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LETTER FROM THE EDITOR-IN-CHIEF

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## CHINA'S SECOND-OLDEST BOOK OF STORIES Gets New Life in Twenty-first Century Political and Social History

*R*ising Asia Journal devotes the current Special Collectors' Issue to *Tales From The Principalities* (Guóyǔ 國語) that come from ancient China, set in the BCE period, and will be of great interest to scholars of Chinese history, politics, and culture, as well as world historians and Asia aficionados at large. We present the *Tales* in nine chapters containing seventy-two stories that give new life to the text that holds relevance in twenty-first century political and social life.

All the stories have been translated by Professor Eric Henry, a renowned specialist in Chinese literature and language, who also serves as the Guest Editor. Dr. Henry, Emeritus Professor at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, explains that most of these stories were compiled around 294 BCE. *Tales* is China's second-oldest book of historical narrative. The oldest Chinese text is the much longer *Zuǒzhàn* 左傳, dating to 420 BCE.

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The stories in this issue reflect the intense preoccupation of people in that era with several issues such as the affairs of the Royal Court, the reason why States were constantly warring, the political and social practices of Kings and lesser Lords, Dukes, Counts, Viscounts, and Marquises, and the shenanigans of their Consorts and Ladies-in-Waiting. Overlaid with prophesy, ritual, divination, and paranormal phenomena of all types, the *Tales* portray a society that carries lessons for the present-day.

*Tales* is set within an area that now belongs to north China, but in the world of *Tales*, this area is occupied by competing political entities called *guó*, “states” or “nations,” or, as in this special issue, “principalities.” The Rulers of these States were theoretically obedient to the King of the Zhōu Dynasty, also known as “the Son of Heaven,” but in actual practice they acted as Rulers of independent kingdoms. The Rulers of the *guó*, were not Kings, but aristocrats who held a range of feudal ranks reflecting some degree of subordinacy to the King of the Zhōu Dynasty. These ranks have been translated as Duke, Marquis, Count, Viscount, and Baron, many of whom were blood relatives of the Zhōu King.

Professor Henry explains that the Rulers of the “principalities” spared no effort to outwit, defeat, and diminish each other in war and strategy, but in their public statements they always pretended that they were engaging in these activities out of a desire to serve the Zhōu King.

And, how precisely did these ancient *Tales* reach us? Professor Henry believes that, 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. Even though ancient Chinese “scribes” were unable to mass produce them, the *Tales* were nevertheless widely read. Almost all

Chinese authors from the Warring States Period, and subsequent periods, either cite the *Tales*, or show through their writing that they were familiar with it. Professor Henry writes that *Tales* attracted seven early commentaries, 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.

**I**n “The Rising Asia Review of Books,” we publish timely reviews on the collapse of a Sri Lankan political regime, the right-wing backlash that brought U.S. President Donald Trump to power, and Singapore’s response to pandemics through history.

Shakthi De Silva, Lecturer at the Royal Institute of Colombo, reviews former Sri Lankan President Gotabaya Rajapaksa’s autobiography, *The Conspiracy To Oust Me From The Presidency: How Internationally Sponsored Regime Change Made A Mockery Of Democracy In Sri Lanka*. De Silva notes that Rajapaksa’s election as an Executive President of Sri Lanka in 2019 marked a new benchmark in the island’s political history, as he was the first non-career politician, and the first former military officer, to be democratically elected in the country since independence in February 1948. During his presidential term however, the island ran out of foreign exchange needed for essential imports as power cuts ranged from eight to twelve hours a day, and he was eventually ousted from power through public protests in July 2022. Several scholarly publications, as well as a recent Supreme Court ruling, placed a significant portion of the blame to the policies pursued by the Gotabaya Administration. The release of the former president’s auto-

biography in 2024 marks a significant addition to the discourse surrounding Sri Lankan politics. Even so, Gotabaya fails to make a convincing case for “internationally sponsored regime change,” as his book offers no empirical evidence of foreign involvement, and instead exposes a presidency hobbled by domestic interest groups, ideological rigidity, and ultimately brought down as a result of economic mismanagement.

Por Heong Hong, Lecturer at University Sains Malaysia and a member of this journal’s editorial board, reviews the book, *Pandemics in Singapore, 1819–2022: Lessons for the Age of COVID-19*, co-authored by social historian Loh Kah Seng and medical doctor Hsu Li Yang. Published in 2024, it adopts a long-durée lens to examine the lessons historical pandemics may offer in the wake of Covid-19. The book asks, what lessons can be drawn from the past pandemics? It explores the social, economic, and political dynamics that shaped the emergence of quarantine systems and the designation of notifiable diseases in British-controlled Singapore. The narrative resists simplistic portrayals of colonial power versus passive and undifferentiated native subjects, which is common in some postcolonial accounts. Instead, the authors reveal internal divisions within colonial administrations and tensions between municipal and colonial authorities, such as disputes over roles and responsibilities in public health. The authors highlight the value of social memory as a source that helps fill the gaps left by official records and institutional amnesia. The book ambitiously surveys all major disease outbreaks in Singapore’s history. The authors caution against relying too heavily on familiar precedents, which is illustrated in the reliance of the Singaporean authorities on the SARS experience in their initial response to Covid-19, when the nature of the two diseases was different.

Salikyu Sangtam, Associate Professor at Tetso College, reviews *Backlash: Donald Trump And The Remaking Of America* by journalist Nirmal Ghosh, former Washington, D.C. bureau chief of *The Straits Times*. A timely volume, its value lies in its brevity, which sketches events that led not only to the rise of Trump, but also the impending “backlash” against the perceived erosion of social stability, and rise of anxiety among the right-wing. Trump’s America First slogan has traveled abroad, as seen in the rise of the far-right populist party in Japan, Sanseito, in the July 2025 Upper House election under its leader, Sohei Kamiya. *Backlash* cautions about how democracies are susceptible to the emergence of authoritarian leaders, and how such democratic erosion happens imperceptibly. The book is a cautionary tale on the need to protect democracies and the institutions that support the existence of democracy. Most democracies often do not collapse suddenly. Rather, they die gradually, often at the hands of elected officials, those who are charged with the legitimacy and duty to protect the fundamental foundations of democracy.