Ironical Critics at Ancient Chinese Courts (Shih chi, 126)∗

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Many studies have been written, especially in Eastern Asia, on the greatest historian of antiquity, Ssu-ma Ch‘ien[1]. His large work entitled Shih chi[2], the plan and some chapters of which are due to his father Ssu-ma T’an[3], was completed at the beginning of the first century B.C. The title has usually been translated as "Historical Memoirs" but Burton Watson’s rendering "Records of the Historian" is clearly better. A problem into which I cannot enter now is what the word shih meant in Han China. Shih is part of the title t’ai shih kung, which was used by both historians. Its actual meaning is Great Astrologer, an office held by both of them, but their work undoubtedly belongs to the realm of history.

This does not mean, however, that all of the 130 chapters of this large encyclopaedia — the Shih chi being in fact a great encyclopaedia covering the whole Chinese world from an historical point of view — are “really” or entirely historical. The Records include, for example, eight monographs mainly dealing with such technical matters as the calendar, astronomy, canals and ditches. What I have in mind here is a general observation, namely that the authors of the Records on occasion knowingly provide the reader with information which, when analysed, appears to be highly suspect and, at times, even impossible. This assertion may at first sight seem rather strange since there is no denying that Ssu-ma Ch‘ien belonged to the school of thought which emphasized reality, as opposed to false or vain utterances.

The intentional inclusion of unreliable information in the Shih chi appears in different forms. Best known are the telling quotations from intimate conversations which could not have been recorded at the moment but must have been reconstructed at a later time by somebody who had not himself been present. We read, almost as in a thriller, in the translation by Derk Bodde, the description of the intrigues carried on by the eunuch Chao Kao[4] together with one of the sons of the just deceased First Sovereign Emperor of Ch‘in[1]. It goes without saying, and it is even stressed by the historian, that such a tète-à-tête deliberation took place only in the presence of the two men, who, moreover, were to die soon afterwards. Who, then, recorded the strictly secret dialogue?

∗ When preparing the English version of this study I was given much valuable advice by Professors Derk Bodde, Jack Dull and F. A. Kirmayer, Jr. to all of whom I offer my sincere thanks.

1 Shih chi 87, pp. 16–21; edited by Takigawa Kametaro, Shih chi kachou kosho[5], Peking 1955; D. Bodde, China’s First Unifier, Leiden 1938 (Hong Kong 1966), pp. 26–28.
It is clear that such talks have been invented, in this case probably by none of the authors of the Shih chi. But in any case, from our point of view, it does not matter who wrote down the dialogue since what we are really interested in is why such a patently scrupulous historian as Ssu-ma Ch'ien should have included such speeches in his work. The reasons for doing this cannot have been "purely" historical; on the other hand, Ssu-ma Ch'ien never tried to write anything which was in absolute contradiction to factual history. What Ssu-ma Ch'ien must have had in mind was evidently a historicity of a "higher" sort which had to be documented also from the psychological and artistic point of view or, in other words, which would carry a wider appeal than the dry facts per se.

It has been shown many times that Ssu-ma Ch'ien was a critical historian. If possible, he tried to compare his sources with one another or even to confront them with the facts so as to find out their reliability. We know of his numerous travels in many provinces of China where he could, for example, critically verify the legends concerning the tombs of mythical emperors of remote antiquity. But we have to state that Ssu-ma Ch'ien also included in his historical encyclopaedia information the reliability of which he could not have proved, and which he had in fact no intention of proving.

In the introduction to the first of the eight monographs mentioned before (Shih chi 13) we learn of Ssu-ma Ch'ien's adoption of a principle allegedly proposed by Confucius, viz. that even doubtful information may be handed down: i lse ch'uan i [6]: "If I learn something doubtful I hand it down as such." We have to stress, of course, that the context of this statement refers to doubtful dates and facts concerning the most ancient and partly legendary period of Chinese history. We, too, may agree with Ssu-ma Ch'ien's (and Confucius') standpoint since a strongly critical attitude towards such kinds of information would invariably lead to their rejection and thus, finally, to their complete loss.

Such an approach to history leads to at least two questions: 1) Is the principle of handing down doubtful information generally valid? 2) If so, should we interpret such a principle as an inclination towards an artificial creation of "historicity", or have we to deal again with an effort to constitute a half-historical, half-literary genre which would illustrate better the "hidden" history?

We cannot answer these questions immediately. Let us first try to study more carefully some of Ssu-ma Ch'ien's methods. We cannot say for sure

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1 This problem was thoroughly examined by Yu. L. KROLL, "O nekotorykh osobennostjah metoda ispol'zovanija istočnikov v Istoricheskih zapiskakh Syma Cjana" (On some peculiarities of the method of using the sources in Ssu-ma Ch'ien's "Historical Records"); in the collection of articles Dal'nij Vostok, Moscow 1961, pp. 117—139. I am grateful to the Leningrad scholar for several suggestions, i. a. especially on Ssu-MA Ch"ien's theory on "handing down the doubtful". See also the next note.

2 Shih chi 13, p. 3; CHAVANNES, Les Mémoires historiques de Sse-ma Ts'ien III, p. 2 (further MH).
whether Ssu-ma Ch'ien himself created the form of biography or memoir (chuan), but it is clear that he made large use of it and made it popular for all generations of historians to come. In fact, neither the translation "biography" nor "memoir" is fitting. Those chapters called chuan in the Shih chi do not only deal with the lives of individuals and the times in which they lived but also with groups of people linked together in some particular way. Such a chuan includes, for instance, men of the same profession, or men belonging to the same ethnic group or territory. For example, Ssu-ma Ch'ien provides in a single chapter information on several philosophers or poets, or principled assassins, but he also has separate chapters on the southwestern barbarians or on Korea.

In fact, the word chuan refers to something which is half-historical, half-fictitious in origin; therefore the most exact translation of it would be merely "tradition". Now, we find in the Shih chi seventy chapters of the so-called biographies entitled lieh chuan, a term which should probably be translated as "ordered" or "organised tradition". I believe that by the very choice of this particular term Ssu-ma Ch'ien tried to convey to, and emphasize for, his readers a certain conception. But from the contents of some of these biographies we may also conclude that it is not the mere registration of facts and data that plays the most important role; indeed, such a role may sometimes be quite subsidiary.

The well-known Ch'u poet Ch'ü Yüan has a large biography in the Shih chi but scholars who, like James Hightower, have tried to reconstruct the poet's life from it have not had much success. To understand why this is so, we must first realize what Ssu-ma Ch'ien tried to accomplish in the biography. We find (and this applies not only to Shih chi biographies but to those in late dynastic histories as well) that the biographies try to present certain characteristics of their heroes by recording their own speeches and writings. Thus the aim of such a biography is not necessarily that of documentation but sometimes that of literature, of art.

In the case of Su Ch'in, for example, the picturesque wandering politician of the Warring Kingdoms, H. Maspéro tried to show quite convincingly that historically Su Ch'in did not exist. The personality of Su Ch'in was,

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5 H. Maspéro, "Le roman de Sou Ts'in", in Études Asiatiques 1925, II, pp. 127-142, "Le roman historique dans la littérature chinoise de l'Antiquité", in his Études historiques, Vol. III, Paris 1950, pp. 53-62. The same, "La chronologie des rois de Ts'i au IVe siècle avant notre ère", TP 25 (1928), pp. 367-386. The problem of Su Ch'in's historical existence was studied anew by Hsü Chung-shu, "Lun Ch'ang-kuo t's'e ti pien-hsieh chi ju kuan Su Ch'in chu wen-t'ı" [9] (On the compilation and writing down of the "Chan-kuo ts'e" as well as on the problems in connection with Su Ch'in), LSYC 1964, 1, pp. 133-150. As far as the political history connected with Su Ch'in is concerned Hsü's conclusion is negative like that of Maspéro's (p. 150), but on the personality of Su Ch'in Hsü says that it may not belong to "reliable
according to Maspero, invented because such a hero was needed to enrich the account of the disturbed period of the Warring Kingdoms. For cases like this, Maspero proposes the term "roman historique"; had he been writing in English, he would probably have preferred the word "fiction".

I believe it follows from what has been said, that there is no reason to doubt the existence of fiction in the Shih chi. What we have to determine further, however, is whether the fiction was introduced by Ssu-ma Ch'ien himself into his work intentionally or whether it was simply taken over by him from other sources. As far as Su Ch'in is concerned we might well believe that Ssu-ma Ch'ien simply accepted an older tradition without feeling any necessity to doubt it.

As a means of clarifying this problem, the collective biographies in the Shih chi may be of great importance. By "collective" I do not mean the biographies devoted to two or three men only bound together by a concrete historical connection but rather the several biographies at the very end of the book (chapters 119—129). In these chapters the men treated together are grouped according to their character and activities, not necessarily with regard to chronology, territory, or other historical circumstances.

With the exception of chapters 120 and 123, which are probably misplaced, the nine chapters mentioned deal with the following social groups: reasonable officials, Confucian scholars, harsh officials, wandering knights, imperial male favorites, ironical critics, diviners of lucky days, another kind of diviners, and finally the money-makers. To be sure, during the Warring Kingdoms and under the Han other social groups also existed, but those adduced by Ssu-ma Ch'ien are indeed varied.

To the higher strata belong the two kinds of officials and, of course, the favorites. An important role in social life was also played by the diviners. The other strata are represented most distinctly by the wandering knights (or bandits, rebels, heroes) as well as by the two groups of diviners. Somewhere in between we find the rich money-makers who may have been very influential in the places where they lived but who cannot be identified directly with the ruling group. We, finally, have the group of rather strange counsellors or court jesters for which I tentatively use the denomination "ironical critics".

We should still mention that another chapter of collective biographies (86) on the principled assasins[10] should by rights also belong to the nine chapters just mentioned. Yet, contrary to this expectation, this chapter is placed between the biographies of the poets and dignitaries Ch'ü Yüan[11] and Chia I[12], on one hand, and the biography of the businessman and legalist politician Li Ssu[13], on the other. As a matter of fact, another chapter might well have been included in the Shih chi, compiled from material already existing in it.

history* (hsin shih) [52], but that it also could not have been simply invented (pp. 136—137). This opinion of Hsō is evidently a relatively plausible conclusion.
This would be a collective biography of the wandering counsellors (yu shui\(^{14}\)) who offered their services at numerous courts of the Warring Kingdoms. It may be that there was too much such material on the wandering counsellors to compress them all within a single chapter, though there may have been other reasons why Ssu-ma Ch'ien did not class them as one group. As far as we are concerned, we must not focus our attention on the wandering counsellors but on the settled ones, whose statements and some of whose actions — as well as, to a lesser extent, their careers — are described in chapter 126 of the *Shih chi*.

This chapter presents several difficulties, the first being the translation of its title. Neither of the title's two characters, *ku chi*\(^{15}\) (also read *hua chi*) was used for the first time by Ssu-ma Ch'ien. However, an analysis of all the places where the term occurs does not yield any solid basis for its understanding and translation. The Soviet scholar B. M. Alexeiev translated the term into German as "glatte (gleitende) Sucher",\(^8\) which we might perhaps render as smooth or even slippery. His was an attempt at a literal translation and Alexeiev was not wrong when he presented in the same study other freer translations like actor (jester, clown, madman, etc.). There are still other translations like beaux parleurs\(^7\), humorists\(^8\), bouffons\(^9\) or, as in Burton Watson's translation, wits and humorists\(^{10}\).

There is no denying the fact that all these terms, from one point or another, are quite legitimate. Nevertheless, they do not, in fact, represent a real translation since they are not based upon the explanation of the two words but give a description, an explanation of the activities of people characterized by them. This is evidently not the best solution but, at least for the time being, there seems to be no other. But, if we try to translate the term *ku chi* according to the contents of the chapter entitled by it, we obviously have to know something about these contents.

Ssu-ma Ch'ien himself gives us a clue as to how to understand this chapter; but unfortunately at the end of the chapter's three stories he sums up, rather too succintly, the successful results of his heroes' clever speeches as follows:  
"Is something like that not magnificent?" We learn something more in the last chapter of the *Shih chi* where each of the 129 chapters is characterized: 
"(Those people) were not dragged down by the customs of their times, nor did they fight for power or profit. Above and below there was no barrier for them which could hold them back. They did no harm to any man since they practised the Way.\(^{11}\)" Thus we may see quite clearly that what Ssu-ma

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8 Basil M. Alexeiev, "Der Schauspieler als Held in der Geschichte Chinas", *AM*, X (1935), 1, p. 35.
7 Chavannes, *MH* I, p. CCXLIX.
9 Ibidem.
11 *Shih chi* 126, p. 12.
12 *Shih chi* 130, p. 58.

\([14] 遊說 \) \([15] 滑稽\)
Ch’ien highly praised is the independence, determination, unselfishness and critical standpoint of those ku chi.

Not all of the chapter is a product of Ssu-ma Ch’ien’s brush. This is also one of the reasons why it has never been fully translated into any western language. Only the first three stories were written by Ssu-ma Ch’ien and deal with three pre-Han personalities: the clever speaker from Ch’i, Shun-yü K’un[16], and two so-called actors Meng and Chan or Yu Meng[17] and Yu Chan[18]. The second part of the chapter was added or interpolated by Ch’u Shao-sun[19], a man who is known almost exclusively because of these or other additions to the Shih-chi and who may have worked on them about half a century after Ssu-ma Ch’ien’s death. He is the author of six other stories in chapter 126, four of which are set during the Han period and, more precisely, during the reign of Emperor Wu: the companion Kuo[20], Tung-fang Shuo[21], a Mister Tung-kuo[22], again Shun-yü K’un (mentioned already by Ssu-ma Ch’ien), a Mister Wang[23], and an entirely new personality, Hsi-men Pao[24].

In the introductory note to the second part of the chapter, Ch’u Shao-sun presents us with a different motivation for writing these minibiographies: namely, his wish “to move the hearts and stir the ears of those who like stories and who read these texts.” In other words, also with reference to the unorthodox philosophers (those who are not canonical) Ch’u Shao-sun presents his readers with amusing stories.

Another problem immediately appears: why does Ssu-ma Ch’ien, whose main interest is in “modern history”, i.e. that of the Han period (cf. the two large volumes of Watson’s translation which deal entirely with the Han) deal exclusively in this chapter with heroes of the Warring Kingdoms? We can only speculate that he either held that the somewhat anarchistic and unorthodox attitude of his heroes was inappropriate for the rather stiff regime of Emperor Wu or, as seems more probable, he did not find under the Han any personality who, in his opinion, would have been able to offer bold criticism under the existing strong political and ideological pressures. From this point of view Ch’u Shao-sun was clearly right to add to Ssu-ma Ch’ien’s stories other stories relating mostly to the time of Emperor Wu — stories of events, however, which had not been actually witnessed by Ch’u Shao-sun himself but by Ssu-ma Ch’ien. I have to show that the basic viewpoint of the two authors of chapter 126 were not the same.

We are not sure of Tung-fang Shuo’s dates, but we may take it for granted that he was a contemporary of Ssu-ma Ch’ien, whose dates, though not definite, are generally accepted to be approximately 145 (or 135) — 90 B.C. We might at the first sight be surprised by the fact that Ch’u Shao-sun pays

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13 Shih chi 126, p. 13.

[24] 西門豹

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attention to somebody whom he himself did not know personally and who had been omitted by Ssu-ma Ch'ien. But even more surprising is the fact that Ch'u Shao-sun brings Shun-yü K'un into the picture for a second time (after he has already been treated by Ssu-ma Chien), and that he even introduces another personality who lived in the fifth and fourth centuries B.C., namely the prefect Hsi-men Pao who, says Ch'u Shao-sun, brought to the superstitious natives of Yeh on the Yellow River the blessing of Chinese civilisation. Why had such a man been neglected by Ssu-ma Ch'ien? Was Hsi-men Pao really a historical personality or was he merely a symbol, or was he simply a pretext for telling a nice story?

Is there always a clearcut difference between a story and history? Etymologically those two words are closely related even in English. But let us now come back to "real" history, i.e. definitely chronological history. We may be astonished that in the first part of chapter 126 we are faced with inexplicable anachronisms which already surprised the commentators of the Shi ch. We learn, for example, that Shun-yü K'un lived at the court of King Wei of Ch'i who, according to traditional chronology, ruled between 378—343 B.C. The second hero of the chapter, a certain Meng of Ch'u, is credited with 1) having lived more than one hundred years later than Shun-yü K'un, but 2) also having been active at the court of King Chuang of Ch'u, whose dates are 613—591. Thus there is a difference of some 350 years between the two dates. Moreover, the other "actor", Chan, reportedly lived some two hundred years later than his colleague Meng, in the Ch'in dynasty under Emperor Ch'in Shih Huang-ti. Irrespective of which of the two sets of dates for Meng we accept, if we deduct from them two hundred years we do not arrive in either case at the time of Ch'in Shih Huang-ti, i.e. the end of the 3rd century B.C. All these discrepancies are self-evident and no study like that of Maspero's is necessary to disclose them.

As already pointed out, some of the commentators on the Shi ch were greatly disturbed by such gross chronological mistakes. But are we really dealing with mistakes here? Could Ssu-ma Ch'ien, a most experienced historian, really have accepted such dates as historical facts? It would be easy to answer no and to conclude, as has often been done, that the text must have been falsified and written by somebody else. But it would be rash to make such a charge merely because something does not fit in with our modern ideas. I do not think that Ssu-ma Ch'ien was not the author: it is hardly conceivable that Ch'u Shao-sun, writing some decades after Ssu-ma Ch'ien's death, would have been able to add anything to the non-existing text of Ssu-ma Ch'ien.

Admittedly, there may be more than one explanation for Ssu-ma Ch'ien's so-called chronological mistakes. For my part, I believe that what did interest...
Ssu-ma Ch’ien in this chapter was by no means a chronological history but one of another type, which stood higher in his eyes, namely a predominantly social kind of history not restricted by any time limits. Of course, Ssu-ma Ch’ien puts his heroes into an historical setting, as was the custom in Chinese literature both before and long after him, but the historian utilizes the historical tradition handed down to him as raw material for the construction of his own stories. In short, Ssu-ma Ch’ien hands on the actually doubtful information he has received, since it nevertheless appears to him, from his “all historical” standpoint, to be more real, more typical, and more effective. As the Italians put it: Si non è vero, è ben trovato. Even, if it’s not true, it’s at least well invented.

I think I have said enough about the general nature of the chapter 126. It is time now to quote at least a small part of the original text in a preliminary translation. I am selecting, however, only a tiny bit from Ch’u Shao-sun’s biography of Tung-fang Shuo15.

“The emperor once ordered that (Tung-fang) Shuo be regaled with food in the emperor’s presence. When the meat was finished, he (Tung-fang Shuo) took all the remaining food away, thus making his clothes completely dirty. He was often presented with silk cloth in such quantities that he had to carry it away on his back. Thanks to the money and cloth he received, Tung-fang Shuo took for himself young girls from among Ch’ang-an’s beautiful women. He generally retained a wife for only one year and then left her go, taking a new one instead. He spent to the last penny all the money and wealth he had been given on girls. Among the young gentlemen around the emperor, half said that Tung-fang Shuo was a madman...16. Tung-fang Shuo did not see any necessity to change his habits but, on the contrary, addressed the courtiers with a long speech full of Taoist ideas, the result of which, we read, was that “thereafter all the gentlemen became speechless and were unable to bring forth any argument” 17.

Another time Tung-fang Shuo showed his ability to evaluate the future correctly as well as in his irresistible penchant for wit when a strange animal resembling a deer appeared near the Chien-chang Palace. Even the emperor went personally to see the animal, but, since he was unable to recognize what kind of animal it was, he sought advice from among those of his courtiers who were “well versed in all affairs and much read in the Classics”. Nobody was able to explain it. Then, after Tung-fang Shuo had been invited to inspect the animal, he said with a good sense for effect: “I know what it is but I will only say it after I have been given exquisite wine and have been finished with a great meal.” Both conditions were, of course, promptly accepted by the emperor.

16 Shih chi 126, p. 16.
17 Idem, pp. 20—21.
But this, as it turned out, was not the only condition. After having had a rich meal, Tung-fang Shuo was reputedly still impertinent enough to demand public land to the extent of several hundred ch’ing \(^{[20]}\) of fields, ponds and grassland. When this request had again been granted, Tung-fang Shuo finally presented his "explanation" of the animal: "It is the Animal with Even Teeth\(^{[20]}\). There will be somebody coming from a distant country to subject himself to right principles but, before he comes, this Animal with Even Teeth will appear. Its teeth from front to back are uniform without projecting canines. This is why it is called the Animal with Even Teeth\(^{\prime}\). It is hardly surprising that, as foreseen, a year later the Hsiung-nu king Hun-hsieh\(^{[21]}\) came with one hundred thousand of his people to subject himself to the Han. Tung-fang Shuo once again received a great amount of money and other valuable presents\(^{18}\).

The above quotation indicates that Tung-fang Shuo led a Bohemian kind of life, was keen-witted, and must have been an impressive speaker. For this reason he gained the Emperor’s favour. In his description of the strange Animal with Even Teeth we also find a certain amount of irony directed against the omniscient courtiers who had previously dared to criticize him because of his informal way of life but were unable to give the animal a name. In other passages we also find him practising a kind of eremitism which, according to his own words, might be practised even at the Emperor’s court.

I have already pointed out that Ch’u Shao-sun’s intention when composing the six small biographical sketches were not the same as those of Ssu-ma Ch’ien. This may be shown for example by the fact that Ch’u Shao-sun’s account of Shun-yü K’un is but a piquant anecdote without any personal commitment, pathos, or moral judgments\(^{19}\). To be sure, Ssu-ma Ch’ien’s own picture of the same Shun-yü K’un cannot rank as a biography with some others in the Shi chi, for in it Ssu-ma Ch’ien also makes use of literary devices: nevertheless, the basic difference between the two historian-writers it that Ssu-ma Ch’ien, unlike Ch’u Shao-sun, presents Shun-yü K’un as a courageous critic\(^{20}\).

Let us now recall the anachronisms we have noted in the first part of chapter 126. With them in mind, we should not be surprised to find that the name of Shun-yü K’un’s ruler, Wei\(^{[22]}\) means Severe or Imposing. Should anybody miss the hint that the ruler’s name has meaning, he may still get the point from Ssu-ma Ch’ien’s statement that the ruler Wei compared himself with an uncanny bird, allowing one of his prefects to be executed in order to impress the feudal lords, etc.\(^{21}\). In this case the nomen of the king represents also the omen.

\(^{18}\) Idem, pp. 22—23. The explanation of the pun relating to the strange animal is too complicated to be presented here.
\(^{19}\) Idem, p. 25.
\(^{20}\) Idem, p. 2—6.
\(^{21}\) Idem, p. 3.
Now, Shun-yü K’un naturally cannot oppose the awe-inspiring king directly and explicitly since he might very well lose his head without achieving any of his aims. Shun-yü K’un’s courageous but prudent behaviour may be illustrated by a quotation:

"Ch’u undertook a great military attack on Ch’i in the eighth year of the reign of King Wei. The King of Ch’i sent Shun-yü K’un to Chao to ask for military help, for which purpose he received one hundred pieces of gold and ten teams of four horses. Shun-yü K’un gazed up to heaven and laughed so much that he broke the bands of his hat and girdle.

The King said to him: ‘Do you belittle this matter, Master?’ Shun-yü K’un replied: ‘How could I dare to do so?’ Thereupon the king asked whether he could explain his amusement. Shun-yü K’un said: ‘I have just come from the East where I saw a man by the wayside (praying to the God of Earth) for fertile crops. With a single leg of pork in one hand and with a single cup of wine in the other (as his sacrifices), he prayed: ‘May the crop from the high-up fields fill my baskets, may the crop from the irrigated fields fill my cart. When the five kinds of grain become ripe, may they fill my entire house! ‘Now, what I saw him holding in his hands was rather limited while what he wished for was excessive. This was the reason for my amusement!’

Thereupon the King of Ch’i increased his presents to the value of one thousand pieces of gold, ten pairs of white jade disks and one hundred teams of horses with carriages. Shun-yü K’un took his leave and went to Chao where the king placed at his disposal one hundred thousand selected soldiers as well as one thousand war chariots. When this was heard of in Ch’u, its army was withdrawn during the night."

We see very clearly here the triumph of the ingenious critic who by means of fitting irony could adroitly oppose his self-assured ruler and was still able to render help to his own country. Another story regarding Shun-yü K’un illustrates the same point but it is too long to translate here. In the second story we find a rather dramatic and at the same time delightful description of Shun-yü K’un’s drinking capacity, when he boasts of being able to consume in one moment about five gallons of strong drink without undue consequences. Then, just when the moment of highest psychological and erotic excitement approaches, Shun-yü K’un refrains from drinking and draws a moral conclusion: there should be no excess in anything. It is hardly necessary to say that such an impressive teaching was accepted immediately by the king.

The half-literary device or cliché in which the wise counsellor instructs his ruler was, of course, not invented by Ssu-ma Ch’ien. We know it from the Chan-kuo ts’e [39] as well as from other sources, and we also find it in the Shih chi itself in those chapters already mentioned which deal with wander-

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[33] idem, pp. 3-4.
[39] idem, pp. 4-6.
ing counsellors. Many of the problems relating to this topic were described by James Crump some years ago as pertaining to the art of “persuasion”\textsuperscript{24}. But, since Ssu-ma Ch’ien grouped his three ku chi\textsuperscript{25} (Ironic Critics) together into one chapter while he did not do the same with the yu-shui, the wandering counsellors, he must have seen some basic difference between the two groups.

The method of persuasion used by the wandering counsellors consisted more or less of extensive and lengthy descriptions of the advantages or deficiencies pertaining to various proposed solutions of political or military problems. The form of argumentation ran roughly as follows: “If you, my ruler, take move A against kingdom X and at the same time make proposal B to the kingdom Y, then you may expect success (or failure), because, . . .”, etc. The effect of those arguments was further reinforced by numerous references to examples from antiquity. Here we see the misuse of history for practical purposes. In such persuasive speeches the speaker is virtually free to select any examples or suggestions he wishes since he has to fear no personal danger from his ruler.

Ssu-ma Ch’ien’s ironical critics, on the other hand, find themselves in a much more delicate situation. Their intention and task is to assert themselves against their own ruler or, in some cases, against various interests and pressure groups. Their method is to use wit, irony and satire in such a way as to achieve their aim without running into difficulties and eventual punishment. Let us remember Alexeiev’s rendition of the word ku (in ku chi) as “smooth” or “slippery”. Both in the English word “slippery” and its Chinese counterpart ku\textsuperscript{134} there is a suggestion of water (thus ku contains the “radical” for water, no. 85).

I believe that this coincidence is not accidental. The ku chi were constantly operating on slippery ground; the sought to draw attention to their ruler’s slips and to correct them, but had to be careful not to slip in the process themselves. The ku-chi proposed serious criticism of the sovereign’s conduct and policy, using irony to present their remonstrances; but they did not have the pure jester’s licence — they were by no means sure of escaping punishment if they offended their ruler. Such a way of persuasion or exhortation was not easy to follow, and although it could lead to a morally sound solution it was also rather dangerous. This, I would like to stress, was the original meaning of the term ku chi as well as, for Ssu-ma Ch’ien, of the small court group to which he gave this name. This does not mean, of course, that the meaning remained stable forever.

Alexeiev’s study of portions of Shih chi chapter 126 occurs in this article “Der Schauspieler als Held in der Geschichte Chinas” (The Actor as Hero in

\textsuperscript{24} J. I. CRUMP, Intrigues. Studies of the Chan-kuo Ts’e, Ann Arbor 1964, especially chapter VIII.

\textsuperscript{25} For the explanation of the binome ku-chi see my study “The Etymology of ku-chi”, ZDMG 122 (1972), pp. 149—172.
Chinese History). I have already remarked on his other translations of the term *ku chi* as jester or clown. We have indeed some reasons to believe that the *ku chi* played a role at the ancient Chinese courts similar to that of the court jesters in mediaeval Europe. This similarity is not limited to the element of satire and irony found in their utterances but also to some elements of drama, or perhaps better, comedy. We know, for example, that among the *ku chi* there was at least one, the comedian Meng, who successfully imitated the voice, movements and appearance of the model dignitary Sun Shu-ao.

But the performance of this comedian of Ch'u was not an end in itself. On the contrary, its aim was high since Meng, by wearing the dress of the chancellor Sun Shu-ao, tried to show King Chuang in a plastic way that the late chancellor's family should not have been neglected by him. The moral is clear: a righteous ruler not only has to reward his dignitaries properly but also has to take care of their families after they have died. And the means of what I call a plastic argument such as a change of dress, really belongs to drama or theater. In this connection, it should be said that two of Ssu-ma Ch'ien's heroes in chapter 126 are in fact designated by the character *yu*, generally translated as "actors".

There are also other translations of this term. Alexeiev translates it several times as "dwarf", although the usual designation for dwarf in China of the Han was *chu-ju* (*the red literati?*)7. This rendition does not contradict Alexeiev's previous translation of *yu* as "actor", since he elaborated a conception of the actor as dwarf. In a recent study, M. Gim28 mentions the same problem and, following Alexeiev, explains the character *yu* as "an actor in the most general meaning of the word"; in doing so he refers explicitly to chapter 126 of the *Shih chi*.

Nevertheless the translation "dwarf" is by no means arbitrary. Wang Kuo-wei declared as early as 1915 that the actors of Chinese antiquity were all recruited from among the dwarfs. We have therefore to pay some

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28 *Shih chi* 126, pp. 6—11.
27 *Ju Shun* (fl. 221—265), whose commentary is quoted in *Han shu pu chu* [41] 23, p. 1911, says: "*Chu-ju* are short people who cannot walk." Cf. also the explanation by A. P. P. Hulsewé, *Remnants of Han Law I*, Leiden 1955, p. 404, note 272. The opinion of *Ju Shun* is hardly acceptable since the *chu-ju* were active at various festivities during which they could not merely stand somewhere. Perhaps for this reason Hulsewé translates: "... who cannot walk well." See also *Tso chuan*, Hsiang 4, in the end; *Legge*, pp. 422, 424. I believe that a picture of a *chu-ju* may be found in the book by M. Loewe, *Everyday Life in Imperial China*, London 1968, p. 59.

attention to the problems of the dwarf-actor. One of the possible reasons for Wang's statement may have been the fact that Ssu-ma Ch'ien twice mentions the stature of all three ku chi: that of Shun-yü K'un was less than seven ch'ih, of Meng eight, while Chan is expressly stated to be a dwarf (chu-ju). Ch'u Shao-sun, the author of the second part of chapter 126, does not give any similar information. However, we are informed in the rather large biography of Tung-fang Shuo in the Han shu, allegedly written by Tung-fang Shuo himself, that he was nine ch'ih and three ts'ün (inches) high.

Now, Wang Ch'ung tells us in his Lun heng that the stature of the people of his time generally did not exceed seven ch'ih. Moreover we know that Tung-fang Shuo sharply objected to being designated as a dwarf, and he is reported to have said on one occasion: "The stature of dwarfs is somewhat more than three ch'ih!" Thus, if we replace the Chinese measurement by the metrical system (one ch'ih being 23.1 cm), the stature of Shun-yü K'un would have been somewhat less than 162 cm, that of Meng 185 cm and of Tung-fang Shuo as much as 209 cm. If this is correct, Tung-fang Shuo not only was not a dwarf but was a real giant who would now be welcome in any basket-ball team. But this is evidently a literary exaggeration. It may be that important personalities had to be high, the tradition has that Confucius' stature was even higher than that of Tung-fang Shuo, nine ch'ih had six inches which is about 220 cm. Chan's stature was the only one which was as little as 70 cm, thereby separating him radically from the other ku chi.

Thus the ku chi were neither dwarfs nor actors. Only one of Ssu-ma Ch'ien's ku chi was a dwarf, in all probability a juggler or an acrobat. Two of the three ku chi were also yu, i.e. actors, but this, I believe does not mean that every ku chi was at the same time an actor. In the other part of chapter 126, written by Ch'u Shao-sun, nothing points to any relation of the term ku chi with actor. Thus, if only two of the nine ku chi in the entire chapter are denominated as comedian-actors, it clearly follows that the ku chi as such are not actors.

On the other hand, there is no denying that the ironical critics at times used techniques which are part of dramatic art: change of dress, imitation

[41] 王先謙，漢書補注 [42] 譚曜，論衡校釋 [43] 尺
of voice and manners, gestures and poses, wit and songs, satire and recitation, etc. This is not the place, nor do I feel competent, to find out whether all this points towards the beginnings of the theatre in China. There are several other differing theories concerning the origin of the theatre in that country.

As for my personal opinion, I believe that the criterion for such theatre as against non-theatre is the intention of the former to present art for its own sake (l'art pour l'art). This criterion is, of course, not unambiguous since drama has almost always had to serve political, religious and other ends. However, in the case of chapter 126 of the Shih chi, I would prefer the opinion that the ironical critics, while they may have borrowed a lot technically from comedians and similar people, directed their aims entirely towards the realization of concrete political and social plans. Only a few of the ironical critics made use of "dramatic" techniques to achieve their aims, but all of them without exception uttered witty and sophisticated speeches to master some difficult situation. This seems to be the only criterion they have in common. If we were to seek a short definition of the ku chi, therefore, it might be something as follows: they are courageous, ironic critics and smooth, witty humorists. The first part of the definition may be applied more to the heroes of Ssu-ma Ch'ien, and the second to those of Ch'u Shao-sun.

It might be possible and desirable to study other problems of this rather complicated chapter. I have already mentioned that the protagonists are not restricted to any certain time. The Shih chi is of course not only an historical encyclopaedia but is also a large literary work. The chapter studied by us is clearly one-sided — exclusively literary and fictional. What Ssu-ma Ch'ien wished to describe (or to create?) was a certain type of man, whose character I have tried to depict. In this sense of being archetypes, the ironical critics undoubtedly do belong to history.

Interesting in this connection is the question as to whether all people of this kind represent something more than just types, symbols; in other words, did people like them exist in actual history? The probable answer to this question is negative. Much evidence suggests that the ku chi are primarily symbols of what, from Ssu-ma Ch'ien's standpoint, constituted desirable activity, whereby they struggled in an unorthodox way to cope with the disorderly conditions of their times. In this collective biography Ssu-ma Ch'ien and Ch'u Shao-sun do not give the usual information about the alternate names, the careers as officials or otherwise, and the death, etc. of the ku-chi. I believe that we have to evaluate them as somewhat legendary.

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personalities or heroes whose task, in part, was to increase the reputation of their rulers. Just as the real but, in certain respects also fabulous Duke Huan of Ch‘i [44], had his partner in Kuan Chung [45], so somebody discovered the need for Duke Wen of Wei [46], founder of the Wei kingdom, to have a partner in the person of Hsi-men Pao (and some other persons, too).

It would be still much more interesting and of some historical importance if it could be shown that the ironic critics of the time of the Han Emperor Wu had also been invented. We know that he was a strong personality comparable in more than one respect to the hegemons (pa) [47] of antiquity. If the foregoing suggestion were true, we then might be able to observe the creation of legendary personalities in historical dress at a comparatively late time, that of Han. Tung-fang Shuo is a well-known personality; one is tempted to say that we even have too much information on him. The trouble is, however, just as with Ch‘ü Yuán, that the kind of information we have is not very useful, being nebulous and uncertain rather than soberly factual. I do not think that it would be possible to reconstruct, on the basis of the half-romantic, half-Taoist tradition, a picture of Tung-fang Shuo which would be acceptable to historians today.

Although Tung-fang Shuo lived in the fully historical time of the second century B.C., he belongs to those strange personalities of Chinese history and folklore about whom the amount of information increases in direct proportion to the length of time after their death. Ssu-ma Ch‘ien himself does not mention him at all, even though Tung-fang Shuo is reported to have died earlier than the historian himself. Slightly later, Ch‘u Shaow-sun (probably in the middle of the first century B.C.) was able to relate much more about Tung-fang Shuo, but only after explicitly pointing out his intention to amuse the reader.

Tung-fang Shuo is mentioned once more in the Shih chi, chapter 112, but again only in a later addition which in all probability was written in the first century A.D., being taken over from the Continuation to the Shih chi by Pan Piao [48] and Pan Ku [49] (i.e. the Hou chuan [50] [51]). In Han shu 65 we find a rather large and formally elaborate biography of Tung-fang Shuo which richly draws on the numerous writings attributed to him. We also have still later information about him according to which he was the author [49] of a popular book on mythology, the Shen-i ching [51]. He is further said to have been active at the time of the introduction of Buddhism into China.

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[44] Shih chi 112, p. 34.
[45] H. FRANKE tried to prove that this theory is unreliable: "Zur Textkritik des Shen-i ching", OE 8 (1961), pp. 131–136. The same may be said of another book (Hai-pei) Shih-chou chi [52], also attributed to Tung-fang Shuo.

[46] [47] [48] [49] [50] [51] [52]
as well as when coal was first found. In short, the later traditions about Tung-fang Shuo are completely legendary.

I has to be left to further study to determine whether Tung-fang Shuo is a fully invented, fictitious personality— which seems rather unlikely—or whether some historical core for him exists. If we now finally return to the problem pointed out at the beginning of this paper—that of the degree to which Ssu-ma Ch'ien accepted historically doubtful traditions—we may safely conclude that the ku chi represent a certain type of man which has been created or observed by Ssu-ma Ch'ien. The historian based himself upon tradition and in doing so disregarded "proper", strictly chronological history. Nevertheless Ssu-ma Ch'ien's biographies of ironical critics do belong to a kind of history—to the history of ideas.


42 The same result was reached by Tanaka Kenji on the example of Shi chi 39, the information and formulations of which he compared with the sources like Tso-chuan and Kuo-yü. Tanaka concludes that Ssu-ma Ch'ien preferred the "literary truth" to the "historical" one. Cf. Tanaka Kenji, "Shiki ni okeru ningen byosha" (The Portrayal of Character in the Shih chi), in Chügoku bungaku hō 13 (1960), pp. 25–53, especially p. 52; RBS 6, No. 439.