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Tales From the Principalities
Ancient Chinese Short Stories

ALL STORIES ARE TRANSLATED BY ERIC HENRY

CHAPTER TWO
TALES FROM THE WESTERN ZHŌU

A representation of Lord Huán of Qí convening an interstate assembly in the seventh century BCE. Ink painting in the Zibo Chinese Ceramics Museum in Zibo City in Shandong Province in Summer 2007. Artist unknown. Image edited by David Henry.

The name "Zhōu," is applied to two different dynastic entities. The first, often referred to as the "Western Zhōu" lasted from 1045 BCE to 771 BCE and had its capital in a city named Hào 鎬 by the Fēng 灃 River in present-day Xi'an Province. The second, often called the "Eastern Zhōu," existed from 770 BCE to 256 BCE and had its capital, called "Luò" or "Chéngzhōu," far to the east, near present day Luòyáng in Hénán Province, by the confluence of the Luò and Yellow Rivers. In *Tales from the Principalities*, there are thirty-three items in the three books of *Tales from Zhōu*, of which the first ten are set in the earlier period, and the remaining twenty-three in the second. The five tales presented in this section all belong to the earlier, or "western," phase of the Zhōu.
~ Eric Henry.

Author: Unknown, 4th Century BCE.

1. The Mother of Lord Kāng of Mì

In this item, three sisters, for reasons not stated, but motivated, perhaps, by a desire for personal or social security elope with Lord Kāng, the Ruler of the petty State of Mì, while he is in attendance upon King Gōng of the Zhōu Dynasty. Lord Kāng's mother urges him to present the maidens to the King, warning him that if he keeps them for himself, he will perish. Lord Kāng fails to follow this advice, and a year later perishes as predicted: the King destroys the State of Mì. This narrative appears as Item 2 in "Tales from Zhōu" (Book 1), and was later excerpted in the Hàn Dynasty *Accounts of Assorted Women* (*Liènǚzhuàn*), Book 3, Item 1.

This tale is remarkable for its attribution to a period from which virtually no stories survive: the mid-phase of the Western Zhōu Dynasty (1045–771 BCE). The preceding story, it is true, concerns King Mù, King Gōng's predecessor, and a few additional stories concern events belonging to the reigns of the last three Western Zhōu Kings, but

narrative accounts do not in general become plentiful until some fifty years into the period that followed the Western Zhōu: the Spring and Autumn Era (771–479 BCE).

In spite of its brevity and its relative chronological isolation, the tale of Lord Kāng's mother is endowed with an array of traits that appear in almost all the narratives in this anthology. First, most importantly, the story concerns a prediction made by a wise and perceptive person that is borne out by subsequent events. In this case, the wise person is a woman, the mother of the principal male protagonist. Secondly, this also is typical of the anthology as a whole. Women were excluded from the formal structures of power in the period described, but female figures are often portrayed as possessing a keen understanding of power relationships that enables them to see far into the future. In other words, there is a feminist element in *Tales from the Principalities* that is exemplified here. Thirdly, the story is an illustration of the deadly danger of ostentation, a theme that comes up again and again. King Zhōu destroys Lord Kāng, not out of disappointment at not receiving the same-surname women as concubines, but out of alarm at his subordinate's assumption of a status that appears to threaten his own.

Liǔ Zōngyuán of the Táng Dynasty objected to this tale because he thought it was improper for a mother to advise her son to curry favor with his Ruler by presenting him with the maidens, but the tale is not about ethics. Like nearly all the other tales in the anthology, it is about power and survival. Ethics assume a greater importance in tales coming from later periods. Liǔ also expressed the view that the final sentence on the destruction of Mì contributed nothing of value, but since it validates the prediction, it is in fact essential to this type of story. ~ Eric Henry.

King Gōng of Zhōu 周恭王[1] made an excursion to the river Jīng 涇[2] attended by Lord Kāng of Mì 密康公.[3] Three maidens [of the same surname] eloped with Lord Kāng.[4]

His mother said, "You must present them to the King as tribute gifts. Among animals, let us note, three is sufficient to make a herd; among people, three is sufficient to form a multitude; and as for maidens, three make a bright bouquet-like spectacle. When a King goes hunting in the fields, he doesn't take whole herds; when a Lord travels, he does not bear himself proudly before others; and the directors of the inner palaces do not draw sets of three Consorts from the same lineage. Bright spectacles, we may note, are made up of fine objects. When others use women to create such offerings, what virtue could be sufficient to endure it?[5] Even a King could not endure it, much less a person of little standing[6] like you. A lowly person who supplies himself with every luxury must surely perish in the end."

Lord Kāng didn't present the maidens. A year later, the King

[1] King Gōng, personal name Yī Hù 伊扈. He was the sixth Zhōu King; reign dates: 917–899 (traditional dates: 945–934).

[2] The River Jīng originates as a stream in Gānsù and flows into Shǎnxī Province.

[3] Lord Kāng of the State of Mì, the Rulers of which were bearers of the Zhōu royal surname: Jī 姬.

[4] Conceivably, this means that they were presented to King Kāng by the people living along the River Jīng. But the text says "bēn" 奔, "flee (to a place) for refuge," which in this context would mean something like "eloped." In any event, it appears that no sponsor or matchmaker was involved. The commentator Wéi Zhāo adds that the three were of the same surname. If they, in fact, came from a surnamed clan, this would, in itself, be a sign of high sociopolitical status.

[5] i.e. sufficient to endure the resentment such ostentation would arouse. Kān 堪 means rèn 任, install, employ.

[6] The text has "xiǎo chǒu" 小醜, which to a modern reader is suggestive of "clown"; Wéi Zhāo, however, says that "chǒu" here means "type, variety," a meaning that is attached to the word elsewhere in the text as well.

destroyed the State of Mì.

Author: Unknown, 4th Century BCE.

2. King Lì of Zhōu Obstructs Free Speech

The first ten items in "Tales from Zhōu" (Book 1) are all set in centuries that preceded a catastrophic event that occurred in 771 BCE: in that year, the Zhōu ruling house was toppled, and the King slain by a coalition of disaffected Zhōu noblemen and a tribal non-Chinese people known as the Quǎn ("Dog') Róng. Due to this event the Zhōu had to abandon their old capital city and establish a new one far to the east, with a son of the slain Ruler on the Throne. Most of these ten tales are related in that they each portray some event that is interpreted as a sign of dynastic decline and as a portent of the 771 debacle that was soon to come.

This item concerns a Zhōu Ruler, the third to the last before the downfall of the Western Zhōu, who, due to his unpopularity, had to spend fourteen years of his reign (842–828) as an exile at a place in the nearby principality of Jìn. The item here is devoted to a speech by the Duke of Shào, a Zhōu Court figure who warns King Lì that by exercising a too strict control over speech, he is placing himself in jeopardy.

An interesting aspect of this item is the Duke's detailed description of the many ways that information and opinions are conveyed to a Ruler in a properly run Royal Court. These means of communication include songs, poems, and performances as well as speeches, and are offered by a wide variety of court figures, including blind musicians, blind reciter-performers, men-at-arms, archivists, and diviners.

Summary: King Lì of Zhōu rules harshly, and the people begin to speak ill of him. Angered, he has a shaman from Wèi find out who the slanderers are and kills all the ones whom the shaman accuses. No one

dares to say a word; people converse only with their eyes when they meet on the roads. King Lì boasts to his advisor, the Duke of Shào, that he has stopped up the mouths of his people. The Duke of Shào observes that this is more difficult and dangerous even than stopping up rivers. He urges King Li to allow all classes of people to have appropriate means of expression, such as songs, memorials, poems, records, and admonitions. The ultimate result will be prosperity and abundance. King Li fails to follow this advice, and three years later he is made to reside in Zhì (in the State of Jìn). This is Item 3 in "Tales from Zhōu" (Book 1).~ Eric Henry.

King Lì was harsh, and the people spoke ill of him.[7] The Duke of Shào came to him and said, "The people cannot endure your decrees."[8] The King was angry. He had obtained a shaman from Wèi whom he ordered to keep a watch on all those who spoke ill of him.[9] Those whom the shaman denounced, he killed. No one dared utter any words. When they met on paths and roads they would exchange looks only. The King was very pleased and said to the Duke of Shào, "I am able to block censure; no one dares to speak any more."

"That is to make a barricade," said the Duke of Shào. "Stopping up the people's mouths is worse than stopping up a river. When a river is blocked and bursts through a dike, there are always many casualties. People are like that as well. Therefore, those who manage rivers make sluices for the water to drain away, and those who manage people make occasions for them to speak.[10] That is why, when the Son of Heaven holds

[7] King Lì 厲王 was Hú 胡, the son of King Yí 夷 and the grandson of King Gōng 恭.

[8] Shàogōng 邵公 was Duke Mù, personal name Hǔ 虎, the grandson of Duke Kāng of Shào. He was a minister of the King (wáng qīngshì 王卿士).

[9] Wèi wú 衛巫 means Wèi guó zhī wú 衛國之巫, a shaman from the State of Wèi.

[10] Xuān 宣 is similar to fang 放, release.

court, he has everyone from high ministers to the men-at-arms offer poems; and the blind musicians offer songs, the archivists offer records, the teachers offer criticisms, the blind whose eyes lack pupils offer lyrics, the blind whose eyes retain their pupils offer recitations, and the archivists offer writings. The tutors offer criticisms, the sightless who possess pupils offer corrective criticisms, and the hundred [blind] declaimers offer speeches of admonition. The common people have their sayings transmitted, the King's attendants cite regulations pertaining to their functions, the King's relations correct the shortcomings of his administration,[11] the blind narrators and the Court Annalists give instruction, venerable teachers add to this, and only then does the King commence his deliberations. In this way affairs are carried out in such a way that they do not go awry.

"The people's having a voice is like the earth's having mountains and streams; wealth and useful substances derive from them. It is like the plains and wetlands having depressions and channels; food and clothing develop from them. When the people's voices are heard, what is helpful and what is injurious then grows clear; the helpful can then be put into practice and the injurious can be warded off. That which multiplies wealth and tools is the same to us as food and clothing. What worries people's hearts is made evident through the voice, and once this is done may be acted upon. How can their voices be blocked up? If you block up their voices, how long can you survive?"

The King did not heed this advice. Thenceforward, no one in the State dared utter a word, and in three years, the King was driven into

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[11] Bǔ 補 means bǔguò 補過, making up for errors; chá 察 means 察政, seeking out what is correct. *Zuo Tradition* says,"From the King on down, everyone had fathers, elder and younger brothers, and sons, to compensate for missteps. "自王以下, 各有父兄子弟, 以補察其過也 (Xiānggōng 14, Item 6).

exile in Zhì 彘.[12]

Author: Unknown, 4th Century BCE.

3. Rescue of a Royal Heir

This tale, in which a Court Officer sacrifices the life of his own son in order to preserve the life of a young heir to the Throne, is an illustration of the transcendent value of political loyalty. The boy thus saved became King Xuān, the second-to-last Ruler of the Western Zhōu. He brought about a partial restoration of the regime's strength, but also, according to ancient storytellers, made missteps that offended the unseen powers

Summary: After the expulsion of King Lì, the Duke of Shào protects King Lì's young son from an angry mob by allowing his own son to be killed instead. The Duke thus saves the person who becomes King Xuān, the next Zhōu Ruler. This Tale is Item 5 in "Tales from Zhōu" (Book 1). ~ Eric Henry.

When King Lì fled to Zhì from the disorder, his son [the future] King Xuān[13] was in the mansion of the Duke of Shào, where he had fled for refuge, and the people of the State besieged it. The Duke of Shào said, "Formerly I admonished the King many times. He didn't listen, and so this disaster arose. If I now kill the King's son, he will surely think I am resentful and have stirred the people up against him. One who serves a Territorial Lord endures peril but is not embittered, suffers wrong, but does not grow angry. How much more must this be true for one who serves a King?"

He thereupon used his own son as a substitute for Xuān and,

[12] Zhì was in the State of Jìn, in the area known as Hédōng 河東.

[13] King Xuān 宣王 was actually not the son, but the grandson of King Lì. His father was Jìng 靖, the son of King Lì.

when Xuān came of age, established him on the Throne.

Author: Unknown, 4th Century BCE.

4. An Ill-Advised Census

This is one of several items in "Tales from Zhōu" (Book 1) devoted to an event that is portrayed by the author as a sure sign of the imminent downfall of the royal House of Zhōu. The "King Xuān" who appears in this item is the same figure who in the previous item, while still a child, is rescued from death by a loyal court officer. King Zhōu reigned from 827 BCE to 780 BCE. His unusually long reign of forty-seven years is a datum that does not harmonize particularly well with the idea that he made mistakes that contributed to the downfall of his kingdom. Traditional Chinese historiography, however, is such that he has to be portrayed as masking fatal mistakes, since his kingdom was destroyed in 771, only nine years subsequent to the end of his reign. The idea that censuses are useless, and bad in the sense that they cause a State's prestige to decline, is curious and does not appear elsewhere in early Chinese texts. Nevertheless, the idea seems to have been plausible to traditionally-minded readers. The first chapter of a Ming Dynasty vernacular novel on Zhōu Dynasty historical traditions, *Chronicle of the States of the Eastern Zhōu*, reintroduces and dramatizes this episode in its first chapter. In this item, the official who urges the King to abandon his plan to conduct a census mentions several other administrative procedures, some of which appear only in this item.

Summary: After suffering heavy losses in battles with the Jiāng Róng, King Xuān takes a census of the people at Tàiyuán, with a view to forming a new Army. Zhòng Shānfù objects to this, pointing out that the various royal ministers have many ways of estimating the numbers and resources of the people without resorting to population counts. The

King's seasonal hunting expeditions also provide opportunities to estimate numbers. Holding a census is tantamount to publicly admitting that the numbers of the King's subjects have dwindled. This will cause the Vassal Lords to fall away and create disaffection among the people. King Xuān takes the census anyway, and in the next reign the State is lost.~ Eric Henry.

After losing the Army of Nán Guó,[14] King Xuān took a census of the people at Tàiyuán 太原. Zhòng Shānfù admonished him, saying, "It is improper to impose a census on the people. In ancient times, censuses were not taken, yet the people's numbers were known. The Director of the People [*sī mín*] gathered records of the orphaned and the deceased; the Director of Name Conferral[15] [*sī shāng*] gathered records of surnames; the Director of Multitudes [*sī tú*] gathered records of armed hosts; the Director of Criminal Justice [*sī kòu*] gathered records of crimes; the Chief of Cattle-herders gathered records of animals requisitioned for sacrifice; the Chief of Craftsmen gathered records of changes in occupation; the Storeroom Superintendent kept records of objects collected; the Granary Superintendent kept records of grain disbursed; and in this manner the numbers of the populace, deaths and births, incoming and outgoing goods, and the goings and comings of people could all be known. Once these records were complete, the state of the people was further examined by means of their service to the

[14] This took place at Jiāngróngshì 姜戎氏. Nán guó 南國, the southern states, refers to the area between the Chángjiāng 長江 (Yángzǐ) and Hàn 漢 rivers.

[15] "*Sī shāng* 司商" is a rare designation. Wéi Zhāo explains that the word *shāng* here refers onomatopoetically to the sound made by a gong used in the naming of newborns. *Shāng* 商 refers to a pure metallic sound 金聲清. This arises from the circumstance that when a person was newly born, chimes were sounded to determine his name.

Throne;[16] the King would hold plowing ceremonies in the royal grain-fields and conduct spring hunts in the intervals between farming labor. The King would come as well to the royal fields at harvest time. He would hunt in the fall after the tasting of the new grain, and would conduct winter hunts at the close of the year. On all these occasions he had ample opportunity to observe the people's numbers—why should he have taken censuses? To remain silent concerning their diminished numbers and yet to conduct a great census is tantamount to proclaiming the scarcity of your people and admitting your own disinclination to govern. When Rulers reveal the scarcity of their subjects, the Lords withdraw their support, and when they show themselves indisposed to govern, they have no means to issue orders. Furthermore, conducting a census for no reason is an act abhorred by Heaven. It will do injury to your government and create troubles for your heirs."

The King conducted the census anyway. When King Yōu came to the Throne, the State met with destruction. [17]

Author: Unknown, 4th Century BCE.

5. Portents of Dynastic Ruin

This item concerns a number of natural events—earthquakes and alterations in the State of mountains and rivers—occurring in the Zhōu capital region during the reign of the last western Zhōu King that are seen as infallible portents of dynastic disaster. The Táng Dynasty literatus, Liŭ Zōngyuán, remarkably for a Chinese living in traditional times, flatly refused to believe that such events have any portentous significance whatsoever and poured ridicule on this story, saying,

[16] i.e. the people could be observed and counted when they provided corvée labor on the royal grain fields or when they assisted (as game-beaters, animal handlers, etc.) in royal hunting expeditions.

[17] Yōu-wáng or King Yōu 幽王 was Gōng Niè, the son of King Xuān.

"Events relating to mountains, rivers, rainfall, and earthquakes are all natural phenomena that transpire according to their own rules. They bear no relationship to political affairs." He added that the numerological reasoning at the end of Bó Yángfù's speech (see below) is even more absurd. He might have added that certain actions of the King in question are far more credibly related to the downfall of his capital city than any of the phenomena mentioned by the main speaker in the tale. He developed an infatuation for a female temptress and tried to replace the designated heir to the Throne with a son whom he had with the temptress. This enraged the powerful family of the King's Principal Consort, and they at once began making plans and forming coalitions, aimed at overthrowing the King. Ancient readers, however, enjoyed the frisson produced by tales of ominously collapsing mountains and disappearing rivers.

Summary: After King Yōu's accession, earthquakes occur-red throughout the region of the three principal rivers of the Western Zhōu. Based on this event the Court Officer, Bó Yángfù, made a prediction that Zhōu will perish within ten years. His analysis of the event involved *yín-yáng* theory, five-phase (wood, fire, earth, metal, and water) theory, and the use of historical analogy: the fall of Xià and Shāng were preceded by similar natural events. That same year the three rivers ran dry, and Mount Qí, the Zhōu's place of origin, collapsed. Nine years later, King Yōu was killed and Zhōu moved east. This is Item 10 in "Tales from Zhōu" (Book 1). ~ Eric Henry.

In the second year of the reign of King Yōu [779], the beds of the three rivers of Western Zhōu were shaken by earthquakes.[18] Bó Yángfù 伯陽[19]

[18] The three rivers were the Jīng 涇, the Wèi 渭, and the Luò 洛, all of which had their sources around Mount Qí 岐, the ancestral home of the Zhōu. "Western Zhōu" means Hào 鎬, the capital city. Xī Zhōu or Western Zhōu 西周 refers to the

admonished him: "Zhōu will surely perish. The vital essences of heaven and earth do not stray from their natural order. If this order is disrupted, the people will be thrown into turmoil. When the *yáng* force is subdued and cannot come forth, and the *yīn* force is weighed down and cannot rise, earthquakes will occur. Now the region of the three rivers has, in fact, had earthquakes. This shows that the *yáng* force has become dislodged and is invading the *yīn* force. When *yáng* loses its place and is lodged in *yīn*, the springs that feed the streams will necessarily be blocked. Once the springs are blocked, the State must necessarily perish.

"When earth and water mingle freely, they are of use to the people. When the earth is not made moist, the people lack resources. If this does not bring on destruction, what else must we expect? In former times, the Yī 伊 and the Luò 洛 dried up and Xià perished. The Yellow River dried up and Shāng was destroyed. And now the virtue of Zhōu resembles that of those two dynasties in their last phases. Its springs and rivers are blocked, and as they are blocked, they must surely dry up.

"States necessarily depend upon their mountains and streams. The collapse of mountains and the drying up of streams are omens of the destruction of States. Once streams run dry, mountains must surely collapse. If the State is to perish, it will occur within ten years, for ten makes a complete round of numbers. Those abandoned by Heaven are abandoned within one cycle."

That year the three rivers dried up and Mount Qí collapsed. In the eleventh year of his reign, King Yōu was destroyed, and Zhōu moved east.

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capital city Hào 鎬京. King Yōu 幽 resided there, and it was close to Fēn 邠 and to Mount Qí 岐.

[19] Bó Yángfù 伯陽父 was a Court Officer of Zhōu.