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Tales From The Principalities
Ancient Chinese Short Stories

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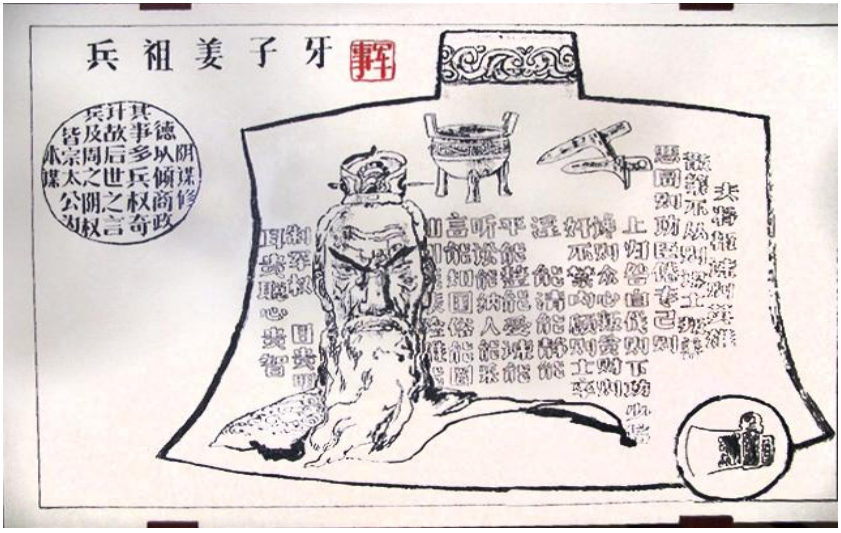
CHAPTER ONE
THE NATURE OF THE WORK
Some Extremely Ancient Stories
By Eric Henry

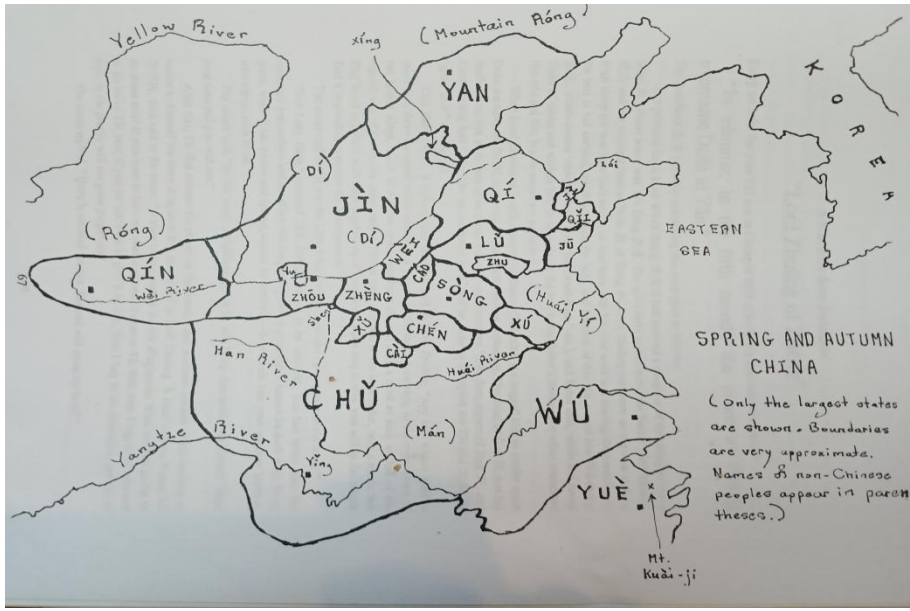


A representation of Jiāng Tài Gōng, a legendary military strategist, who in 1045 BCE, in his nineties, enabled the chiefdom of Zhōu to overthrow and replace the Shāng Dynasty. Ink painting in the Zibo Chinese Ceramics Museum in Zibo City in Shandong Province in Summer 2007. Artist unknown. Image edited by David Henry.

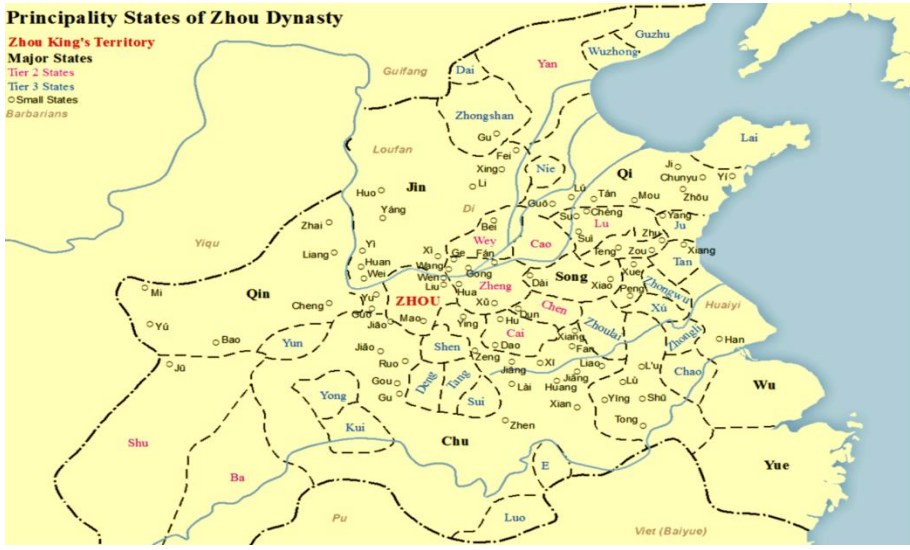
This issue of *Rising Asia* is devoted to narrative specimens that appear in *Tales from the Principalities* (*Guóyǔ* 國語). The Chinese title of this work is most often represented in English as "Discourses (or Conversations) of the States." Most of it was compiled around 294 BCE. It is China's second-oldest book of historical narrative.[1] The tales collected in it reflect the intense preoccupation of people in that era with prophesy, ritual, divination, and paranormal phenomena of all types. Collectively, these tales portray a society quite different from any that can be found on the earth today. All the dates mentioned in the present translation are BCE, unless otherwise stated.

The events depicted in these items all take place within an area that now belongs to north China, but in the world of *Tales*, this area is occupied, not by some unitary precursor of that country, but by a welter of competing polities called *guó*, "states" or "nations," or, as here, "principalities." The Rulers of these polities all owe theoretical obedience to the King of the Zhōu Dynasty, also known as "the son of Heaven," but in practical terms they act as Rulers of independent kingdoms. The Rulers of these *guó*, however, are not Kings, but aristocrats who hold a variety of feudal ranks reflecting some degree of theoretical subordinacy to the King of the Zhōu Dynasty. These ranks are rendered in these translations as duke, marquis, count, viscount, and baron. Many of them were blood relations of the Zhōu King.

[1] The oldest such work, the much lengthier *Zuǒzhuàn* 左傳, an ancient text dating to 420 BCE, appears to have come into existence a few decades earlier. An English bilingual edition entitled *Zuo Tradition* was published by Washington University Press in 2016. All references made here to *Zuǒzhuàn* will henceforth use the title of that bilingual edition: *Zuo Tradition*. Divisions within the text, such as "Yǐngōng" (Lord Yǐn) and "Zhuānggōng" (Lord Zhuāng), correspond to the reigns of successive Rulers of Lǔ.



Map 1: This map is shown here merely to provide general orientation. It is not accurate in detail. Boundaries were vague and subject to constant change. Maps, as such, did not exist in the Spring and Autumn Era. This hand-drawn map is based on the one that appears in James Legge, *The Ch'un Ts'ew with the Tso Chuen*, 1872, Vol. 5 of *The Chinese Classics*.



Map 2: A more detailed map of China in the Spring and Autumn Era.
Source:https://en.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:States_of_Zhou_Dynasty.png

My use of "principality" for *guó* is my attempt to find an appropriate term for a political entity that is ostensibly subsidiary to a more exalted political entity, but which is actually not all that subsidiary. The Rulers of the principalities strove with all their might to outwit, defeat, and diminish each other, but in their public pronouncements they always pretended that they were engaging in these activities out of a desire to serve the Zhōu King.

As is the case with all ancient Chinese works of pre-imperial and early imperial times, the text was transmitted exclusively by means of hand-copying for a very long period—in this case, about 1,300 years. Though Chinese texts could not be mass produced in early times, the work was nevertheless widely read. Almost all Chinese authors from the Warring States period and subsequent periods either cite it, or show by other means that they were familiar with it. It also attracted seven early commentaries, all exhaustive, one of which, by the historian Wéi Zhāo of the Three Kingdoms period (220–280 CE) has remained the standard one up to the present day. The first printed edition of *Tales* appeared in the Northern Sòng Dynasty in 1029 CE, and was followed by additional printed editions in 1033, 1064 and, in the Southern Sòng, in 1149. From then on, editions were numerous.

The work as a whole is compendious; with Wéi Zhāo's notes, it fills about 800 pages. It consists of 243 stories arranged in twenty-one books (fascicules or *juǎn*) from which the seventy-one tales presented here are selected. Some of the tales consist only of a paragraph; others go on for a number of pages. Many of the tales take place in a Court setting and involve interactions between Rulers and Court Officers. The stories in *Tales from the Principalities* are organized according to the states or polities in which the action occurs; these are, in order: the Zhōu royal domain ("Tales from Zhōu," three books), "Tales from Lǔ" (two books),

"Tales from Qí" (one book), "Tales from Jìn" (nine books), "Tales from Zhèng" (one book), "Tales from Chǔ" (two books), "Tales from Wú" (one book), and "Tales from Yuè" (two books). The order of the items within each polity is chronological.

Some of the items in *Tales from the Principalities* are self-contained, while others can be regarded as building blocks in a larger narrative structure that include a series of items. An example of a self-contained item is Item 9.4 in "Tales from Jìn" (a section in *Tales from the Principalities*), which hinges on a joke arising from the meaning of a word: *xìyuán* 繫援, "to be bound and raised up." A man, Dǒng Shú 董叔, ignoring the dissuasions of a friend, marries into the powerful Fàn 范 clan, saying that he wishes to be "bound" to them so that they can "raise him up." When Dǒng later incurs the displeasure of his powerfully-connected bride, the Fàn clan chief has him seized, bound, and suspended from a poplar tree in the courtyard. Seeing his friend pass by from his place of suspension in the tree, Dǒng Shú pleads to him for assistance, whereupon the friend says, "Why should I help you? You wanted to be bound, and now are bound; you wanted to be raised up, and are now raised up. You got exactly what you wanted." The evident reason for the inclusion of this item in *Tales from the Principalities* is that the writer or editor thought it was hilarious.

An example of a larger narrative, including a long series of items, in is the depiction, spread over the first two books of "Tales from Jìn," of the patient, clever, and diabolical maneuvers used by Lí Jī, the female favorite of Lord Xiàn of Jìn, to cause him to transfer his favor from his elder Princes to her own newborn son. These maneuvers involve much collusion between Lí Jī and Shī, a scheming Court performer, and include much minute discussion of the psychological weaknesses of their intended victims.

Many of the items in *Tales from the Principalities* are enthrallingly effective as narrative fiction. They are full of dramatic irony, and show a keen, pervasive interest in the relationship between character and destiny. The voices with which its characters speak are sharply distinct and remain vividly in the reader's memory. An example is Xì Zhì 郤至, an early sixth-century officer of the State of Jìn. The last item in Book Two of "Tales from Zhōu" relates how in 575 BCE he comes to the Zhōu Court to announce Jìn's recent victory over Chǔ at Yānlíng. This officer bursts with pride at his own contributions to that victory and cites many instances of the wisdom and propriety of his own behavior. His self-confidence is so pronounced that it is comical. He is convinced that he will shortly become the Prime Minister of Jìn. When one of his hosts presumes to doubt that this will happen, since Xì Zhì is surpassed in rank by a number of other officers in Jìn, he exclaims, "What does rank have to do with it?" and cites the examples of three previous Jìn officers who rose from low positions to the Prime-Ministership. "If I were to become the fourth in the series," he continues, "I would not be inferior in any respect to those three gentlemen. Why shouldn't it be possible for the assistant commander of the New Army to become Prime Minister? This is something I will definitely pursue." Some people in the Zhōu Court are impressed by this talk, and regard Xì Zhì as a person worth cultivating, but Duke Xiāng of Shàn, a Zhōu officer whose wisdom surpasses that of his colleagues, perceives that Xì Zhì is a doomed man. "The weapon," he says, "is bearing down upon his neck." Xì Zhì's eager self-promotion will be an affront to his colleagues in Jìn and will offend the invisible spiritual powers as well, a factor never to be discounted in these tales. It was Heaven, the Duke observes, that brought about Jin's victory over the rival State of Chǔ. For Xì Zhì to claim that it was he who brought about

the victory is tantamount to usurping the merit of Heaven. In the following year Xì and his two brothers are assassinated in Jìn.

Another character in *Tales from the Principalities*, whose speech and behavior make an immediate, distinctive impression, is Lord Dào of Jìn (personal name Zhōu 周). The first item of Book Seven in "Tales from Jìn" shows his response to a group of Jin officers who have come in 572 to the Zhōu royal domain where he was residing, to invite him back to Jìn in order to assume the Throne. The Prince is then just fourteen years of age. The previous Jìn Ruler, Lord Lì, has just been assassinated. The Prince's speech to the officers shows that he is fully aware of the dangers to which this elevation will expose him, but the calm clarity with which he outlines to the officers the nature of his, and their, responsibilities in their new relationship shows that he is a person of very unusual poise and confidence:

> It was never my desire to come to this. That I have come to this is due to Heaven. When people have a worthy Ruler, they swear to serve and follow him. If they receive orders but do not obey them, that is like burning the harvest. If they swear and the Ruler proves to be ungifted, that is like a harvest that fails to mature. If the grain does not mature, that will be my fault; but if it matures and is then burned up, it will be due to the opposition of you gentlemen. I want to provide a permanent place where people's desires can find a lodge; in issuing orders, I swear that I shall never prevent the grain from ripening. It was because orders were not followed that you gentlemen sought a worthy Ruler, so that you might consult and plan with him. If I should prove unworthy and you should set me aside, who would harbor any grievance? But if I should prove worthy and meet with harsh opposition, it will be you gentlemen who have brought it about.

> If you wish to serve a worthy Ruler so as to promote the cause of justice everywhere, the decision is yours to make this very day. But if you wish to use violence and oppression to alienate the clan chiefs and upset and alter the people's constant rules, the decision is also yours to make this very day. Let our plans, whether to advance or to move backward, commence this very day.

Subsequent items show this Ruler, with the same levelheadedness, promulgating a series of measures that restore much of the preeminence among the states that Jìn had come to enjoy a half-century earlier under the rule of his predecessor Lord Wén (reigned 635–628).

The style and subject matter of the items in the work pass through various phases. The items in the last book of "Tales from Jìn," for example, tend to focus on small delimited events and provide instances of homely, personal, involuntary gestures on the part of the people described. Thus, in Item 9.17, a Zhào clan chief engaged in military struggles with several other clans, is about to eat a meal when he receives a report that one of his commanders has brought two campaigns to a victorious conclusion. Instead of pleasing him, this news makes him apprehensive. He rolls his rice into little balls as he reflects that these victories may have been due to luck alone, and that his future is far from assured.

In addition to depicting character as a predicter of destiny, the work in a number of places goes deeply into several other destiny-related areas of knowledge. These are: astrology, music, hexagram divination, and ritual prescription. Astrology comes into play, and is exhaustively discussed, whenever the topic at issue is a historical event that the author regards as being of culture-defining importance. Two examples of this are the Zhōu victory over Shāng (in 1045) discussed in

the concluding portion of Item 7 in "Tales from Jìn" (Book 4), and the return of Prince Chóng'ěr to Jìn (in 635) after sixteen years of exile, the topic in Item 2 of "Tales from Jìn" (Book 4). In both these cases, the positions of Jupiter in relation to various Chinese asterisms is seen as directly related to human events. The relation of music theory to human affairs is extensively explored in Items 6 and 7 of "Tales from Zhōu" (Book 3). Hexagram divination plays a prominent role both in the account of the Zhōu conquest of China and the account of the triumphant return of the exiled Prince Chóng'ěr to the State of Jìn. Finally, many items in the "Tales from Zhōu," as well as "Tales from Lǔ," "Tales from Jìn," and "Tales from Chǔ," amounting to sixteen of the works twenty-one books, provide exhaustive accounts of ritual practices relating to different aspects of administration in various different locales. The author of these items plainly felt that these practices were essential to the well-being of the state and to society as a whole. Any failure in the observance of ritual is seen as a sign of impending failure and destruction. It is not just that such failures cause lapses in the proper functioning of the political and social systems to which they are attached, they are apt to lead to punishment by the invisible powers as well. In Item 11 of the first book in "Tales from Lǔ," a Court Officer makes an unauthorized change in the sequence of ancestral tablets in the temple devoted to past Rulers of Lǔ. A savant who observes this predicts that the erring officer will suffer some future disaster. This is borne out when, at the time of the officer's burial, fire consumes his coffin and flames emerge from his grave. In Item 7 of "Tales from Zhōu" (Book 2), Duke Xiāng of Shàn, a Zhōu Court Officer, passes through Chén on his way to Chǔ. He notices that affairs in Chén are in total disarray. No Court representatives are sent to greet him, no seasonal tasks stipulated in the ancient almanacs are being carried out, dikes and roadways are falling

into disrepair, the Chén Ruler and his ministers are wearing inappropriate dress, and preparations are being made to use peasant labor to build a tower for their amusement. On his return to the Zhōu Court, Duke Xiāng of Shàn makes a full report of this to the Zhōu Ruler and predicts that Chén will soon suffer destruction. The back story to all this, scarcely mentioned in all the details concerning ritually prescribed activities, is that Lord Líng and two of his high ministers are licentiously disporting themselves in the home of Xià Jī 夏姬, the alluring widow of a Chén Prince. The troubles arising from these activities would in themselves have been sufficient to cause the downfall of Chén, but the narrator appears to be intent on showing that this Ruler's sexual irregularities were only one instance of a far more general collapse of ritual. In the process, he creates a fascinatingly detailed portrait of the way things are run in a properly functioning state. The story itself seems merely a pretext to present this information. There are many other items in *Tales from the Principalities* in which ritual detail greatly prevails over the stories they are attached to.

Certain themes appear repeatedly in these stories, such as the importance of correct gesture and demeanor as a means of maintaining the favor of colleagues, superiors, and invisible spirits, as well as the invariably disastrous consequences of pride and boastfulness, the importance of fulfilling ritually prescribed procedures, the skill shown by various individuals, including women and people of negligible social status, in predicting the future based on the interpretation of minute signs in the present.

Social norms evolve over time. Not quite four centuries after the compilation of *Tales from the Principalities*, another huge collection of quasi-historical narratives (*Shuōyuán* or *Garden of Eloquence*) came into being and was submitted to the Hàn Throne. The stories in this collection

evince little interest in the invisible world, the world of spirits, ghosts, and immaterial beings, but are focused instead on types of behavior, variously depicted as wise or deluded, virtuous or unprincipled, etc., so as to serve as a guide to prospective readers, especially those charged with ruling the empire. Another seven centuries later, in the mid-to-late Táng Dynasty, it had become possible for the preoccupations reflected in *Tales from the Principalities* to appear bizarre to some readers. This was certainly the case with the Táng literatus Liǔ Zōngyuán (773–810). Fearing that the work might lead readers into mistaken beliefs and moral confusion, he wrote a lengthy, detailed essay entitled "Refuting *Guóyǔ*" (Fēi Guóyǔ 非國語, "Against the Principalities") in which he finds fault with sixty-seven of the work's 247 items. The opening passages of this essay fully acknowledge the intoxicating literary strength of the work discussed. "It is written in a deep and striking manner," Liǔ says; its readers are "endlessly mesmerized and delighted by it." The work was regarded "almost as a canonical classic," he continues; it had "astounded and enraptured the eyes and ears of generations of readers," and its words had been "woven into finely brocaded tapestries and incised in bronze and stone."

Liǔ is nevertheless offended whenever he encounters an item in *Tales from the Principalities* that appears to him to flout natural law or Confucian morality. His vigorously expressed objections are entertaining to read and, in fact, shed much light on the nature of the tales. Unfortunately, the tales would be ruined, not improved, if the elements he objects to were removed. The stories of are *of necessity* rife with superstition, and are more concerned with power and survival than with ethics. That is their whole point.

And so, I hereby invite the reader to enter the alien world portrayed in the following tales. The effect should be like walking around

on Mars. I know of no work that portrays more vividly, or in more detail, what it was like to live on the earth 2,400 years ago.