) and Öljaytū