

PARTICULARLY UNUSUAL, DEFINITELY TRUE:
ANECDOTES AS POLITICAL CRITICISM
IN THE LATE TANG MISCELLANY *SONGCHUANG ZALU**

AMELIA YING QIN 秦璵

1 Introduction

Anecdotes are important vehicles of memory in the construction of historical narratives as well as of various perspectives and discourses on the past.¹ Accounts from major mid- and late Tang collections of historical anecdotes, such as Liu Su's 劉肅 (fl. 806–820) *Da Tang xinyu* 大唐新語 and Li Zhao's 李肇 (fl. ca. 812–830) *Guoshi bu* 國史補, have been widely quoted as source material in historical writings and “brush jottings” (*biji* 筆記) of later times, as well as in scholarly research today. However, as Anna M. Shields points out in her study of the *Guoshi bu* as mid-Tang political and social critique, the original objectives of these miscellaneous collections and how they selected and organized their material remain important and deserve due attention.² Instead of reading large collections with hundreds of accounts such as the *Guoshi bu*, this paper examines a small late Tang compilation of sixteen anecdotes, titled *Songchuang zalu* 松牕雜錄 (Miscellaneous Notes under the Pine Window), to reveal its discursive layers and semantic units made of parallel and contrasting narratives. Once its

* The author can be reached at AmeliaYQ@gmail.com. This study was presented at the Harvard China Humanities Seminar in May 2018 and I want to thank Xiaofei Tian, Wai-ye Li, and Peter K. Bol for their encouragement and advice. I would also like to thank Paul W. Kroll for reading an early version of the work and offering invaluable suggestions for revision. I am greatly indebted as well to my editor Kai Vogelsang and my anonymous reviewer for insightful comments that helped to improve the quality of the final article. All remaining errors, however, are entirely mine.

- 1 For studies of anecdotes as vehicles of the construction of memory and historical narratives, see Li 2007, Schaberg 2001, and Vogelsang 2011 on early Chinese historiography and the composition of and narratives in the *Zuozhuan* 左傳; Luo 2011 on Tang historical miscellanies; Hymes 2011 on Song dynasty oral anecdotes and historical knowledge; Fu Daiwie 2007 on Song *biji* and history of knowledge; Schneewind 2009 on the writing of one Ming history scholar-official's biography; Huntington 2005 on memory and genre in anecdotal recollections of the Taiping Rebellion; as well as works by many others.
- 2 See Shields 2017, 410. For more studies of the nature and compilation of Tang and Song miscellanies, see, among many other works, Bol 1995; Chiang 2007; De Weerd 2016; Dudbridge 2016, 2013; Feng 2010; Hong 2008; Inglis 2013, 2006; Luo 2012; Reed 2007, 2003; Xiong 2011; Zhang 2016, 2012.

hidden patterns are disclosed, this small collection, with its focus on the anecdotal memories of Emperor Xuánzong 玄宗 (685–762, r. 712–756) and the imperial inner palace, proves to be a work of artfully designed political discourse and criticism.

Late Tang compilers of historical anecdotes were fascinated by Xuánzong's reign. Paul W. Kroll points out that for the ninth-century writers, Xuánzong's time was very different to their own, an era on the other side of the historical watershed of the An Lushan 安祿山 (703–757) rebellion, a time chronologically close, but psychologically already distant.³ The largely anecdotal “unofficial or submerged histories” – the “broad sea of other texts swept by additional or competing currents” beneath the surface of “sanctioned narratives” such as the standard histories – reflect the ninth century's retrospective view that came to dominate interpretations of Xuánzong's era in later times.⁴ Many of the collections of such miscellaneous accounts share in the dual nature of “memory and invention” that Kroll identifies in the portrait of Xuánzong's reign in “The Jinyang Gate” 津陽門, a long poem composed by Zheng Yu 鄭嵎 with accompanying commentary that very much resembles a collection of anecdotes.⁵ Though such anecdotal reconstructions of the past often claim historical veracity for their accounts, some claims, when examined closely, prove in fact to be rhetorical approaches to their compilers' subtle discourses. Not all anecdote collections were intended to convey hidden messages, but the *Songchuang zalu* does indeed have a distinctive voice that is apparent in its selection of accounts and their carefully designed interrelations.

2 The Text: Particularly Unusual, Definitely True

The *Songchuang zalu*, compiled by Li Jun 李濬 (fl. 877), presents a series of accounts dating from the reign of Zhongzong 中宗 (656–710, r. 684, 705–710) to the time of Xuánzong 宣宗 (810–859, r. 846–859).⁶ Li Jun did not hold particularly powerful positions at court. The most notable advancement of his career was perhaps his promotion in 877 to the Bureau of State History, due to the recommendation of Xizong's 僖宗 (862–888, r. 873–888) councilor Zheng Tian 鄭畋 (825–883).⁷ His most active period fell squarely within the ten-year span (874–884) of the Wang Xianzhi 王仙芝 (d. 878) and Huang Chao 黃

3 Kroll 2003, 286–87, 307.

4 Kroll 2003, 289–90.

5 Kroll 2003, 297.

6 The text is known as *Songchuang lu* 松窗錄 and *Songchuang xiaolu* 松窗小錄. For discussions on varied titles, author's identity, and on Li Jun's family and political background, see Bian 2002, 4; Twitchett 1986, 2–3, n. 3; Zhou Xunchu 2008, 108–109.

7 See Li Jun's “Huishan si jianshan ji” 慧山寺家山記 in *Quan Tang wen* 816, 8591–8592. See also Bian 2002, 4.

巢 (835–884) rebellions that signified the final stage of the collapse of the Tang. It should also be noted that both Li Jun's father Li Shen 李紳 (772–846) and Zheng Tian's father Zheng Ya 鄭亞 (d. 851) belonged to the political faction of Li Deyu 李德裕 (787–850),⁸ who is featured in two of the anecdotes in the *Songchuang zalu*.

The text appears to be rather stable, with only minor textual variations among different editions.⁹ As will be discussed in detail below, there exists a parallel text entitled *Zhiyi ji* 摭異記, also attributed to Li Jun, that omits two of the sixteen *Songchuang zalu* accounts and includes an additional anecdote, but is otherwise the same.¹⁰ Traditional scholars often regarded the *Songchuang zalu* as a fairly reliable collection whose accounts were thus “sufficient to amend what is missing from the histories” 足以補史闕.¹¹ The text has since served as an additional source for the study of Tang history in general, and contributed in particular to the study of certain Tang figures commanding significant scholarly attention, such as Xuánzong, Li Bo 李白 (701–762), and Gao Lishi 高力士 (690–762). In one case, it even provided evidence for the study of the tree peony as a medicinal plant in early China.¹² The way the text has been treated as a collection of historical facts proves, if not veracity itself, at least the success of its claim to veracity.

In the preface to the *Songchuang zalu*, the claim to “truthfulness” (*shi* 實) goes hand in hand with a promise of “the unusual” (*yi* 異) to the curious reader, an intricate duality revealing a peculiar emphasis in the selection of material. Li Jun writes:

I remember, from as early as childhood, hearing the dignitaries and high officials recount among themselves all the past events of the state court, and, in addition, including many superfluous conversations. Among those that involve matters particularly unusual, I picked from them the accounts that are definitely true, and when I had some leisure, compiled them to produce a small scroll entitled *Miscellaneous Notes under the Pine Window*.

8 For an overview of the Niu–Li factional struggle at mid-ninth-century court, see Dalby 1979, 639–654.

9 The text can be found in the *Shuofu* 說郛, the *Siku quanshu* 四庫全書 (*SKQS*), the *Gushi wenfang xiaoshuo* 顧氏文房小說, the *Jigutang congchao* 稽古堂叢鈔, and the *Congshu jicheng chubian* 叢書集成初編 (*CSJC*). In this paper, my translation and punctuation of the text follows the *CSJC* edition, which is based on the 1770 Qijinzhai 奇晉齋 edition printed by Lu Hui 陸烜 (b. 1761). The *SKQS* edition is also consulted in cases of missing characters or doubtful readings.

10 Twitchett 1986, 3, n. 3. The *Zhiyi ji* 摭異記 can be found in the *Tang ren shuohui* 唐人說薈, the *Tang dai congshu* 唐代叢書, and the Wanwei shan 宛委山 edition of the *Shuofu*.

11 *Siku quanshu zongmu* 140, 1185.

12 Kubo 2009, 121.

濬憶童兒時，即歷聞¹³公卿間敍國朝故事，次兼多語。其有事特異者，取其必實之跡，暇日輟成一小軸，題曰松牕雜錄。¹⁴

If Li Jun as a small child was already used to overhearing court officials tell such tales, this short preface surely serves as explicit evidence of the pervasiveness of literati gossip – the “superfluous conversations” 多語 – in the social and political culture of Tang elites.¹⁵ There must have been a great deal said and heard over the years, and yet Li Jun only chose sixteen accounts of seemingly random events spanning roughly 150 years. Comparing Li Jun’s text to earlier anecdote collections covering similar lengths of time suggests his dual criteria for selecting material – that it be, first, “particularly unusual” 特異, and second, “definitely true” 必實 – are unusually strict. For example, Liu Su’s *Da Tang xinyu* includes 380 anecdotes, spanning a little over 150 years from the beginning of the Tang to the years of the Dali 大曆 (766–779) reign era.¹⁶ Li Zhao’s *Guoshi bu* covers a period of more than 100 years from the Kaiyuan 開元 (713–741) to the Changqing 長慶 (821–824) years with roughly 300 anecdotes.¹⁷ There were indeed a great many stories for Li Jun to collect and choose from, yet he included only sixteen.

Li Jun’s claim to historical accuracy should not be seen as particularly limiting either, since it is not unusual for Tang miscellanies, including large collections, to assert the veracity of their accounts. Oftentimes such a claim was indeed associated with a lofty statement on the purpose of amending history, though some, like the *Guoshi bu*, may still have their own embedded political agenda.¹⁸ For instance, in the *Da Tang xinyu*’s preface, Liu Su claims the tradition of historiography by placing his collection in the lineage of *Shangshu* and *Chunqiu* and by comparing his practice to that of Confucius, Zuo Qiuming, Sima Qian, and Ban Gu.¹⁹ The much-quoted preface of the *Guoshi bu*, whose title openly declares the purpose of supplementing state history, proclaims that the collection will focus on records of events, facts, and the principles of things while purposefully excluding accounts of retribution, gods and ghosts, dreams and divination, and even matters concerning women.²⁰

13 A textual variant reads *jiao* 交 in *Songchuang zalu* (SKQS), 1a.

14 *Songchuang zalu* (CSJC), 1. The preface to the *Zhiyi ji* (29b) reads the same, with minor textual variations, but ends with “and stored it under the pine window” 貯之松窓 instead of noting the title of the text.

15 For studies on anecdotes as social gossip and literati storytelling, see Allen 2014; Chen & Schaberg 2014; Luo 2015.

16 *Da Tang xinyu*, 1–2; Zhou Xunchu 2008, 27–31.

17 *Tang guoshi bu*, 2–3; Zhou Xunchu 2008, 31–35.

18 Shields 2017.

19 *Da Tang xinyu*, 1.

20 *Tang guoshi bu*, 3.

However, despite Li Jun's firm assertion of his accounts being "definitely true," it seems unlikely that his main concern was to amend Tang history with a mere sixteen anecdotal patches. Neither did he claim such a goal. Focusing perhaps too narrowly on the *Songchuang zalu's* claim to veracity, traditional and modern scholars alike seem to have overlooked other possible functions the collection served. It is very likely that Li Jun's selection of anecdotes was governed by a different, and more peculiar, concern for that which was both "definitely true" and "particularly unusual," his emphasis in fact falling on the latter. As no specific purpose was explicitly stated by Li Jun, it must then be interpreted by reading between the lines, and indeed, between the anecdotes.

An overview of the *Songchuang zalu* reveals its strong focus on Xuánzong and his reign. Such a focus is in itself not unusual among Tang miscellanies. Indeed, the extreme prosperity of Xuánzong's reign, and the devastating calamity and decline that followed, furnished many popular stories that promised insider knowledge and veracity and aroused mingled sentiments of amazement, pride, pity, and nostalgia. For example, Li Deyu's *Ci Liu shi jiuwen* 次柳氏舊聞, presented to Wenzong 文宗 (809–840, r. 827–840) in 834 to satisfy the emperor's curiosity about Gao Lishi,²¹ records seventeen anecdotes about Xuánzong passed down directly from Gao himself through oral transmission across the kinship and social networks of Liu Fang 柳芳 (fl. ca. 760) and Li Deyu. Zheng Chuhui's 鄭處誨 (*jinshi* 834) *Minghuang zalu* 明皇雜錄 offers between twenty and thirty anecdotes from Xuánzong's reign era,²² while Zheng Qi's 鄭棨 *Kai Tian chuanxin ji* 開天傳信記, compiled around the same time as the *Songchuang zalu*,²³ presents thirty-two anecdotes from the Kaiyuan and Tianbao 天寶 (742–756) eras with a similar claim to trustworthiness. Zheng's preface notes the richness of anecdotal memories from these most prosperous years of the Tang and their insufficient coverage in existing historical records. Thus Zheng Qi explicitly states his compilation principle of "searching for those [accounts] left behind and scattered, and transmitting those that are definitely trustworthy" 搜求遺逸, 傳於必信.²⁴ The *Kaiyuan Tianbao yishi* 開元天寶遺事, with 159 anecdotes collected by Wang Renyu 王仁裕 (880–956) after the fall of the Tang, represents an interest in the past splendors that lasted into a much later time.²⁵ Accounts in these collections feature a wide range of miscellaneous topics, including fraternal love between Xuánzong and his brothers, administrative affairs, power plays among officials, court regulations and institutional practices, literary and artistic accomplishments of the literati elites, customs and popular practices,

21 Zhou Xunchu 2008, 41–43. *Ci Liu shi jiuwen*, 45.

22 Zhou Xunchu 2008, 51–52.

23 For the debate over the author's identity and time, see Zhou Xunchu 2008, 39–40; *Kaitian chuanxin ji*, 73.

24 *Kaitian chuanxin ji*, 75.

25 Zhou Xunchu 2008, 161–163.

magical powers of Daoist and Buddhist masters, and even imperial bathhouses and hunting expeditions.

Compared to the collections exclusively focusing on Xuánzong's reign, the *Songchuang zalu* anecdotes, in addition to being unusually few, appear to be perplexingly random. Among its sixteen accounts, seven are about Xuánzong and one is about the political intrigues between his ministers Yao Chong 姚崇 (651–721) and Zhang Yue 張說 (667–730). While half of the stories do indeed date from Xuánzong's time, two reach back to the reigns of Zhongzong and Wu Zetian 武則天 (624–705, r. 690–705) and six continue down to Li Jun's own time. These six include two anecdotes about Wenzong, two pertaining to Li Deyu, one list of unusual objects seen by Li Jun himself, as well as one lone account from the reign of Dezhong 德宗 (742–805, r. 779–805), in which his minister Li Mi 李泌 (722–789) offers an eloquent critique of Xuánzong, directing the focus back to Xuánzong again.

Unlike texts such as the *Tang yulin* 唐語林 that suffered major loss and careless restoration, the relatively unproblematic textual history of the *Songchuang zalu* allows at least a tentative discussion of order and structure.²⁶ Two apparent levels of structuring hold the small collection together. First, its sixteen accounts are ordered according to their protagonists' social and political status, with anecdotes about emperors and consorts placed before those pertaining to ministers, and a list of objects appearing at the end of the collection. Second, below the level of social hierarchy, there exists an imperfect chronological order governed by the particular emphasis placed on Xuánzong. Of the eleven anecdotes concerning the Tang imperial house, the seven from Xuánzong's reign are found at the very beginning, in seemingly random order, before the collection moves on to accounts of Zhongzong, Dezhong, and Wenzong, following their historical chronology. The four anecdotes pertaining to ministers are also arranged chronologically, moving from the story of Di Renjie 狄仁傑 (629–700) and his aunt, to that of Yao Chong and Zhang Yue, to the two accounts about Li Deyu. Thus anecdotes about Xuánzong are accorded highest priority, as indicated both by the number included and their placement in the collection.

What, then, is “particularly unusual” about the Xuánzong anecdotes, and in general about all the anecdotes of the *Songchuang zalu*? This paper sets out to explore the definition and discourse of “the unusual” in relation to the “truthfulness” that governs it in the collection. The analysis reveals a two-layered framework that facilitates the interpretation of the collection's core anecdotes (see Figure 1).

26 Zhou Xunchu 2008, 108–109; for the contrasting case of the *Tang yulin*, see Zhou Xunchu 1996, 279–290.

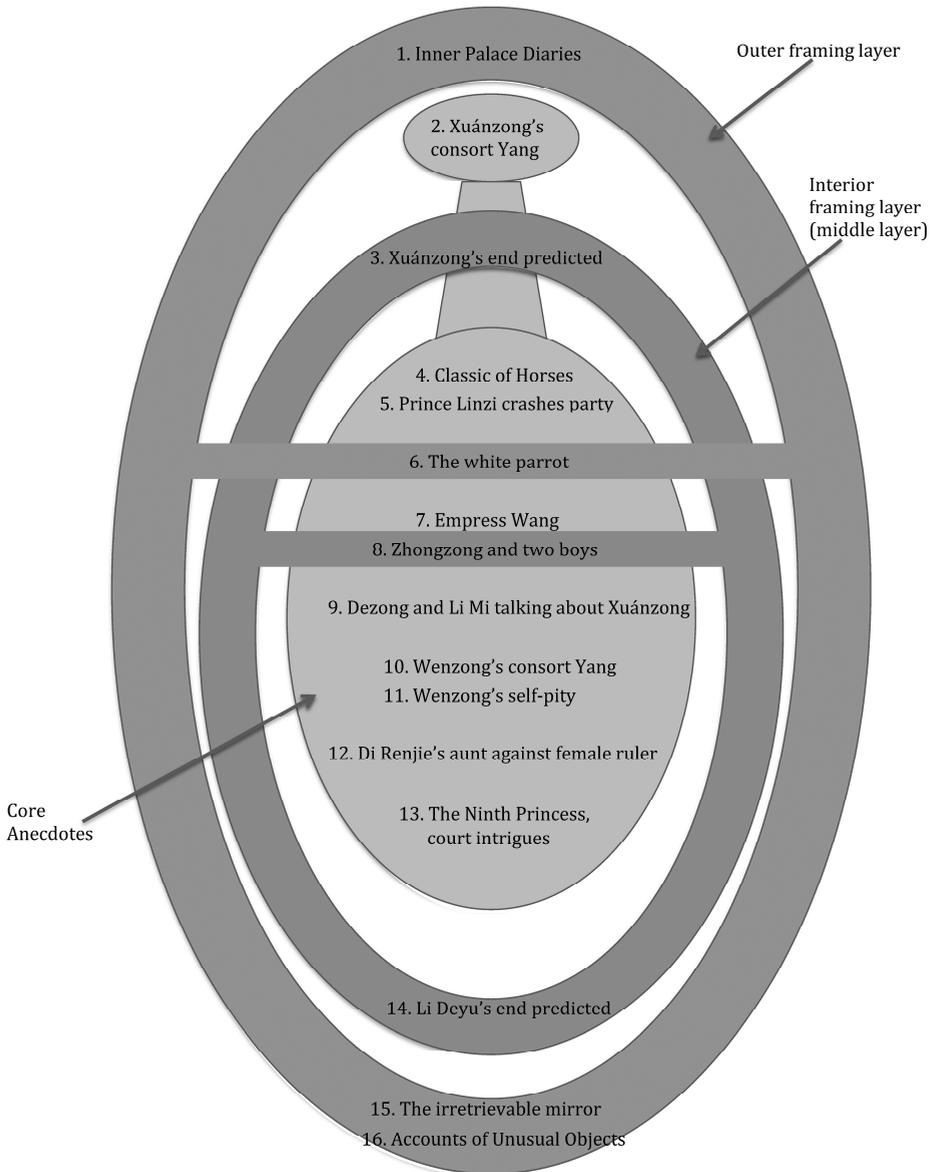


Figure 1. Interpretive framework of the *Songchuang zalu*

The outer framing layer establishes an attitude toward “the unusual” that is rooted firmly in the quest for “truthfulness” and in the idea that the unusual should always be placed squarely in the category appropriate to it. The interior framing layer betrays the collection’s ultimate concern for “the end” (*zhong* 終), be it the end of a minister, a ruler, or a dynasty, and thus establishes it as an implicit perspective on the core accounts. At the core are the anecdotes

about Xuánzong, Wenzong, Dezong, and their consorts and ministers that at first reading do not seem particularly unusual. But when viewed within the two-layered interpretive framework, from the perspective of the concern over the end, they reveal the subtle political criticism of a particular type of “unusualness” in the rulers’ conduct, which can be viewed as a governing principle in the compilation of the *Songchuang zalu*.

3 The Interpretive Framework

3.1 Discourse of the Unusual: Within Boundaries of Truthfulness and Propriety

The collection opens with an account conveying historiographical concerns over the preservation and transmission of truth and virtue and stressing the fear and regret attending their loss. It tells the story of how Xuánzong’s brothers began the practice of keeping the Inner Palace Diaries of Activity and Repose:

During the Xiantian (712–713) reign era, Xuánzong once more suppressed the turmoil within [the ruling house]. Afterwards, because there were no [troublesome] matters within or outside of the Tang territory, [the Sovereign] resolutely dedicated himself to attending to government affairs and set his heart on reading books. [...] The customs within the four seas were harmoniously guided and transformed. He paid special attention to the Diaries of Activity and Repose. During the Xiantian and Kaiyuan years, the court selected renowned Confucians or scholars of integrity and rectitude to fill the duty [of compiling the Diaries.] If there were those who performed their duties well, even after more than ten years [in their positions] they still stood their posts at court. [The Sovereign] cherished them and did not want them to leave, so he promoted their titles to Section Gentlemen that they might hold [both positions] concurrently. From the first year of the Xiantian reign era to the winter of the eleventh year of the Tianbao reign era, seven hundred *juan* of the Diaries of Activity and Repose were completed, and three hundred *juan* of the Inner Palace Diaries of Activity and Repose were completed. The Inner Palace Diaries of Activity and Repose started from the spring of the second year of the Kaiyuan reign era. At that time the Sovereign visited the residence of Prince Ning [i. e., Li Xian 李憲, 679–741], and they performed the ritual propriety of family members. When coming to the order of playing music, the [arrangement of] food and wine, as well as rewards and gifts, the Sovereign never decided on his own, having [attendants] report to Prince Ning for instructions in everything. The Sovereign said, “My eldest brother, you can enjoy being the host, A’man here will just respectfully be your honored guest.”²⁷ Because of this they both enjoyed good

27 Within the forbidden palaces, Xuánzong often called himself A’man 阿瞞. See Lu Hui’s note, *Songchuang zalu* (CSJC), 1.

cheer to the fullest until they parted. The next day, Prince Ning led Prince Qi [i. e., Li Fan 李範, 686–726], Prince Xue [i. e., Li Ye 李業, 686–734], and all the younger princes [to the audience of the Sovereign] and memorialized together, “Your subject heard that the Diaries of Activity and Repose must record the words and deeds of the Son of Heaven. Your subject fears that the Left and Right Scribes have no access to the Son of Heaven’s conduct in the inner palace to establish the ultimate example of ritual propriety for the common people, and thus have nothing to illuminate and instruct the ten thousand generations to come. Your subject requests that from now on, your brothers all take our turns carrying writing brushes every day in front of your carriage, so that we can record all matters regarding the imperial movement and presence. Each of the four seasons, the records will be secured with the vermilion seal and sent to the Bureau of [State] History together with the list of names [of the compilers]. However, we will all follow the example of the records from the outer court, with everything submitted to the Sovereign [for review]. This way we hope to make it clear that your subjects are responsible to their duties just like the court scribes.” The Sovereign wrote his reply in the Eight-Point Script on paper presented as a tribute from the state of Nippon, his diction highly respectful. In great passion, he granted all that was presented in the memorial. From then to the winter of the tenth year of the Tianbao reign era, three hundred *juan* were completed. All [were copied on] yellow hemp paper with each fifty sheets made into one continuous scroll, mounted on purple silk with the dragon-and-phoenix pattern, and supplied with carved sandalwood spindles. When the scrolls were finished, Prince Ning presented his request to the Sovereign to have them transferred from the office [of their compilation] to the building for [the compilation of State] History. The Sovereign ordered wine and music to be bestowed and feasted his ministers and attendants together at the Bureau of [State] History. The Sovereign treasured this history especially and ordered a grand pavilion to be constructed separately in order to house it. When An Lushan (703–757) took Chang’an, he adopted the strategies offered by Yan [Zhuang] and Gao [Shang] and ruthlessly burned the palaces and halls with ten[s of] torches before he even entered them. This pavilion turned into ashes in no time. Therefore, the *Veritable Records of Xuánzong’s Reign* only covers less than three or four percent [of this history], and for this reason, the transmission and recording [of its contents] beyond the palace walls are even rarer.

玄宗先天中，再平內難，後以中外無事，銳意政理，好於觀書。[...] 海內之風翕然率化。尤注意於起居注。先天開元中，皆選當時鴻儒或貞正之士充之。若有舉其職者，雖十數年猶載筆螭頭，²⁸ 惜不欲去，則遷名曹郎與兼之。自先天元年至天寶十一載冬季，起居注撰成七百卷，內起居注撰成三百卷。內

28 The phrase *zaibi chitou* 載筆螭頭, literally “holding a writing brush by the head of the hornless dragon,” is a figurative expression for the duty of a court scribe. The court scribes often stood by the heads of the hornless dragons carved on the railings of the stone stairway leading to the audience hall of the court, thus the name *Chitou guan* 螭頭官, see Twitchett 1986, 3, n. 5.

起居注自開元二年春，因上幸寧王宅，敍家人禮，至於樂奏前後，酒食沾賚，上無自專，皆令稟於寧王教。上曰，大哥好作主人，阿瞞但謹為上客。以是極歡而罷。明日寧王率岐、薛已下同奏曰：臣聞起居注必記天子言動。臣恐左右史不得天子閤行，極庶人之禮，無以光示萬代。臣請自今後，臣與兄弟各輪日載筆於乘輿前，得以行在紀敍其事。四季則用朱印，聯名牒送史館。然皆依外史例，悉上聞，庶明臣等守職如螭頭官。上以八分書日本國紙為答，辭甚謹，慨然悉允所奏。自是天寶十載冬季，以成三百卷。率以五十幅黃麻為一編，用雕檀軸紫龍鳳綾褱。書成，寧王上請自部納於史閣。上命賜以酒樂，共宴侍臣於史館。上寶惜是史尤甚，因命別起大閣以貯之。及祿山陷長安，用嚴、高²⁹計，未升殿宮，先以火十炬³⁰猛焚。是閣不移時灰滅。故玄宗實錄百不敍及三四，以是人間傳記者尤鮮。³¹

This anecdote appears to align perfectly with the traditional view of the collection's most valued function of "amending what is missing from the histories." The compilation of the diaries was a response to the historiographical "fear" that the scribes in charge of the outer court diaries "had no access to the Son of Heaven's conduct in the inner palace" 不得天子閤行, which would thus be missing from the official histories. The purpose of the compilation speaks of the need to set the emperor's behavior within the kinship relationships of the imperial family as a moral example "to illuminate and instruct the ten thousand generations to come" 以光示萬代. The proposed task was carried out with utmost respect for the principle of historiographical truthfulness and thoroughness, with Xuánzong's brothers "taking turns carrying writing brushes every day in front of his carriage" 輪日載筆於乘輿前 and "recording all matters regarding the imperial movement and presence" 行在紀敍其事. The physical product of this effort was handled with all the due formalities of official historical compilations, being "secured with the vermilion seal" 用朱印, and four times a year "sent to the Bureau of [State] History together with the list of names [of the compilers]" 聯名牒送史館. Emphasizing their commitment to the task, the imperial brothers even adopted the rhetoric of duty and responsibility of the court scribes. Since these were "renowned Confucians" 鴻儒 and "scholars of integrity and rectitude" 真正之士 especially selected to maintain the truthfulness of the court records, the imperial brothers thus claimed the same veracity for the Inner Palace Diaries. On a more fundamental level, this *Songchuang zalu* account, being the only extant record about the compilation of the Inner Palace Diaries,³² is itself a valuable item "amending what is missing from the histories." It

29 An Lushan's two councilors. See Lu Hui's note, *Songchuang zalu* (CSJC), 2.

30 The variant text "one thousand torches" 火千炬 seems to offer a more reasonable number, see *Songchuang zalu* (SKQS), 2b.

31 *Songchuang zalu* (CSJC), 1-2.

32 Only a brief reference to the Inner Palace Diaries is found in the biography of Prince Ning, *Jiu Tang shu* 95, 3012. See also Twitchett 1986, 3; Twitchett 1992, 43-51.

notes that, after the destruction of the historical archives in 756, “the *Veritable Records of Xuánzong’s Reign* only covers less than three or four percent [of the Inner Palace Diaries]” 玄宗實錄百不敘其三四, and that much less was circulated and preserved among the general public. If it were not for Li Jun’s account in the *Songchuang zalu*, important details such as the initiation of the project, the compilation process, the format and storage of the final product, and Xuánzong’s appreciation of this particular history would all have been lost to later generations. This placement of this account at the very beginning appears to be setting the tone for the whole collection, in accordance with Li Jun’s claim in the preface that his accounts are “definitely true.”

The text closes with two records about unusual objects, demonstrating clearly the collection’s attitude toward “the unusual.” They reveal a concern for validation and veracity that governs both the selection and appreciation of the unusual objects and that of the anecdotes chosen for the *Songchuang zalu*. Together with the collection’s opening account and one additional anecdote that firmly anchors “the unusual” in its appropriate category, they form a compelling “discourse of the unusual” that is crucial to the interpretation of the text as a whole.

The very last account gives a list of twenty-one items under the title “Accounts of Unusual Objects” 物之異聞, including “Chain of the Thunder God” 雷公鑠, “Dust-repellent hairpin made of rhinoceros horn” 辟塵犀簪, “Skin of a green dragon” 青龍皮, and other similarly marvelous and still quite tangible objects. Some, though, may be slightly beyond our everyday experience of the physical world, such as the “staff that turns soft at midday” 日中軟杖子, of which the translation here can only suggest a tentative understanding. At the end of the list, Li Jun attests to the reality of these objects and the truthfulness of his record by stating his process of validation:

Of the twenty-one objects listed above, I have obtained the origins of them all. I have identified some of them with my own eyes. My guests had doubts or questions [about them]; I have put [my explanations] thoroughly in the notes.

已上二十一物，皆得其所自，或經目識。客有疑問，悉用條註。³³

The acts of witnessing, identifying with one’s own eyes, and obtaining reliable provenances all offer proof of the reality of these unusual items. The record of them is therefore “definitely true” and thus worthy of attention. This emphasis on verification also proscribes what is uncertified, firmly ties the *Songchuang zalu*’s definition of “truthfulness” (*shi* 實) to the process of investigation, and restricts its definition of “the unusual” (*yi* 異) to what is also claimed to be “truthful.” The last line suggests that there was indeed disbelief and wonder, and perhaps that Li Jun included, or planned to include, further annotations to substantiate his claim to

33 *Songchuang zalu* (CSJC), 7.

veracity. Thus the intertwined claims of “unusualness” and “truthfulness” are in themselves also an argument made, or to be made, by the compiler.

The attitude toward validation is best shown in the penultimate account of the collection, where the unusualness of an ancient mirror crosses into the fantastic and surreal:

The Duke of Wei [i. e., Li Deyu] was in the west of the Zhe region during the Changqing (821–824) years. There happened to be a fisherman upon the Qinhuai River who lowered his trap net down to the deep water and suddenly felt the lifting strength [of the water] was unusual compared to normal times. When he pulled [the net] in to the edge of the water, it turned out that he had not caught a single fish. All of a sudden, he found [in his net] an ancient bronze mirror more than one *chi* long, its reflected light floating on top of the waves. The fisherman took it in astonishment and held it up to look into it. There he saw, clearly and in great detail, all of his five organs and six viscera. His tangled pulse throbbing in fear, his souls and spirits horrified, his wrists thus trembled, and the mirror fell [back into the water]. By chance the fisherman spoke of it near the residence [of the Duke of Wei] and in the end it was thus heard by His Excellency. [The Duke of Wei] spent a whole year thoroughly searching the bottom of the river via myriad methods, but could never recover [the mirror].

衛公長慶中在浙右。會有漁人於秦淮垂機網下深處，忽覺力舉異於常時。及歛就水次，卒不獲一鱗。忽得古銅鏡可尺餘，光浮於波際。漁人驚取照之，歷歷盡見五藏六腑。縈脈動竦駭神魄，因腕戰而墜。漁人偶話於舍傍，遂乃聞之於公，盡周歲萬計窮索水底，終不復得。³⁴

This short account differs interestingly from the two analyzed previously. Rather than conveying affirmation and certainty in diction and tone, it employs multiple expressions of randomness, coincidence, unexpectedness, and disturbance, such as “there happened to be” (*hui* 會), “suddenly” (*hu* 忽), “by chance” (*ou* 偶), “in astonishment, alarmed” (*jing* 驚), and of course the explicit phrase, “unusual compared to normal times” (*yi yu changshi* 異於常時).

The account here again reveals the compiler’s strong emphasis on truthfulness and on the effort of validation. Found by fortune, the ancient mirror is irretrievable once lost. Its visual wonders, together with its shocking unusualness, can no longer be verified. Instead, it is Li Deyu’s determination to retrieve it and his extensive effort to “thoroughly search” 窮索 the bottom of the river that justify the belief in its existence. The account thus concerns itself more with the quest for truthfulness seen in the effort of validation than with the “truthfulness” of the unusual thing itself. As mentioned earlier, Li Jun’s father Li Shen was a good friend and political ally of Li Deyu; it is thus reasonable to believe that Li Jun “had obtained [this account’s] origin” 得其所自 as well, and a very reliable origin at that.

34 *Songchuangzalu* (CSJC), 6.

A strong sense of historiographical loss echoes in this story as well as the collection's first account about the Inner Palace Diaries. In traditional Chinese culture, the mirror was often used as a metaphor for history.³⁵ By looking into the mirror of history, one was believed to be able to learn the reasons for the rise and fall of dynasties. Here in the *Songchuang zalu* stories, the loss of the ancient mirror mirrors the loss of Xuánzong's Inner Palace Diaries, with one engulfed by water and the other by fire. Without the ancient mirror, the workings of the five organs and six viscera inside the human body could no longer be discerned; with the loss of the Inner Palace Diaries, later Tang emperors also lost the opportunity to use their records as a mirror to either guide or forewarn them. Li Deyu's effort to retrieve the lost mirror is perhaps a hint at the historian's effort to search for past accounts that could function as mirrors that would reveal the activities of Xuánzong in his inner palace, just as the ancient mirror revealed the inner workings of the body. As will be discussed later, the collection certainly takes the ruler's conduct in the inner palace as a crucial factor affecting the fate of the dynasty.

From the two anecdotes at the end of the collection dealing explicitly with the concepts of "the unusual" and "truthfulness," we discern three aspects in the collection's claim to the latter: the reality of the unusual things, the truthful effort of investigation, and the veracity of the accounts recording these things and efforts. What is included in this collection is not only "the unusual" but also, perhaps more importantly, the quest for the verification of the unusual, even if the examined objects themselves remain ultimately irretrievable.

At this point, the *Songchuang zalu* definition of "the unusual" is not just opposed to "the normal" (*yi* 異 vs. *chang* 常) but it also becomes inseparable from the claim of, and the effort to claim, "truthfulness" (*shi* 實). By opening with an anecdote of a lofty historiographical quest and ending with two accounts that privilege the pursuit of truthfulness and validation ahead of the unusual things themselves, this small collection seems to have built an outer-layer interpretive frame that teaches the audience how to read the stories enclosed within, calling for "the unusual" to be viewed within the context of the truthful and real. This outer framing layer also prompts the reader to ponder the similarities and distinctions between the records of an emperor's activities within the inner palace and the unusual objects. After all, all that were left of them are the anecdotal accounts and the compiler's claim of their veracity and the truthfulness of the efforts for their validation. The question is, if "the unusual" itself is no longer present or can no longer be certified, what significance can the reader find in the collection's claim to their truthfulness? Here the outer framing layer seems to suggest that the reader take the attitude of an investigator, actively seeking deeper meanings of "truthfulness" in the records of "the unusual."

35 For detailed discussions of the symbolic, metaphorical, religious, and political usage of the mirror in traditional China, as well as the related material culture, see Chen Jue 2004a, 2004b, 2010.

The account of the white parrot further clarifies the collection's definition of and attitude toward "the unusual" and completes the outer framing layer of the "discourse of the unusual:"

The Sovereign [i. e., Xuánzong], for the first time, had the state of Linyi present a white parrot to him, and its clever and sharp nature was particularly unusual compared to normal ones. He thus decorated it with gold [ornaments, or a gold cage] on a leisurely day and showed it to the three Councilors. The Sovereign repeatedly praised it. At that time Su Ting (670–727) just took the post of Councilor and often devoted his service to the Emperor according to the principles of loyalty and criticism. He therefore went forward and presented [his advice]: "The *Book [of Rites]* says that 'Although the parrot can speak, it does not free itself from [the category of] flying birds.'³⁶ Your subject wishes that Your Majesty take it seriously as an admonishment."

上初以林邑國進白鸚鵡，慧利之性特異常者。因暇日以金飾之，示於三相。上再三美之。時蘇頌初入相，每以忠讓勵王，因前進曰，書云鸚鵡能言，不離飛鳥。臣願陛下深以為誡。³⁷

Here we see the dichotomy between "the unusual" and "the normal" again. The sixth anecdote in the collection, this account occupies the center position among the eleven anecdotes about Tang emperors, perhaps a meaningful choice if there is indeed significance in the placement of anecdotes. The story functions as the eyes of the "painted dragon" that when finally added to the picture would bring the painting (here the outer framing layer) to life. On first reading, it simply appears to be one of the many anecdotes about upright officials remonstrating with their rulers. After all, "loyalty and criticism" 忠讓 are the most important and fundamental obligations a minister owes his ruler, and there is certainly nothing unusual in a councilor quoting the *Liji* 禮記 for appropriate words of warning. It would seem that the clever parrot is that which is "particularly unusual" in this account, but Su Ting's comment brings the focus to the unusualness of Xuánzong's actions instead. Ornamenting the parrot with gold is making the unusual even more unusual, though as the councilor points out, even an unusually smart parrot is but a bird, still confined within the category of birds.

This account sets forth an argument that one should investigate the ultimate "truthfulness" or intrinsic nature of the unusual and treat it as nothing more than a normal member of its appropriate category. Here the parrot is still, verily, a bird, and thus should be treated just as a bird. The line Su Ting quotes is from a passage that argues for the importance of ritual propriety and social norms, by which men are distinguished from birds and beasts. Ritual propriety is the cultural institution of normality and conformity, of the moderation and

36 *Liji zhengyi* 1, 2664a.

37 *Songchuangzalu* (CSJC), 3.

regulation of human emotion and behavior according to their appropriate categories. The explicit argument in this *Songchuang zalu* anecdote is precisely that, no matter how strange or appealing “the unusual” is, how different from “the normal” it appears, it is still governed by, and “does not free itself from” 不離, the category to which it belongs. It is what it is and thus, following the principle of “truthfulness,” should be treated appropriately according to its intrinsic truth and categorization. It is in this sense that the idea of “the unusual” in the *Songchuang zalu* is closely tied to the process of investigation and validation and does not go beyond the boundaries of truthfulness and propriety.

Since Li Jun’s preface claims his accounts to be “definitely true,” the asserted truthfulness of Xuánzong’s unusual behavior thus calls for criticism of the ruler’s inappropriate attitude toward “the unusual.” The explicit argument of this centrally placed anecdote, when viewed through the outer framing layer of intertwined unusualness and truthfulness, completes an implicit “discourse of the unusual” that pulls the seemingly random core anecdotes of the *Songchuang zalu* together into a coherent political criticism, as demonstrated in the sections below. This particular criticism is indeed the deeper meaning of “truthfulness” that the outer framing layer encourages the reader to find in the collection’s highly selective presentation of “the unusual.”

3.2 The Ultimate Concern:

Understanding the End and Its Foreshadowing

As one wonders what end it might serve to read the collection’s anecdotes within the outer framing layer of the “discourse of the unusual,” two other accounts form an interior framing layer revealing the collection’s ultimate concern with “the end” (*zhong* 終). These two stories, the third from the beginning and the third from the end, highlight the significance of initially overlooked or neglected prophecies from their mirroring positions in the collection’s sequence of anecdotes. They echo each other in semantic parallels and contrasts that intensify a sense of marvel and fatedness around the understanding of one’s end. The third account from the end of the collection is a story about Li Deyu:

The Defender-in-Chief, the Duke of the State of Wei [i. e., Li Deyu], was once appointed a Retainer in Bingzhou. Within a month after he arrived at his post, all of a sudden a certain “Man-of-the-Mountains” (often a self-proclaimed hermit free from the fetters of society), surnamed Wang, came to his gate to request an audience. His Excellency ordered [Wang] to be seated with him. Only then did [Wang] say, “I am good at predicting one’s predestined age.” At first His Excellency did not take it as anything special, and so only requested that a table with writing brush and paper, as well as incense and talismanic water, be set up in the main hall. His Excellency then ordered the curtain to be lowered and [everyone present] to wait in silence, while he and the young man sat together under the western wing. Soon after, the young man named Wang said, “It can be verified now.” On the piece of

paper, [His Excellency's] eight characters of birth time were written in large script. In addition, there was a note written in regular script that read, "He will reach the highest rank possible for a minister and the age of sixty-four." The young man named Wang then hastily asked to leave, and in the end no one knew his whereabouts. When it came to the Huichang (841–846) reign era, His Excellency was appointed to positions of the first rank three times. [When] he died in Hainan, his years (Li Deyu, 787–850) indeed tallied with the age predicted by the young man named Wang.

太尉衛國公為并州從事，到職未旬月，忽有王山人者詣門請謁。公命與坐，乃曰，某善按冥也。公初未之奇，因請正寢備几案紙筆香水而已。因令垂簾靜伺之，生與公偕坐於西廡下。頃之，王生曰，可驗矣。紙上書八字甚大，且有楷注曰，位極人臣，壽六十四。王生遽請歸，竟不知所去。及會昌朝，三策一品，薨於海南，果符王生所按之年。³⁸

Again, the personal experience, in fact the whole life in this case, of the most important political ally and friend of Li Jun's family contributes to the collection's rhetoric of validation and "truthfulness." The randomness and unusualness of the young man's visit is signified by the use of the words "suddenly" (*hu 忽*) and "hastily" (*ju 遽*) for his coming and going, and the truthfulness of his predictions is stressed by such phrases as "can be verified" (*keyan 可驗*) and "indeed tallies with" (*guofu 果符*). Its mirroring anecdote, the third from the beginning, follows a similar semantic model of verified predictions while telling a story about Xuánzong:

Xuánzong sojourned in the Eastern Capital. Once, by chance, due to the clear autumn weather, he and Master Yixing together ascended the pavilion at the Heavenly Palace Temple. Taking in the view from above for a long time, the Sovereign looked into the far distance in a sorrowful mood, sighed several times, and asked Yixing, "When I reach sixty, will I be able to meet my end without suffering?" Yixing presented [his answer]: "Your Majesty travels to and sojourns in places ten thousand *li* away, and your sagely rule is endless." When it came to the time he traveled westward and reached Chengdu for the first time, beholding a great bridge ahead, the Sovereign raised his whip and asked his attendants, "What is the name of this bridge?" Spurring his horse forward, Military Commissioner Cui Yuan presented [his answer]: "The Ten-thousand-*li* Bridge." The Sovereign thus recalled [the past conversation] and sighed, "Today's situation indeed tallies with the words of Yixing. I shall have no worries."

玄宗幸東都，偶因秋霽，與一行師共登天宮寺閣。臨眺久之，上遐顧悽然，發歎數四，謂一行曰，吾甲子得終無患乎？一行進曰，陛下行幸萬里，聖祚無疆。及西行初至成都，前望大橋，上舉鞭問左右曰，是橋何名？節度使崔圓躍馬前進曰，萬里橋。上因追歎曰，一行之言，今果符之，吾無憂矣。³⁹

38 *Songchuangzalu* (CSJC), 6.

39 *Songchuangzalu* (CSJC), 2–3.

Like its parallel anecdote, this one highlights the randomness of the occurrence, here indicated with “by chance” (*ou* 偶), as well as the truthfulness of the prophecy, which is marked with exactly the same phrase as in the other account: “indeed tallies with” (*guofu* 果符). Both anecdotes emphasize the delayed validation of the predictions with the phrase “when it came to the time” (*ji* 及) that indicates the span of a long period.

While validated prophecy is indeed a popular trope in anecdotal storytelling, these two form a pair of parallel narratives that, when read together *within* the outer framing layer, address more serious concerns. First, by echoing each other from symmetrical positions within the collection, they highlight the fundamental concerns of a minister and a ruler. Understandably, long life expectancy and high official rank are what a Tang official would desire, while “meeting the end without suffering” 得終無患 is the hope of Xuánzong. All these are concerns over one’s end (*zhong* 終), for emperor and minister alike, and more importantly, one would be able to know the end if one does not neglect the prophecies about it.

On a second level, both stories, when read within the outer framing layer establishing the collection’s discourse of the unusual, also deal with the understanding of and attitude toward one’s end and the prophecies about it. Wang’s explicit and favorable predictions appear to have no effect on Li Deyu. Though he has no way to verify the prediction of his life span at the time when it is made, Li Deyu should be able to immediately recognize Wang’s unusual ability and the value of his predictions when the correct characters of his own birth time are revealed. Most officials would have been overjoyed at the promised prospect of “reaching the highest rank possible for a minister” 位極人臣. We know that Li Deyu, apart from a very brief and troubled period as chief councilor during Wenzong’s reign, spent most of his time in provincial posts before finally gaining real political power for a substantial period of time as Wuzong’s 武宗 (814–846, r. 841–846) chief councilor. The anecdote makes clear that Li Deyu is still in an insignificant provincial post when he meets the fortune-teller. It would be at a time when the leaders of the Niu faction were at the center of power at court and Li Deyu’s political ambitions were frustrated. Despite all this, the account depicts no reaction from him to the prospect of attaining the highest rank possible. In contrast to his “thorough searching” 窮索 for the ancient mirror, Li Deyu appears to have never sought after the teller of his auspicious fortune after he abruptly leaves. This unusual attitude may be precisely the subtle point of this anecdote when it is read in comparison and contrast with its mirroring account of Xuánzong.

Xuánzong shows a rather different understanding of and attitude toward both the end of his life and the prophecy concerning it. While Li Deyu is offered the prophecy quite unexpectedly and “at first does not take it as anything special” 初未之奇, the deeply worried Xuánzong openly expresses concerns for his own end and actively seeks answers. It is unusual for an emperor to be so worried about his end as to be “in a sorrowful mood” 悽然 during the prime of his rule. It is even more unusual that Xuánzong, deeply attentive as he

must be in this moment, still would not understand the unusualness and warning in the Buddhist master's answer. After all, the emperor's place and duty are to be found at his court in the capital rather than in "traveling to and sojourning in places ten thousand *li* away" 行幸萬里. If undertaken for the emperor's personal pleasure, such a voluntary act would betray his irresponsibility and extravagance, while making the journey because of a political or military crisis would signal grave danger for the imperial house. When Xuánzong finally recognizes the prophecy's fulfillment, instead of expressing the alarm and regret due at such a moment, he utters words of relief, "I shall have no worries" 吾無憂矣. This, in fact, is exactly the moment when an emperor should focus on his empire's prospects and worry about reclaiming his capitals from the rebel army. Later readers of the anecdote would know that the Tang court was restored and Xuánzong returned safely to his capital, but at that particular moment of displacement and danger, the emperor's reaction certainly appears markedly unusual and departs from its normal category of imperial responsibility. There are quite a few anecdotes concerning Master Yixing's predictions of Xuánzong's flight to Sichuan,⁴⁰ but the *Songchuang zalu* account is the only one explicitly offering the emperor's complacent words as his response. If read alone, this account might merely amaze its audience with Yixing's ability and subtlety, his verified prophecy, and the turn of events concerning the destiny of the Tang. But read alongside the parallel story about Li Deyu, it instead invites a different kind of amazement over Xuánzong's inability to understand a warning of danger in the midst of prosperity, and his inability to react in a way appropriate to a ruler facing a crisis.

Within the interpretive frame constructed by the outer layer of anecdotes, these two accounts concerning prophecies of and attitudes toward the end of one's life function as a second framing layer that ties the collection's discourse of "the unusual" to the fundamental concerns of the Tang literati. This middle layer, between the outer framing layer and the core anecdotes of the collection, draws attention to the proper attitude toward signs, prophecies, and their fulfillment while hinting at the irresponsibility of the ruler. In dealing with the obviously unusual, such as the ancient mirror or the white parrot, one should strive to understand a thing's true nature and to base one's perception and treatment of the unusual thing on the category appropriate to it. To know one's own end is to understand and recognize the unusualness of the overlooked or misunderstood signs and prophecies. As will be discussed in detail in the next two sections, the *Songchuang zalu* may have been compiled just around the early years of the avalanche of events that brought on the total collapse of the Tang. Perhaps these seemingly random anecdotes represent an at least subconscious dread of the impending end of the dynasty.

40 Zhou Xunchu 2015, 632–633.

As these two mirroring accounts point to the ultimate concern over “the end,” the eighth anecdote of the collection completes the interior framing layer by anchoring this concern in two essential factors that, as shown in later sections, turn out to be the focus of the collection’s core stories. Upon first reading, the eighth anecdote depicts an amusing but random occurrence at Zhongzong’s court in which the talents of two young children are thrown into contrast:

Zhongzong used to summon the sons of the Grand Councilors Su Gui (639–710) and Li Qiao (644–713) to present themselves for an audience. The sons of the two Councilors were both at the age of boyhood. The Sovereign let them come close and caressed them [as they stood] before him, generously granting gifts to them. He then spoke to the two children: “Every day you remember the books you studied, [now] you may memorialize this person and tell me about them.” [Su] Ting replied, “Following the [carpenter’s] line, a piece of lumber will be made straight; following remonstrations, the ruler will become a sage.”⁴¹ The son of [Li] Qiao also presented [his answer]: “Chopping off the legs of people wading in the morning, and cutting open the heart of the worthy man.”⁴² The Sovereign said, “Su Gui has a [good] son, while Li Qiao does not.”

中宗嘗召宰相蘇瓌、李嶠子進見，二丞相子皆童年，上近撫於赭袍前，賜與甚厚。因語二兒曰，爾日憶所通書，可奏為吾者言之。瓌應曰，木從繩則正，后從諫則聖。嶠子亦進曰，斲朝涉之脛，剖賢人之心。上曰，蘇瓌有子，李嶠無兒。⁴³

On the surface, this account appears to be a piece of light-hearted gossip. But perhaps its most unusual aspect is that it is the only anecdote from Zhongzong’s reign included in a collection in which half the accounts concern Xuánzong. Granted, there are many anecdotes about unusual things said by children.⁴⁴ However, read within the interpretive framework of the *Songchuang zalu*, this particular anecdote reveals an interest not in the amusing contrast between what the children remembered from their *Shangshu* lessons, but rather in the didactic views in the quoted lines themselves that help advance the critical argument of the collection. It is worth noting that the veracity of this account was convincingly disputed by Sima Guang 司馬光 (1019–1086).⁴⁵ Thus it must have been the truthfulness of the didactic message, rather than that of the account itself, that justifies the collection’s claim of “truthfulness.” A close examination reveals that the innocent children become spokesmen for the collection’s concern over “the end.”

41 *Shangshu zhengyi* 10, 370b. Translation with reference to Legge 1970, 253.

42 *Shangshu zhengyi* 11, 12a. For an alternative translation, see Legge 1970, 295.

43 *Songchuang zalu* (CSJC), 3–4.

44 For a few examples, see *Da Tang xinyu* 8, 119; *Tang guoshi bu* 3, 54; *Bei Meng suoyan* 1, 18.

45 Sima Guang points out in his *Kaoyi* 考異 notes (*Zizhi tongjian* 207, 6561) that Su Ting was already a court official when his father Su Gui was chief councilor.

Su Ting's quotation of the *Shangshu* addresses the way a ruler and his dynasty achieve a good end, whereas that produced by Li Qiao's son points out the way through which they meet destruction and ruin. The latter also highlights the devastating influence on a ruler of a beautiful woman allowed to act beyond the bounds of her proper category. Young Su Ting quotes Fu Yue's 傳說 (fl. ca. 1335–1250 BCE) reassurance to King Wu Ding 武丁 (ca. 1250–1192 BCE) of the Shang 商 that as long as a ruler is willing to heed the remonstrations of his ministers, his charge over them will be respected and his goals will be achieved. Their conversation takes place soon after Wu Ding begins his rule. He searches for a worthy minister to carry out his commands, finds Fu Yue, and charges him with the duty of being his most senior councilor. Wu Ding's speech ends, "Alas! May you respect this command of mine and bring it to a [good] end" 嗚呼! 欽予時命, 其惟有終.⁴⁶ This desired end is stated just before the concluding charge, when Wu Ding hopes, "I could model myself after the former kings, follow the footsteps of my high ancestor king, and benefit millions of people" 俾率先王, 迪我高后, 以康兆民.⁴⁷ Fu Yue thus answers with the lines quoted by Su Ting in the anecdote here, assures the king of his loyalty, and points out the way for Wu Ding to achieve his goals and come to a good end – by heeding his advisers' remonstrations and becoming a sage. The line quoted by Li Qiao's son, however, concerns the violent end of King Di Xin 帝辛 (i. e., King Zhou 紂 of Shang, ca. 1085–ca. 1046 BCE) and of the entire Shang dynasty. It is part of a speech given by Ji Fa 姬發 (fl. ca. 1048–1043 BCE), later King Wu 武 of Zhou 周, to justify his military expedition against Di Xin. Di Xin's crimes enumerated in this speech include willful killing, disregarding laws and statutes, neglecting sacrifices to Heaven and Earth, and discontinuing offerings to the ancestral temple. One particularly unusual crime is "making contrivances of wonderful device and extraordinary cunning to please his woman" 作奇技淫巧以悅婦人.⁴⁸ The woman in question is his beautiful consort, Daji 妲己, who wields the greatest influence on King Di Xin and his court politics. The king, rather than heeding the remonstrations of his ministers, "follows only the words of his wife" 惟婦言是用.⁴⁹ Just to please her, he even orders cruel acts such as cutting open the heart of a minister to check whether he is a sage and chopping off the legs of people wading in the morning to examine their bone marrow. Therefore, these quotes identify two essential factors that determine the particular end of a ruler and his dynasty: his attitude toward ministers and his attitude toward women. The ability to appoint good ministers and follow their advice leads a ruler and his dynasty toward prosperity, while the folly of allowing a bewitching beauty to act beyond the bounds of propriety brings nothing but ruin.

46 *Shangshu zhengyi* 10, 370b. Translation with reference to Legge 1970, 253.

47 *Shangshu zhengyi* 10, 370b. Translation with reference to Legge 1970, 252–253.

48 *Shangshu zhengyi* 11, 386c. For an alternative translation, see Legge 1970, 295.

49 *Shangshu zhengyi* 11, 388d. Translation by Legge (1970, 303).

Considering the historiographical significance of the rhetoric of “the end” (*zhong* 終) in the *Shangshu*, this anecdote about two children reporting their lessons to Zhongzong, appearing as it does in the very middle of the collection, no longer seems random at all. Indeed, many kings and great ministers in the *Shangshu* are deeply concerned with “the end” and their formal declarations (*gao* 誥) or speeches often conclude with exclamations of hopes, worries, or admonishments addressing it. For example, King Taijia’s 太甲 apologetic speech to his minister Yi Yin 伊尹 also points out the importance of worthy ministers’ remonstrations in bringing things to their proper conclusion, as he says, “May I still rely on your correcting and preserving virtue, keeping this in view that my end may be good” 尚賴匡救之德，圖惟厥終.⁵⁰ The Duke of Zhou (i. e., Ji Dan 姬旦, fl. ca. 1042–1032 BCE), the ultimate example of the loyal minister, when he divines the illness of King Wu of Zhou, expresses his relief that “I, who am but a child, have got his appointment renewed by the three kings, by whom a long futurity has been consulted for” 予小子新命于三王，惟永終是圖.⁵¹ Again, addressing the feudal lords after his successful expedition against Jie 桀 (d. ca. 1600 BCE), Tang 湯 (ca. 1670–ca. 1587 BCE) urges them to respect and obey the mandate of Heaven, to nourish their people, to follow the laws and regulations, and not to indulge in extravagance, all for one reason – “Alas! May you be sincere in these things so you will also attain [good] ends” 嗚呼！尚克時忱，乃亦有終.⁵² Perhaps the exclamation at the end of Zhong Hui’s 仲虺 formal declaration in the *Shangshu* sums up the argument implicit in the *Songchuang zalu*. Zhong Hui concludes his speech justifying Tang’s 湯 military action against Jie thus:

“Oh! He who would take care for his end must be attentive to his beginning. There is establishment for the observers of propriety, and overthrow for the blinded and wantonly indifferent. To revere and honor the way of Heaven is the way ever to preserve the favoring regard of Heaven.”

嗚呼！慎厥終，惟其始。殖有禮，覆昏暴。欽崇天道，永保天命。⁵³

That is, a ruler who worries about his end, as Xuánzong does in the stories Li Jun chose, needs to closely observe propriety and avoid wantonness and irresponsibility from the very beginning. Ritual propriety by which a ruler maintains reverence of the way of Heaven demands normality and conformity to proper categories and hierarchies. Thus this seemingly random anecdote about two children quoting the *Shangshu* functions to anchor the ultimate concern with “the end” expressed in the interior framing layer to the collection’s core

50 *Shangshu zhengyi* 8, 348b. Translation by Legge (1970, 207).

51 *Shangshu zhengyi* 13, 417b–417c. Translation by Legge (1970, 356).

52 *Shangshu zhengyi* 8, 343c. For an alternative translation see Legge 1970, 190.

53 *Shangshu zhengyi* 8, 342b. Translation by Legge (1970, 183).

accounts about the Tang rulers' attitudes toward unusual women in the inner palace and ministers at court.

4 The Core Anecdotes

Having shown the way the outer framing layer guides interpretation of the collection according to a specific "discourse of the unusual" and the way the interior framing layer highlights concerns about "the end" and the subtle signs foreshadowing it, this paper will next consider the core anecdotes of the collection. These core accounts, read within the two-layered interpretive framework, bring to light the unusual signs of troubles and the Tang rulers' unusual attitudes toward them.

4.1 Women Beyond Their Normal Categories

One of the oldest tropes in the narrative of a falling dynasty is that of the bewitching beauty and the irresponsible ruler. In the ten core anecdotes enclosed by the two interpretive layers of the *Songchuang zalu*, a group of unusual women, who either break down the categories normal to them or are displaced from those categories, reveal a similar theme. Four stories, comprising a hefty 40 percent of the core accounts, or one quarter of the whole collection, focus explicitly on women of the Tang imperial family, including two royal consorts, one empress, and one female ruler. Two additional anecdotes also involve women and though the tales' apparent narrative foci lie elsewhere, their inclusion in the collection contributes to the text's view on the unusual females. Thus a total of 60 percent of the core accounts, and 38 percent of the whole collection, involve women. Among these six anecdotes, seven unusual women are depicted or mentioned altogether: three from Xuánzong's reign, two from Wu Zetian's time (including Empress Wu herself), one favored consort of Wenzong, and one who appears only in a quoted reference to Zhongzong's time – Daji, the ultimate femme fatale in historiography and exemplar of a woman gone beyond her proper category.

Denouncing Daji's interference with court politics of the Shang, the *Shangshu* records King Wu of Zhou quoting an ancient saying: "The crowing of a hen in the morning [indicates] the subversion of the family" 牝雞之晨惟家之索.⁵⁴ As it happens, the house of Tang was indeed subverted once before already, and the *Songchuang zalu* does not fail to include an anecdote denouncing the hen announcing morning within the royal family. This time, a defiant female serves as the spokeswoman delivering the didactic message:

When Di Renjie served as the Councilor, his aunt, née Lu, who was his mother's cousin, lived in a villa to the south of the Wu Bridge. She only had one son, but he had never come

54 *Shangshu zhengyi* 11, 388d. Translation by Legge (1970, 302–303).

to the residence of his relatives inside the capital city. Whenever it was time for the summer and winter sacrifices, as well as the first and last day of the month, the Duke of Liang [i. e., Di Renjie] would quite diligently perform the duty of ritual propriety [toward his aunt]. At one point after heavy snow, he had much time released from official duty, and thereby went to inquire upon the wellbeing of Aunt Lu. He happened to see his cousin coming back home for his meal, bearing bow and arrows and carrying pheasants and rabbits, and presenting his game at the Northern Hall [to his mother]. He looked at the Duke of Liang and paid his respect, with a quite arrogant bearing. His Excellency thus presented an idea to his aunt, “Now that I am serving as the Councilor, if my cousin has any [official posts] he would like to pursue, I would do my best to follow his instructions.” His aunt said, “The Councilor may enjoy his prestige alone. I [only] have one son and do not want to make him serve a female ruler.” His Excellency was greatly ashamed and withdrew.

狄仁傑之為相也，有盧氏堂姨居於午橋南別墅。姨止有一子，而未嘗來都城親戚家。梁公每遇伏臘晦朔，修禮甚謹。嘗經甚雪多休暇，因候盧姨安否，適見表弟挾弓矢攜雉兔來歸膳，味進於北堂。顧揖梁公，意甚輕簡。公因啟姨曰：某今為相，表弟有何樂從，願悉力以從其旨。姨曰：相自貴爾，有一子，不欲令其事女主。公大慚而退。⁵⁵

Di Renjie receives no respect from his aunt, not even from her son, because he serves a female ruler. While the veracity of the account may be questioned, the disdain expressed for the hen crowing in the morning for the Tang house was very real. During the late Tang and subsequent dynasties, male literati frequently discoursed against female political power. Empress Wu Zetian, the woman who had trespassed beyond her proper category of ritual propriety, was often deployed in political rhetoric championing male authority and the indoctrination of women. One additional unusual aspect of this anecdote is that the denunciation comes from another woman, who is able to shame a man, and a councilor at that, with her superior understanding of propriety.

At this point, a close reading of the core anecdotes reveals a series of parallel and contrasting accounts that identify the unusual things within the inner palace: the imperial consorts and influential eunuchs who acted beyond the bounds of their proper categories and the indecisive and irresponsible rulers who were easily influenced by them. Immediately following the opening account of the Inner Palace Diaries is a famous story about Yang 楊貴妃 (719–756), Precious Consort to Xuánzong:

During the Kaiyuan (713–741) years, the tree peony was first planted in the forbidden palaces, [the tree] that today is named the *mudan*.⁵⁶ Four trees were obtained, one [with]

55 *Songchuangzalu* (CSJC), 5.

56 Lu Hui's note reads, “During the Kaiyuan and Tianbao reign eras, this flower was called the tree peony. The Basic Annals note that that which was [planted] in the forbidden palaces was the *mudan* flower” 開元天寶花呼木芍藥，本記雲禁中為牡丹花。 *Songchuangzalu* (CSJC), 2.

red [flowers], one violet, one light-red, and one completely white. The Sovereign [i. e., Xuánzong] then had them transplanted to the east of the Pond of Joyful Celebrations, in front of the Agarwood Pavilion. Once the flowers happened to be blooming lavishly, the Sovereign took advantage of the moonlit night [to view the flowers] and summoned Consort Taizhen to follow him in a hand carriage. He decreed that the especially excellent ones be selected from among musicians [of the Imperial Ensemble] at the Pear Garden,⁵⁷ and he received sixteen different pieces of song music. Li Guinian (fl. ca. 755), who at that time enjoyed incomparable fame for his singing, held the sandalwood clappers in his hands and stepped forward, leading the group of musicians, ready to sing about [the flowers]. The Sovereign said, “Appreciating the celebrated flower and enjoying the presence of my Consort, how can old lyrics be used for this?” He thus ordered [Li] Guinian to take the type of paper with the golden-flower pattern and to bestow it upon the Hanlin Academician Li Bo with the announcement of an imperial order for him to present three pieces of song lyrics to the rhythm of the “Tunes of Purity and Tranquility.” [Li] Bo gladly received the decree. Still suffering from a lingering hangover, he thus took up his writing brush and composed the following:

Clouds long for the splendor of her garments, and flowers for the beauty of her countenance.
In spring wind, at early dawn, her dew-touched blossoms are richly colored.
If not beholding [such beauty] on top of the Mountain of Jade and Jaspers,
I must have chanced upon her, in the moonlight of the Nephrite Terrace.

Scarlet and voluptuous, a blooming branch of dew-laden fragrance,
Clouds and rain, that Goddess of Mount Wu, [for her] my heart breaks in vain.
May I ask, who in the Palace of Han could be likened unto her –
Perhaps the lovely Flying Sparrow, if only newly dressed.

The flower celebrated by all, the beauty bewitching a whole nation,
may they delight in each other,
may they always be held in the smiling eyes of the Sovereign.
Gone with the spring wind are the endless longings of love,
[right here,] north of the Agarwood Pavilion,
they lean against the balustrade [next to each other].

[Li] Guinian immediately presented the song lyrics. The Sovereign ordered the musicians to play softly on their strings and flutes, then hastened [Li Guinian] to sing [the new lyrics]. Consort Taizhen held in her hand a glass goblet decorated with seven precious jewels, poured the grape wine from the Xiliang commandery, and enjoyed [the song and music] with a smile of deep appreciation. The Sovereign then checked the tone of his jade flute

57 This is the inner palace musical academy founded by Emperor Xuánzong himself.

and played the tune of the music [along with the musicians]. At the end of each piece, before the next one started, he thus prolonged the last note to please her. When she finished her wine, Consort Taizhen put on an embroidered scarf and once again bowed in front of the Sovereign for his kindness. [Li] Guinian often spoke of this to the five Princes, and of those who achieved recognition through song [lyrics], he could think of no one else, none that did better than this, which was perhaps also the ultimate achievement of the time. After this, the Sovereign especially regarded the Hanlin Academician Li [Bo], [considering him] different from the other Academicians. It happened that Gao Lishi had always taken it as a deep humiliation when [Li Bo] had him remove his boots. On another day, when Consort Taizhen again chanted the lyrics from before, [Gao] Lishi jokingly said, "I originally thought the Consort hated Li Bo to the marrow. How is it [you are appreciating his lyrics] with such sincerity?" Consort Taizhen was thus alarmed and said, "How could the Hanlin Academician insult me like this?" [Gao] Lishi said, "Referring to the Consort as 'Flying Sparrow,' this is to regard you with utmost disdain." Consort Taizhen agreed with him rather strongly. Once the Sovereign wanted to appoint Li Bo to an official position, but in the end he dropped the idea because of the resistance from within the [inner] palace.

開元中，禁中初重木芍藥，即今牡丹也。得四本紅、紫、淺紅、通白者，上因移植於興慶池東沉香亭前。會花方繁開，上乘月夜，召太真妃以步輦從。詔特選梨園弟子中尤者，得樂十六色。李龜年以歌擅一時之名，手捧檀板，押眾樂前欲歌之。上曰，賞名花，對妃子，焉用舊樂詞為？遂命龜年持金花牋，宣賜翰林學士李白，進清平調詞三章。白欣承詔旨，猶苦宿醒未解，因援筆賦之。雲想衣裳花想容，春風拂曉⁵⁸露華濃。若非羣玉山頭見，會向瑤臺月下逢。一枝紅豔露凝香，雲雨巫山枉斷腸。借問漢宮誰得似，可憐飛燕倚新粧。名花傾國兩相歡，長得君王帶笑看。解釋春風無限恨，沉香亭北倚欄干。龜年遽以詞進，上命梨園弟子約略調撫絲竹，遂促龜年以歌。太真妃持頗梨七寶盃，酌西涼州蒲萄酒，笑領意甚厚。上因調玉笛以倚曲，每曲遍將換，則遲其聲以媚之。太真飲罷，飾繡巾重拜上意。龜年常話於五王，獨憶以歌得自勝者無出於此，抑亦一時之極致耳。上自是顧李翰林尤異於他學士。會高力士終以脫烏皮六縫為深恥，異日太真妃重吟前詞，力士戲曰，始謂妃子怨李白深入骨髓，何拳拳如是？太真妃因驚曰，何翰林學士能辱人如斯？力士曰，以飛燕指妃子，是賤之甚矣。太真頗深然之。上嘗欲命李白官，卒為宮中所捍而止。⁵⁹

This story has everything necessary for a juicy piece of gossip or legend: the most favored consort, the emperor himself playing music, the best singer of the time, the poet's unmatched talent, and a twist resulting from the shrewd interference of the most trusted eunuch. It is

58 A textual variant reads *chunfeng fukan* 春風拂檻, "the spring wind softly sweeping the railings," in *Songchuang zalu* (SKQS), 3a.

59 *Songchuang zalu* (CSJC), 2. For an alternative translation of this account, see Protopappas 1982, 112–120.

also a lush display of the extravagance of the Tang imperial house at the high tide of its prosperity and power – the exotic flower, the highest cultural achievements in music and poetry, the jeweled goblet, the best wine brought to the capital from thousands of miles away, the jade flute, the embroidered scarf – with all the small, vivid details of the moonlit night offered forth unreservedly for the reader to behold. The drunken poet fully brings out the romance of the moment with his lyrics of spring wind and moonlight, voluptuous blossoms and dew-laden fragrance, the goddess, the ancient beauty, and the mutual love shared by emperor and consort. The anecdote clearly aims to evoke awe and amazement, and perhaps also nostalgia and melancholy for a high moment of prosperity in the history of the Tang, and also to call forth regret and pity for the talented, wronged poet.

While the authenticity of the story does not necessarily lie in historical facts and verses of poetry,⁶⁰ the anecdote certainly contributes a different kind of significance to the collection's claim to truthfulness. Keeping in mind that the collection was compiled when the dynasty's fortune was in rapid decline, this story takes on additional meaning within the collection's discursive interpretive framework when read together with other accounts of unusual Tang women and especially when its mirror opposite, an account of Xuánzong's empress, is considered:

Empress He [i. e., Empress Wang] was originally presented [to Xuánzong] for her beauty. After the Sovereign ascended the throne, within but a few years, his favor and indulgence [toward the Empress] gradually declined. The way the Empress worried and feared all the more caused her much self-affliction. But she appeased those ranked below her with favor, and fortunately avoided the troubles of being slandered and harmed by them. One day, rather unexpectedly, she pleaded with the Sovereign in tears, and said, "Does [my lord] the Third Son just not remember [the time when my father] Zhong took off his new purple half-arm [jacket] and exchanged it for one *dou* of flour in order to made flat-dough soup for the Third Son's birthday? How could [my lord] bear not to look back and think of the past times!" Upon hearing this, the Sovereign woefully changed his expressions and had a look of sympathy for the Empress. Because of this, [the Empress] was able to prolong his favor for her for three more years. Eventually, due to the increasing favor and advantages

60 The reliability of the anecdote, and especially the authenticity of the poems, are explicitly discounted in Yu 1983, 343–357; see also Wu 1980. Daniel Bryant (1989) offers a detailed summary of traditional anthologies and anecdotes attributing the poems to Li Bo, as well as of modern scholarship both for and against Li Bo's authorship. The veracity of the famous "boot incident" between Li Bo and Gao Lishi has also been examined for hints as to Li's biography, see Nienhauser 2002. The story was apparently widely circulated and was included in Li Bo's biographies in both official Tang histories, see *Jiu Tang shu* 190, 5053; *Xin Tang shu* 202, 5763. The latter also includes a brief recounting of the *Songchuang zalu* anecdote.

enjoyed by the various consorts, the Empress was in fact deposed because of them. The Empress was dismissed while she had committed no offense, and those in the Six Palaces [of the inner court] all pitied her.

何⁶¹ 皇后始以色進，及上登位，不數年恩寵日衰。后憂畏之狀，愈不自安。然撫下有恩，幸免讒語共危之禍。忽一日泣訴於上曰，三郎獨不記何忠⁶² 脫新紫半臂，更得一斗麵，為三郎生日湯餅耶？何忍不追念於前時！上聞之，戚然改容，有憫皇后之色。由是得延於其恩者三更秋。終以諸妃恩遇日盛，皇后竟見黜焉。后無罪被擯，六宮共憐之。⁶³

The depiction of the empress here contrasts sharply with that of Consort Taizhen above. While in the earlier account Consort Taizhen enjoys wine and flowers with the emperor, who plays the flute for her himself, in the account here the empress suffers “worries and fear” 憂畏 and “self-affliction” 不自安 due to the emperor’s declining favor. The consort “receives [much indulgence] with a smile of deep appreciation” 笑領意甚厚, while the empress “pleads [Xuánzong] in tears” 泣訴. One account fully displays the extravagance surrounding the emperor and Consort Taizhen, while the other has the sobbing empress recall the difficult days before Xuánzong took the throne, when his simple birthday celebration had to be financed by the her father at the cost of his garment.⁶⁴ In the former account, the emperor does his best to please Consort Taizhen, while the best he can do in the latter account is to “have a look of sympathy for the Empress” 有憫皇后之色. Even more alarmingly unusual is that Consort Taizhen is able to influence Xuánzong’s decision about the appointment of a talented scholar, whereas the empress only manages to prolong her favor a few years and is still eventually dismissed.

These two imperial women thus represent two opposing extremes of “the unusual” (*yi* 異), both in their own circumstances and in the emperor’s drastically different attitudes toward them. A consort enjoying the ultimate favor and an empress deposed to become a commoner, both are displaced figures of the inner palace, allowed or forced to leave their appropriate categories. When decisions about the appointment of officials can be influenced by a consort, who is herself under the cunning influence of a vengeful eunuch, the

61 Xuánzong did not have an empress surnamed He. The “Empress He” here is believed to be his deposed empress, née Wang 王. This anecdote is indeed included in the *Xin Tang shu* biography of Empress Wang (*Xin Tang shu* 76, 3490–3491).

62 Lu Hui notes this is the name the empress uses to refer to her own father. See *Songchuang zalu* (CSJC), 3. The *Xin Tang shu* reads “A’Zhong is that by which the Empress refers to her father [Wang] Renjiao” 阿忠, 后呼其父仁皎云 (*Xin Tang shu* 76, 3491).

63 *Songchuang zalu* (CSJC), 3.

64 Empress Wang became Xuánzong’s consort before he took the throne, see *Jiu Tang shu* 51, 2177.

authority and responsibility of the emperor himself is called into question. By the same token, his virtue is suspect when the deposed empress is, or at least used to be, a beauty possessing the virtue of “appeasing those ranked below her with favor” 撫下有恩, whose father had been a loyal supporter of the emperor in the difficult days before his enthronement. By chance or by design, these two accounts confront each other like mirror opposites, and the tension between them highlights a rather irresponsible Xuánzong whose conduct in the inner palace may not be as virtuous and exemplary as is suggested in the very first account of the collection.

Similar to the debated veracity of the anecdote about Consort Taizhen, the “truthfulness” of the account concerning Empress Wang also has issues of possible bias. A rather different image of the empress is found in an anecdote from the *Da Tang xinyu* when it comes to the reason of her deposition:

The Gracious Consort of the Tang, née Wu, enjoyed exclusive favor from the Emperor and was about to plot her son’s replacement of the Heir-apparent. Empress Wang was of a jealous nature and could not bear with it the least bit. Xuánzong thus deposed the Empress to the status of a commoner.

唐惠妃武氏，有專房之寵，將謀奪嫡。王皇后性妬，稍不能平。玄宗乃廢后爲庶人。⁶⁵

The *Xin Tang shu* notes that the empress “produced no sons after a long time” 久無子, and that “Consort Wu slightly gained the Emperor’s favor, the Empress could not bear it and openly slandered her” 武妃稍有寵, 后不平, 顯詆之.⁶⁶ The direct cause of her deposition, as detailed in both official Tang histories, is that the empress, with the help of her brother, sought supernatural interference from a Buddhist monk, made and wore a charm with Xuánzong’s name carved on it, and offered this prayer, “Wearing this, I shall have a son and be like Empress [Wu] Zetian” 佩此有子, 當與則天皇后為比.⁶⁷ The anecdote in the *Songchuang zalu* omits the empress’s jealousy and her offense of using the emperor’s name to seek supernatural efficacy and aspiring to be like the much-denounced female ruler. Instead it stresses that “the Empress was dismissed while she had committed no offense, and those in the Six Palaces [of the inner court] all pitied her” 后無罪被擯, 六宮共憐之. These choices seem to guide the reader toward attributing her deposition merely to the fickleness of the emperor.

The contrast between the two *Songchuang zalu* stories about this pair of unusual women thus seems to function as an implicit but intentional criticism of Xuánzong’s inability to maintain propriety and order in his inner palace. It also flags to readers the inner

65 *Da Tang xinyu* 11, 172.

66 *Xin Tang shu* 76, 3490.

67 *Jiu Tang shu* 51, 2177; *Xin Tang shu* 76, 3490–3491.

palace as the origin of the troubles that led to the decline and impending demise of the Tang. Considering the structure of the collection's interpretive framework, the anecdote about the deposed empress occupies a rather significant position. It follows immediately after the outer framing layer's key story about Xuánzong's unusual fondness for his parrot, a story that argues the unusual should not be treated as if outside its proper category, and immediately before the interior framing layer's key account of the two boys quoting the *Shangshu*, which points out the two distinct ways by which rulers and dynasties reach good or bad ends. The *Songchuang zalu* portrays the empress as an exact opposite to Consort Taizhen in terms of Xuánzong's attitudes toward them. If we heed Su Ting's warning and the collection's overall "discourse of the unusual," then an empress, no matter how unfavored, belongs to the highest rank and category in the proper hierarchy of the inner palace, while a concubine-consort, no matter how favored, is still but a concubine. The contrast between these two unusual women, when viewed through the interpretive framework of the collection, brings sharp criticism to bear upon Xuánzong's favorable attitude toward Consort Taizhen. The quotation by Li Qiao's son, referring to the cruel acts committed by King Zhou of Shang just to please Daji, appears to hint obliquely at Xuánzong's playing of the jade flute to please Taizhen, while young Su Ting's quotation implicitly mocks Xuánzong's concern over "meeting the end without suffering" 得終無患. The collection seems to suggest that the trouble and suffering Xuánzong met with at the end of his reign had already been prophesied in Li Bo's poem likening Taizhen to Flying Sparrow, the much-favored beautiful consort of Emperor Cheng 成 (51–7 BCE, r. 33–7 BCE) of the Han 漢. Flying Sparrow was constantly criticized by traditional historians for her adulterous behavior and blamed for troubles both in the inner palace and at court, and eventually for the death of Emperor Cheng and the overthrow of the Han. The discourse of the femme fatale can certainly be found around Li Jun's time as well, voiced in fact by no other than the Li family's friend and political ally Li Deyu, who, in his "On Auspicious Omens" 祥瑞論, vehemently attacked these beauties as "demons" 妖.⁶⁸ Therefore, when the seemingly random anecdotes are analyzed side by side through the interpretive framework I have proposed, it appears that Li Jun may indeed have intended his collection to be strongly, though subtly, didactic and critical.

The Tang royal consorts were but one kind of out-of-bounds woman; the princesses from the imperial Li family caused no less trouble for the ruling house. The *Songchuang zalu* includes an anecdote apparently focused on the drama behind court intrigues that,

68 Li wrote, "Si of Bao and the Beauty of Li were both demons to the state and were to bring catastrophes to the Zhou and the Jin. The Green Pearl and the Graceful Maiden were both demons to the household and were to bring disasters to Qiao [Zhizhi] and Shi [Chong]. Such [dangers] cannot be neglected" 褒姒驪姬皆為國妖，以禍周晉，綠珠窈娘皆為家妖，以災喬石，不可不察也。See Fu Xuancong 1999, 696.

when read in the context of other accounts of women in the Tang imperial family, also hints at the undue influence of a favored princess over Xuánzong. The anecdote begins with Xuánzong's chief counselor, Yao Chong, secretly presenting the emperor with a memorandum detailing the offenses of Zhang Yue, a fellow counselor to the emperor. Xuánzong thus angrily orders Yao and Li Linfu, the deputy chief imperial censor, to work together in pressing charges on the matters reported. As Yao informs Li of the emperor's decision, he pretends to be sympathetic to Zhang and Li Linfu receives the wrong signal from the chief counselor. On his way to the censorate, Li falls off his horse and thus has to take time off from duty. While Zhang Yue temporarily escapes Yao Chong's plotting, the anecdote brings in an unexpected turn of events:

A month before this, there was a young scholar and teacher who had an illegitimate affair with [Zhang Yue's] most favored handmaid. It happened that their treacherous deeds were caught and made known to [Zhang] Yue. Greatly angered, [Zhang] Yue planned to have him imprisoned by the Metropolitan Governor. The young scholar said in a stern voice, "It is also basic human nature to be unable to restrain oneself upon seeing a beauty. As the honorable gentleman holds the prestigious position of the Councilor, how could there be no need of [helpful] men in resolving urgent situations? Is he stingy with a handmaid?" [Zhang] Yue marveled at his words and released him, sending him home together with the maid. The young scholar also went away without a trace, and nothing was heard or known about him for more than a month. All of a sudden he called directly upon [Zhang] Yue one day, with a worried look on his face, and said, "I am grateful for the honorable gentleman's favor and have been thinking for a long time about offering something in return. Now I just heard that the honorable gentleman was framed by Yao [Chong], the Councilor of the State. [The punishment of] exile and imprisonment will be issued, and the honorable gentleman does not know it. The crisis is impending. I wish to obtain that which the honorable gentleman has treasured all his life to enact a scheme via the Ninth Princess, and this will surely immediately resolve [the crisis]." Therefore [Zhang] Yue personally identified and described the things he treasured one by one. The young scholar told him, "They are not [valuable] enough to solve your difficulty." [Zhang Yue] again focused his thought for a long time and suddenly said, "There is a curtain from the Jilin Commandery made of pearls luminescent at night that can serve as a token when sent together with a letter." The young scholar said, "My plan will indeed work out." Thereby he requested [Zhang Yue] to write a letter of a few lines and plead [his case] with touching words. [The scholar] then headed out hastily and only went to the residence of the Ninth Princess when the night came. The young scholar thoroughly communicated [Zhang] Yue's intention and presented the curtain as a gift in addition. Moreover, he asked the Princess to say the following: "Does the Sovereign just not remember the time when he was the Heir-apparent and decided to always treat Councilor Zhang with favor? Does he now instead trust the mind of [a person who] takes pleasure in putting Councilor Zhang in disadvantage?" Next day, the Princess went in to visit [Xuánzong] in the morning, and presented everything in detail on behalf of

[Zhang Yue]. The Sovereign was moved, and hastily sent Gao Lishi to the Censorate to announce that the previously charged matters should all be dropped. The scholar never came to see Councilor Zhang again.

前旬月，有教授書生，私通於侍婢最寵者，會擒得姦狀以聞於說，說怒甚，將窮獄於京兆尹。書生勵聲曰，覩色不能禁，亦人之常情也。公貴為相，豈無緩急有用人乎？斲於一婢女耶？說奇其言而釋之，以侍兒與歸。書生亦遁跡去，旬月餘無所聞知。忽一日直訪於說，憂色滿面，且言，某感公之恩，思有謝者久之。今方聞公為姚相國所構。外獄將具，公不知之。危將至矣。某願得公平生所寶者，用計於九公主，必能立釋之。說因自歷指狀所寶之物，書生告云，未足解公之難。又凝思久之，忽曰，近有雞林郡夜明簾為寄信者。書生曰，吾事濟矣。因請手札數行，懇以情言。遂急趨出，逮夜始及九公主邸第。書生具以說旨言之，兼用簾為贄，且請公主曰，上獨不念在東宮時，思必始終恩加張丞相乎？而今反用快不利張丞相之心耶？明旦公主入謁，具為奏之。上感動，急命高力士就御史臺宣前所按事並宜罷之。書生亦不再見張丞相矣。⁶⁹

An impressive piece of storytelling, this anecdote offers vivid descriptions of plotting and counter-plotting among high officials, artfully mixes public interactions at court with secret missions in private residences, and combines the activities of the elite with those of low status. In one short story, the randomness of life is joined with the design and causality of political intrigues. All guarantee the attention and amazement of its readers.

Apart from its good storytelling, the anecdote may also have been included for the way it echoes the experience of Li Jun's father, Li Shen, during the Niu–Li factional struggles. At the beginning of Muzong's 穆宗 (795–824, r. 820–824) reign, Li Shen served at the Hanlin Academy together with Li Deyu and Yuan Zhen 元稹 (779–831) and formed strong friendships and political alliances with them. Soon Yuan Zhen and Li Deyu were both demoted out of service in the capital due to the scheming of Li Fengji 李逢吉 (758–835), who then, together with Niu Sengru 牛僧孺 (d. 847), targeted Li Shen with his political machinations. Almost as dramatically as in the anecdote, a young scholar, and none other than a clansman of Li Shen's own lineage, played a significant role. This clansman, whose relationship with Li Shen had previously turned sour, rather than exonerating Li Shen in the face of false accusations instead fanned Li Fengji's anger and helped to frame Li Shen. At the same time, a powerful ally of Li Fengji in the inner palace, the eunuch Wang Shoucheng 王守澄 (d. 835), slandered Li Shen in front of the newly installed Jingzong 敬宗 (809–826, r. 824–826) for supporting a different candidate for the throne. As a result, Jingzong soon demoted Li Shen from service in the capital. Li Shen subsequently occupied various regional posts and did not return to the center of power until Wuzong took the

69 *Songchuangzalu* (CSJC), 5–6.

throne in 841.⁷⁰ The parallels between Li Shen's travails and those of Zhang Yue are clear, given the many plot twists, cunning schemes among high officials at court, and the credulity of the ruler. Behind the inclusion of this anecdote, it may even be possible to sense a little of Li Jun's regret that his father lacked the unexpected help from someone like the young scholar, and the influential parties from the inner palace worked against, instead of for, his fortune.

Significantly, the credulity of Xuánzong in the *Songchuang zalu* story is associated with the favor he shows toward the Ninth Princess, who in this account holds crucial influence over the emperor and thus over the fate of high officials at court.⁷¹ Beneath the astonishing drama of the anecdote lies a telling portrayal of the precarious circumstances faced by upright officials at court. At the cost of a curtain made of luminescent pearls, one can have a favored princess deliver a prescribed message to the emperor to change his mind about one's political fate. Once again, the *Songchuang zalu* represents Xuánzong as a rather irresponsible ruler, as easily "moved" 感動 when reminded of Zhang Yue's merits as he is "angered" 怒 at Yao Chong's secret accusations. His orders to press charges and then to drop them both appear to be made quite "hastily" 急. Though one is relieved to see the upright official eventually unharmed, the potential dangers of serving a ruler easily influenced by his intimates can hardly be missed in this story.

This story also brings forth further parallels and contrasts with other accounts in the collection that emphasize the credulity and fickleness of the ruler and hint at the foreseeable troubles toward the end of his rule. Zhang Yue here is able to escape danger and achieve a good end because he is willing to let go of his favorite handmaid in exchange for the valuable service of a capable scholar. Xuánzong, however, allows himself to be influenced by the words of his consort, who is herself manipulated by a powerful eunuch, and fails to appoint the talented poet to an official post at court. He even depends on women to remind him of the loyal services his ministers rendered him in the difficult days before he ascended the throne. The pointed questions here, "Does the Sovereign just not remember the time when he was the Heir-apparent...? Does he now, instead...?" 上獨不念在東宮時...而今... clearly echo Empress Wang's tearful plea, "Does [my lord] the Third Son just not remember [the time]...? How could [my lord] bear not to look back and think of the past times!" 三郎獨不記...何忍不追念於前時. The image of Xuánzong as a wise ruler is inevitably called into question if not one but two anecdotes in such a small collection show him being

70 See Li Shen's biographies in *Jiu Tang shu* 173, 4497–4499 and *Xin Tang shu* 181, 5347–5349.

71 Also referred to as the Ninth Immortal Princess (Jiu xian gongzhu 九仙公主), the Ninth Immortal Lady (Jiu xian yuan 九仙媛), and the Immortal-like Lady (Ruxian yuan 如仙媛) in multiple anecdotal accounts and poems from Tang times. Sima Guang seems to believe this is a favored palace lady (see his *Kaoyi* notes on *Zizhi tongjian* 221, 7093) while Zhou Shaoliang (2002, 50–51) argues this legendary female figure could be Ruizong's 睿宗 daughter, Princess Yuzhen 玉真.

easily influenced by women, only being called back to the right path by pleas reminding him of his ministers' services. The almost identical format of the pleas in these two stories perhaps can be read as the compiler's intended subtle emphasis on the fickleness of the ruler.

The *Songchuang zalu*'s multiple accounts involving women, when read in light of the collection's overall "discourse of the unusual" and its concern for "the end," indeed offer a coherent political view, albeit indirectly. Of the eight accounts concerning Xuánzong (out of a total of sixteen), three involve particularly "unusual" women in the imperial family. In two additional accounts, Di Renjie's aunt and two young boys function as spokespersons denouncing female political power and the devastating influence a woman can have on an irresponsible ruler when allowed to act outside of her appropriate category. The collection, very likely compiled at a time when circumstances at court and in the provinces were already showing symptoms of severe troubles heralding the end of the Tang, seems to be tracing earlier signs of problems in the inner palace and using the rhetoric of unusual women to hint at criticism toward the irresponsible ruler.

4.2 From Women to Ministers:

Wenzong in Parallel with and Contrast to Xuánzong

The rest of the collection appears to offer an implicit comparison and contrast of Xuánzong and Wenzong. One particular anecdote about Wenzong and his favored consort presents itself as a rather obvious parallel to the one about Xuánzong and Consort Taizhen. This pair of accounts, like the two concerned with the end of one's life, also suggests intentional design in the selection of anecdotes. The story about Wenzong reads:

During the Dahe [i. e., Taihe 太和, 827–835] and Kaicheng (836–840) years, there was a certain Cheng Xiuji who, for his painting ability, was able to present himself for an audience [with Wenzong]. [Cheng] Xiuji was originally summoned to enter the register [of painters] due to [his status of being] a nominated scholar of filial piety and integrity, so the Sovereign did not really view him as one of the [mere] painters. It happened to be late spring, as the Sovereign was enjoying the tree peony flowers in the inner palace, and, being fairly fond of poetry, he then asked [Cheng] Xiuji, "Whose [verses] are now the first choices among the poems about tree peony flowers circulated and sung in the capital?" [Cheng] Xiuji replied, "Your subject used to hear the dignitaries and high officials often chant and appreciate among themselves the poem by Li Zhengfeng, the Secretariat Drafter: 'The heavenly fragrance tints her clothes at night, the national beauty is intoxicated by wine in the morning.'⁷² Upon hearing this, the Sovereign admired and appreciated it for quite a while. At that time Consort Yang was enjoying the Emperor's favor and

72 The two lines are in reverse order in *Songchuang zalu* (*SKQS*), 7a.

indulgence, and the Sovereign said to the Worthy Consort with a smile, "I should have you drink wine from a golden-purple goblet when you sit in front of your dressing table [in the morning], and [Li] Zhengfeng's poem then comes to life."

大和開成中，有程脩己者，以善畫得進謁。脩己始以孝廉召入籍，故上不甚以畫者流視之。會春暮，內殿賞牡丹花，上頗好詩，因問脩己曰：今京邑傳唱牡丹花詩，誰為首出？脩己對曰：臣嘗聞公卿間多吟賞中書舍人李正封詩曰，天香夜染衣，國色朝酣酒。上聞之，嗟賞移時。楊妃方恃恩寵，上笑謂賢妃曰：粧鏡臺前，宜飲以一紫金盞酒，則正封之詩見矣。⁷³

This anecdote depicts an almost identical moment about one hundred years after the one portrayed in the second anecdote of the collection about Xuánzong and Precious Consort Taizhen. Here we find Wenzong and his favored Worthy Consort, also née Yang, in the same inner palace, in front of the same splendor of late spring peonies. Wenzong, too, is here inquiring about the best author of peony lyrics, which immediately reminds the reader of Li Bo, whose lyrics are "the ultimate achievement of the time" 一時之極致. There is also an artist in the scene, the painter Cheng Xiuji, forming a neat cultural parallel with the great singer Li Guinian in the other account. Poetry is quoted as well, though just two lines of it here, to capture the beauty and fragrance of the flowers and to be read as a complement to the charming consort. Wenzong himself draws the analogy by jokingly recommending the Worthy Consort drink wine so she may embody the intoxicated national beauty depicted in the poem. As Wenzong contemplates reenacting the scene from the popular line of poetry, the anecdote itself recreates the earlier account's representation of a spring night about a hundred years before. Blooming peonies, the best of poetry, the favored consort, and the flirting sovereign: all as if nothing had changed over the course of a century.

Much had indeed changed, though a favored consort and her clansmen still exercised a pernicious influence on the dynasty. Just as Xuánzong's consort Yang and her brother Yang Guozhong 楊國忠 (d. 756) had long been regarded as the cause of the extreme extravagance and decline of Xuánzong's reign and the indirect cause of the An Lushan rebellion, Wenzong's Worthy Consort Yang (d. 840) also caused significant trouble for the Tang house. Relying on Wenzong's favor, she slandered the heir-apparent and his mother, Wenzong's Virtuous Consort, née Wang, causing the higher-ranked woman to fall out of favor. Here again a hidden parallel may be perceived with the anecdote about Xuánzong's Empress Wang. Worthy Consort Yang's constant slanders eventually led to the deaths of both Consort Wang and the heir-apparent. With the help from the Niu faction's chief counselor, Yang Sifu 楊嗣復 (783–848), Worthy Consort Yang then actively supported one of Wenzong's brothers, Prince An 安王 (i. e., Li Rong 李溶, 812–840), as the candidate for succession.

73 *Songchuang zalu* (CSJC), 4–5.

Yang Sifu was a clansman of Prince An's mother, one of Muzong's consorts and a clan relative of Wenzong's Worthy Consort Yang herself.⁷⁴ Though her efforts, and those of Wenzong's on behalf of a different candidate, were frustrated by the maneuvering of the powerful eunuchs who successfully installed their own candidate upon Wenzong's death,⁷⁵ she and her clansman caused significant turmoil around the succession. When read side by side, the anecdotes about Xuánzong and Wenzong, each enjoying spring peonies and pleasing his favored Consort Yang, form an eerie parallel that invites careful consideration of the compiler's design. In addition, they seem to suggest the idea that the later Tang ruler lacked the ability to learn from previous lessons and overlooked recurring signs of decadence and decline. The seemingly joyful comparison between the two emperors' peony scenes quickly turns into a sad contrast, though, as is made rather brutally clear by none other than Wenzong himself in the anecdote that immediately follows:

From the *yimao* year [835] of the Taihe reign era on, the Sovereign [i. e., Wenzong] was not happy, and he would surely utter sighs upon hearing the least bit about court affairs. Once he happened to visit the Eastern Pavilion of the Three Palaces [i. e., the Unicorn Virtue Palace 麟德殿] and there saw a huge scroll held up by a crossbar. The Sovereign said to [Cheng] Xiuji, "This is 'The Painting of [Xuánzong] Going Eastward during the Kaiyuan Reign Era and Performing the Sacrificial Ceremony [to Celebrate the Virtue of Heaven on top of Mount Tai].'" He therefore ordered the huge scroll to be taken in and hung under the Eastern Wing. The Sovereign held a white jade scepter to point at several figures [in the painting], such as Zhang Yue, and sighed, "If only I could have one of them come here, then I would be able to see [the kind of prosperity of] the Kaiyuan years." At this, a helpless and dejected sentiment became visible in his face. He thus ordered some luscious wine to be presented to him, drank it all up, and hastened in his imperial carriage to return to the hall of repose. In the *Records of Receiving the Decrees during the Kaicheng Reign Era*,⁷⁶ the Sovereign said to Li [Shi], the Right Councilor, "when I think of how difficult it is to manage the affairs under Heaven, I would then have luscious wine brought in for a drink in order to intoxicate and comfort myself."

自太和乙卯歲後，上不樂，事稍聞則必有歎息之音。會幸三殿東亭，因見橫廊架巨軸於其上，上謂脩己曰：斯開元東封圖也。因命內巨軸懸於東廡下。上舉白玉如意指張說輩數人歎曰：使吾得其中一人來，則吾可見開元矣。由

74 *Jiu Tang shu* 175, 4538.

75 For details of the power struggle over succession, see *Jiu Tang shu* 18, 583–584; 175, 4538, 4540–4543; 176, 4559–4560; *Xin Tang shu* 8, 239; 82, 3632–3634; 207, 5874; *Zizhi tongjian* 246, 7935, 7943–7944.

76 This text should be the *Kaicheng chengzhao lu* 開成承詔錄 by Li Shi 李石. See *Xin Tang shu* 58, 1468. It reads *Kaicheng yongzhao lu* 開成永詔錄 in *Songchuang zalu* (SKQS), 7b.

是惋惜之意，見於顏色。遂命進美酌盡爵，促步輦歸寢殿。開成永諸錄中敘上語李右相曰，吾思天下事難理，則進飲釀酌以自醉解。⁷⁷

The account depicts a forlorn Wenzong after the 835 Sweet Dew Incident, whose spirit was broken by the failure of his last attempt to free court affairs, and himself, from the control of eunuchs.⁷⁸ Cheng Xiuji, the painter, appears to be Wenzong's listener, helping to create continuity between this account and the previous one and thus to bring the depiction of Wenzong's dejection here into conversation with both of the parallel anecdotes featuring peony scenes. The account effectively presents Wenzong's unfulfilled hope of "being able to see [the kind of prosperity of] the Kaiyuan years" 可見開元, as well as his pitiful, escapist act of "having luscious wine brought in for a drink in order to intoxicate and comfort [himself]" 進飲釀酌以自醉解 after the Sweet Dew Incident. In voicing his explicit regret at lacking such capable and upright ministers as Zhang Yue, Wenzong is fully aware of the harsh contrast between his reign and that of Xuánzong.

Historical records show that Wenzong had always been curious about Xuánzong's reign, and in particular requested that his ministers search for and present records about Xuánzong's favorite eunuch, Gao Lishi, in 834, the year just before the Sweet Dew Incident.⁷⁹ The painting he admires depicts the most glorious moment of Xuánzong's rule, and possibly of the entire Tang dynasty, with the emperor performing the sacrificial ceremony, "Celebrating the Virtue of Heaven" (*feng* 封), on top of Mount Tai in 725. A little over a century later, in contrast to the ultimate demonstration of imperial authority and power displayed in the painting before his eyes, Wenzong had completely lost control over affairs in both the outer court and the inner palace, with power now residing with the eunuchs. An account from Gao Yanxiu's 高彥休 (fl. ca. 874–879) *Queshi* 闕史 presents Wenzong in a moment of deep self-criticism not long before his death in 840 in which the emperor pitifully concludes that "King Nan 赧 of Zhou 周 (r. 314–256 BCE) and Emperor Xian of Han 漢獻 (181–234, r. 189–220) were controlled by strong feudal lords. Now I am controlled by my house servants, and thus I consider myself inferior to them" 周赧漢獻受制於強諸侯，今朕受制於家臣，固以為不及也。⁸⁰ At the pinnacle of Tang power under Xuánzong's rule, social and political elites often proudly compared the Tang to the great Zhou and Han dynasties. Thus, this is an alarming moment, one also captured in official histories, when Wenzong, sick and sorrowful, is not only contemplating his own reputation

77 *Songchuangzalu* (CSJC), 5.

78 For the Sweet Dew Incident see *Zizhi tongjian* 245, 7911–7917; Dalby 1979, 654–59. For a parallel account on Wenzong seeking solace in wine, see *Zizhi tongjian* 245, 7927–7928.

79 See Li Deyu's preface to *Ci Liu shi jiuwen*, 45.

80 *Tang queshi*, 1334. The account was subsequently included in official histories, see *Xin Tang shu* 207, 5873–5874; *Zizhi tongjian* 246, 7941–7942. For more anecdotal depictions of Wenzong's dejection after the Sweet Dew Incident, see Bian 2002, 2–4, 57.

and end, but also implicitly suggesting the end of the Tang by considering himself inferior to the last Zhou and Han rulers. The collection, by placing Wenzong's own frustrated comparison of himself with Xuánzong in conversation with the parallel anecdotes of each emperor enjoying spring peonies with his own favored Consort Yang, further enhances the cruel contrast between the prosperity of Xuánzong's time and Wenzong's helplessness and self-pity. Reading these accounts together not only reveals a parallel between the consorts who both caused great trouble for the Tang house, but also brings forth Gao Lishi's cunning scheme as an early foreshadowing of Wenzong's loss of control to the powerful eunuchs. These anecdotes work together as one cohesive semantic unit and, when read within the collection's interpretive framework, point to the favored women in the inner palace as unusual signs of extravagance and decadence portending the looming end, not just of one sovereign's rule but also perhaps of the entire Tang dynasty.

It is ironic that Wenzong, in the above account, longs for able ministers like Zhang Yue while in another account that same Zhang Yue needs to bribe a princess to remind Xuánzong of his loyal service. It is even more ironic when one considers Wenzong's approach to appointing high officials at his own court, which turns out to be highly relevant to Li Jun's interests. After the An Lushan rebellion, a series of late Tang emperors tried to restore the authority of the ruling house without much success due to the increasing power of eunuchs and regional military governors. Xianzong's 憲宗 (778–820, r. 805–820) reign had a relatively strong central court when Li Deyu's father, Li Jifu 李吉甫 (758–814), was chief councilor standing against eunuch power and in support of Xianzong's push for military centralization. However, factional strife also took clear shape around this time. As mentioned earlier, under Muzong's reign, the Niu faction leaders worked with the inner palace eunuchs and caused Li Deyu, Yuanzhen, and later Li Jun's father, Li Shen, to be demoted to regional offices. By the end of Jingzong's reign, the central court's control over the regional governors weakened again, and the power of the eunuchs grew to an unprecedented level. It was under these circumstances that the seventeen-year-old Wenzong was enthroned by eunuchs in 827.

Wenzong was by nature indecisive and easily influenced. Based on a favored consort's calumnies alone, he was ready to depose his only son and heir over trifling issues, allowing the heir's death only to later bitterly regret it.⁸¹ His rule featured quick turnovers of chief councilor positions, with major leaders of the Li and Niu factions alternating their hold on power.⁸² Li Deyu became chief councilor for the first time in 832, only to be sent out of the capital again in 834 when Li Zongmin 李宗閔 (787–843) gained power as chief councilor. Together with Li Xun 李訓 (d. 835) and Zheng Zhu 鄭註 (d. 835), Li Zongmin removed

81 *Xin Tang shu* 82, 3633–3634.

82 For a discussion of the factional struggles under Wenzong's reign, see Dalby 1979, 646–654.

officials of the Li faction from court. Li Shen was never in the capital during Wenzong's reign and was thus demoted further.⁸³ In his efforts against eunuch power, Wenzong trusted Li Xun and Zheng Zhu (the latter but a palace physician) and his court was filled with officials from the Niu faction, many of whom had their own connections with the inner place consorts and eunuchs. Therefore, the anecdote about Wenzong complaining of lacking able ministers after his failure in the Sweet Dew Incident seems intended as an ironic criticism of his own misplaced trust in officials who expelled the ministers of the Li faction from court. Had Wenzong trusted Li Deyu and officials of the Li faction, the situation might have been different. Li Deyu might have reduced the power of the eunuchs in many practical aspects and effectively reigned in the power of regional governors for Wenzong, as he later did for Wuzong during his much longer tenure in the position of chief councilor in the 840s.⁸⁴ Perhaps most importantly from Li Jun's perspective, Li Deyu could have brought Li Shen back to court as chief councilor as well, as he later did in 841. The *Songchuang zalu*, in highlighting Wenzong's helplessness and self-pity through parallels and contrasts between him and Xuánzong, appears not to sympathize with but rather to criticize Wenzong.

4.3 Ruler's Responsibility:

Xuánzong as the Exemplar and Cautionary Reference Point

Xuánzong remains the anchoring point for the *Songchuang zalu*'s retrospective reflections on the Tang and its unuttered concern over its looming end. Functioning as a reference point for later stages of the dynasty, Xuánzong's reign represents at once the pinnacle of Tang prosperity and glory, with all its extravagance and decadence functioning as hidden signs and foreshadowings of its troubles, and the sudden disgrace and decline of imperial rule. All possible perspectives, concerns, comparisons, and criticism are embedded in and associated with the collection's depiction of Xuánzong. The account pertaining to Dezong offers an articulated evaluation of Xuánzong and his reign, placing Xuánzong squarely at the center of attention:

Dezong appointed Li Mi as the Councilor. Due to the [high] regard [Li] Mi [enjoyed] during the reigns of three emperors, Dezong treated him with courtesy, trusting and relying on him to an extent different from that of the various Grand Councilors. [Dezong] often talked about the reign of Xuánzong at the Side Hall, and especially pitied how [Xuánzong] made the mistake of putting Li Linfu in charge. At this, he sighed multiple times and said

83 *Jiu Tang shu* 173, 4490, 4499; *Zizhi tongjian* 245, 7896–7907.

84 For Li Deyu's political strategies and achievements during Wuzong's reign, see Dalby 1979, 659–669.

with solemn words, “It was with [Li] Linfu that the troubles of the central plains started. However, with Xuánzong’s exceptional talent, why did he not discern this from the beginning?” [Li] Mi then memorialized, “When the prime years of Xuánzong first started, he had already experienced the multiple difficulties during the times of [Wu] Zetian and Zhongzong. [...] When [Xuánzong] was demoted to be [the Prince of] Linzi, he frequently went in and out of the administrative offices and traveled to and fro between Hu county and Duling, thoroughly hearing about the afflictions and sufferings among the people. In addition, with his outstanding talent bestowed by heaven, he made up his mind to eradicate the difficulties within [the royal house]. He had the multiple unusual [abilities like those] of Emperor Xuan of Han [i. e., Liu Xun 劉詢, 91–48 BCE] and relied on his candid sincerity [comparable to that] of Prince Xiao [i. e., Liu Xiu 劉秀, 5 BCE–57 CE].⁸⁵ Therefore, once his outstanding power and influence were roused, the treacherous and savage died out on their own. Moreover, [Xuánzong] had long esteemed Confucian learning and deeply understood administrative and financial affairs. He disregarded Gaozu’s words [uttered] on horseback and instead applauded the tireless inquiries of Emperor Wu of Han.⁸⁶ From the time he first ascended the throne, he delighted in keeping people of integrity close. Despite all the difficulties of being the emperor, he exerted himself to do all he could. With a diligent and frugal Sovereign, all administrative affairs were carried out smoothly. In addition, he was able to obtain fine ministers, so all under heaven were naturally transformed. But after his eastward journey to perform the sacrificial ceremony on Mount Tai, whenever the Sovereign browsed the imperial records, he would have self-congratulatory words. He employed licentious music and beautiful women as his entertainment and increased the towering loftiness of the halls and stairs [he constructed]. Therefore the ancient saying has it, ‘In poverty, frugality arrives by itself without having to be learned, and in wealth, extravagance arrives by itself without having to be learned.’ If the ruler sets his mind on diligence and frugality, then his ministers and servants will abide by the law, and there are no wicked officials. When his indulgences and desires get slightly deeper, his administration then also becomes neglected. For this reason, [Li] Linfu was good at catering to the inclinations of the Sovereign, gathering and taking care of gold and jade [for him], and thus [successfully] attending on and relying on [him] for protection. [If] the way [Xuánzong] managed his state and appointed his Councilors was like this, it is thus possible to imagine how the myriad officials were employed. [...] While the [bad influence of Li] Linfu had not yet ceased, [Niu] Xianke (675–742) followed in his footsteps. In the past, Duke Huan of Qi (d. 643 BCE) accomplished his hegemonic enterprise when Guan Zhong (725–645 BCE) was alive, while the

85 *Han shu* 8, 235–276; *Hou Han shu* 1, 1–94.

86 “Let servants change shift” (*gengpu* 更僕) is an expression referring to a discussion so long and detailed that servants in waiting become tired and need to be replaced. In the original context, the discussion took place when Duke Ai of Lu asked Confucius about the proper conduct of the *ru* 儒. See *Liji zhengyi* 59, 3623c.

troubles of Qi started when Guan Zhong died. Therefore the remonstrations of the ancients [indeed] manifest deep significance.” From this time on, [Li] Mi frequently remonstrated with [Dezong] regarding right and wrong, and the Sovereign gladly heeded [his advice], seeming delighted about what he learned. He therefore said, “[Li Mi has] the talent for being Councilor and is knowledgeable about books. I can now rest on a high pillow [without worries].”

德宗命李泌為相。以泌三朝顧遇，禮待信用不與諸宰相等。常於便殿語及玄宗朝，尤惜謬用李林甫，因再三歎息重言曰，中原之禍，自林甫始也。然以玄宗英特之姿，何始不察耶？泌因奏曰，玄宗盛年始初，已歷則天中宗多難之後。[...]及降封臨淄，旋出入閣，上下嚮杜之間，備聞人間疾苦。又以天縱英姿，志除內難，有漢宣之多異，仗蕭王之赤城。故英威一震，姦兇自殪。而夙尚儒學，深達政經，薄漢高馬之上言，美武帝更僕之問。自初登寶位，樂近正人。惟帝之難，力所能舉。上既勤儉，政事無不施行，又得良臣，天下自化。及東封之後，上每覽帝籍，有自多之言。用聲色為娛，漸堂階之峻。故古語曰，貧不學儉而儉自來，富不學奢而奢自至。若以勤儉為志，則臣下守法，官無邪人。及嗜慾稍深，則政亦怠矣。故林甫善為承迎上意，招顧金玉，託庇左右。安國委相之跡如是，則百吏可知。[...]林甫未厭，仙客繼之。昔齊桓以管仲存而霸業成，管仲亡而齊難作，則古人所諷見於深旨。由是泌屢以是非諷之，上怡然聽從，似喜所得。因曰，相才而又知書，吾高枕矣。⁸⁷

The account makes the argument that the ruler's virtue consists in eschewing extravagance, using the right ministers, and heeding their remonstrations in order to avoid disasters and achieve a good end. To reinforce this central idea, Xuánzong serves as an example that is both positive and negative, along with ample references to historical precedents. The account identifies Xuánzong's performance of the sacrificial ceremony on Mount Tai as both the pinnacle of his reign and the point at which it began to turn from virtue, achievement, and prosperity and toward decadence, corruption, and decline. The story emphasizes the difficulties and afflictions Xuánzong experienced before he took the throne, as well as his superior abilities and strong determination to achieve his goals. At the beginning of his reign, he was “diligent and frugal” 勤儉, “delighted in keeping people of integrity close” 樂近正人, and employed “fine ministers” 良臣. He valued Emperor Wu's practice of making “tireless inquiries” 更僕之問, diligently seeking worthy Confucians and listening to their ideas and suggestions for the administration of the state.⁸⁸ As a result, “all under heaven were naturally transformed” 天下自化. But when his reign reached the apogee of power and glory,

87 *Songchuangzalu* (CSJC), 4.

88 Emperor Wu promoted Confucian learning and repeatedly decreed that worthy scholars be recommended to court. He personally tested them with essay questions on the principles of regulating the state. See records for 140 BCE and 134 BCE in *Han shu* 6, 155–156 and 160–161; *Zizhi tongjian* 17, 549 and 576–578.

he became “self-congratulatory” 自多 and turned his attention to his “indulgences and desires” 嗜慾. Corrupt officials and the neglect of administration were the natural result.

Thus Li Mi’s comment identifies the emperor himself as the author of both the fortune and the problems of his rule. Li Linfu and the damage he caused were but the symptoms, as he was simply “catering to the inclinations of the Sovereign” 承迎上意. By referring to Guan Zhong’s 管仲 importance to the rise and decline of Qi, the account points out the crucial significance of the appointment of chief councilors. The root of “the troubles of the central plains” 中原之禍 is in fact Xuánzong’s mistakes in “managing his state and appointing his Councilors” 安國委相.

In this anecdote, Li Mi could be regarded as another of the *Songchuang zalu*’s spokespersons, offering the compiler’s own comments and criticism. This account appears to be the only record of Li Mi’s comment on Xuánzong, with not even a parallel or passing reference to be found in the *Zizhi tongjian*, which includes or refers to (either in its main text or its *Kaoyi* 考異 notes) almost all accounts from the *Ye Hou jiazhuan* 鄴侯家傳, the private family records of Li Mi’s words and deeds written by his son. While traditional scholars valued the anecdote’s contribution to “amending what is missing from the histories,”⁸⁹ it invites suspicion as to its authenticity. As discussed above, the accounts in the *Songchuang zalu* cluster, in a manner unlikely to be coincidental, into semantic units formed by parallels and contrasts that serve a hidden but coherent discourse often voiced by the speakers in the anecdotes. Thus it is likely that Li Mi functions here as another of the collection’s spokespersons by offering an explicit evaluation of Xuánzong and his reign.

The ruler’s appointment of a councilor is also at the heart of the outer story that encloses Li Mi’s comment on Xuánzong. The account opens with Dezong appointing Li Mi as chief councilor and treating him with unusual respect and trust. It concludes by depicting a seemingly ideal situation in which the ruler “gladly heeds” 怡然聽從 the minister’s remonstrations, and thus has no worries about his reign coming to a good end. Ironically, however, Dezong’s appointment of Li Mi was severely criticized both by commentators of the time and by later historians. The anecdote here has Dezong praising Li Mi as “the talent for Councilor” 相才. But later historians harshly criticized Li Mi for “occupying the position of the Councilor yet taking to discussions of spirits and deities” 居相位而談鬼神, and thus “not possessing the talent of a Councilor” 非相材.⁹⁰ Dezong, however, appointed him as chief councilor precisely because of his involvement with the supernatural. During the early years of his reign, Dezong showed strong signs of being a wise ruler determined to restore Tang power and “especially detested the strange and eccentric who practiced shamanism and prayers” 尤惡巫祝怪誕之士.⁹¹ But after the Zhu Ci 朱泚 (742–784) rebellion

89 See *Siku quanshu zongmu* 140, 1185.

90 *Jiu Tang shu* 130, 3630.

91 *Jiu Tang shu* 130, 3623.

once again threatened the Tang with destruction, Dezong gradually turned to supernatural beliefs. He summoned Li Mi from outside the capital because he was “good at dealing with the ways of spirits” 長於鬼道, and trusted him “to the extent of putting him in substantial charge [of state affairs]” 以至大用.⁹² The historians specifically noted that “commentators of the time did not take this as appropriate” 時論不以為愜.⁹³

Therefore, the anecdote here appears to be “particularly unusual,” and ironic, on two levels. First, as indicated by historical records, Dezong in his later years indulged in extravagance, took state revenue as his personal wealth, collected additional tax and tribute from across the nation and allowed the eunuchs unprecedented military power. Viewed retrospectively from Li Jun’s time, this anecdote might very well look unusual in depicting Dezong as willingly following the advice offered in this account, contrary to what he actually did. Second, the way Dezong appointed his officials, including Li Mi, was severely criticized even during the time he ruled and later even became a widely cited negative case in political discourses and court debates on the appointment of ministers. It seems quite unlikely that public opinions on Dezong’s appointment of Li Mi around the time the *Songchuang zalu* was compiled would have been drastically different. This account, in using Dezong and Li Mi to depict an ideal example of the appointment of a councilor while commenting on Xuánzong’s mistakes in that regard, would indeed be “particularly unusual.” Dezong’s complacent words, “I can now rest on a high pillow” 吾高枕矣, thus echo Xuánzong’s expression of rather irresponsible relief at the Ten-Thousand-Li Bridge, “I shall have no worries” 吾無憂矣 in forming subtle criticism of both rulers.

In addition, two other anecdotes contribute to the image of Xuánzong in this collection, functioning almost as illustrations of Li Mi’s criticism. One account from his years as Prince Linzi demonstrates Xuánzong’s charismatic character and strategic behavior before he took power. It shows Prince Linzi “observing the situation” 觀時, possibly shortly before initiating the military coup of 710. Though he intentionally “went into reclusion” 晦跡 and “especially practiced humility and self-deprecation” 尤用卑損, he is not to be belittled or trifled with as shown in his proud act of crashing a party of a group of arrogant young men.⁹⁴ The other anecdote illustrates a light-hearted moment after Xuánzong took the throne. The account presents Xuánzong enjoying his court entertainer’s jesting remarks on his and his chief councilors’ love of fine horses and the possibly nonexistent *Classic of Horses* 馬經.⁹⁵ Together these two accounts also hint at the contrast, though not as striking as the ones discussed earlier, between Xuánzong’s prudence and charisma before he took the throne and his indulgence in extravagance afterward.

92 *Jiu Tang shu* 130, 3623.

93 *Jiu Tang shu* 130, 3623.

94 *Songchuang zalu* (CSJC), 3.

95 *Songchuang zalu* (CSJC), 3.

Viewed retrospectively from Li Jun's time, the anecdote about Xuánzong and his ministers' indulgence in fine horses is perhaps a nod toward the extravagant behavior of Emperor Xizong. Xuánzong's love of polo and fine horses was certainly shared by many late Tang emperors, but Xizong took it to an unprecedented level. Enthroned in 873 at the age of twelve, Xizong completely entrusted court affairs to powerful eunuchs such as Tian Lingzi 田令孜 (d. 893) and indulged himself in sports such as football, horse racing and polo, as well as in gambling on rooster and geese fights.⁹⁶ He is known to have said to a court entertainer, at a time when the Tang suffered natural disasters, famine, and tough battles against rebel armies, "If I were to take the *jinsi* examination of polo, I should be ranked at the top" 朕若應擊毬進士舉須爲狀元.⁹⁷ Perhaps the *Songchuang zalu*, in choosing to include the anecdote about Xuánzong's love of fine horses instead of the many other anecdotes about the emperor, is again hinting at subtle signs of troubles mostly hidden in the time of prosperity. After all, the compilation of the collection took place at a time of instability and turmoil, and of a strong anxiety over the end of the Tang.

5 A Furtive Look Toward the End

With Xuánzong and his reign as the central focus and reference point for looking back at the past, the *Songchuang zalu* points at signs, prophecies, and warnings by way of the parallels and contrasts constructed through its selection and arrangement of anecdotes. In so doing, it implicitly expresses its own views of the track the Tang was following and perhaps also casts a furtive look toward the dynasty's looming end.

Much had changed over the roughly one hundred years between those two moments in front of the palace peonies, but the similarity of the scenes, and the many parallels hidden in the collection, hint at alarming recurring themes. Not long after the moonlit spring night in the inner palace, the An Lushan rebellion proclaimed the Yan 燕 dynasty and forced Xuánzong out of Chang'an to take refuge thousands of miles away in Sichuan, with his Consort Taizhen put to death by the road. This was the second time the imperial rule of the Tang had almost ended, the first time being its tenuous existence under the Zhou 周 dynasty declared by Empress Wu. After the restoration, the Zhu Ci rebellion again forced Dezong out of the capital, and for a short time Zhu's Qin 秦 dynasty seriously threatened to replace the Tang. From Shunzong's short reign onward, factional struggles plagued the court administration. Powerful eunuchs took charge of the inner palace, and often of the succession to the throne. Regional military governors could no longer be controlled by the central government. Rebellions broke out in multiple areas. Looking back from the

96 See Somers 1979, 715.

97 *Zizhi tongjian* 253, 8221; *Xin Tang shu* 9, 263–281.

Songchuang zalu's time, history certainly repeated itself often, and later troubles had been foreshadowed back in the good old days.

In Li Jun's time, the decline of the Tang had already appeared inevitable, with its end looming ever nearer. In the representation of the collection, Wenzong's troubles with the eunuchs had their early signs in Gao Lishi's cunning manipulation of Consort Taizhen and his indirect influence on Xuánzong. The ruler's inability to appoint the right ministers is identified as the direct origin of the decline of the dynasty. The indecisive Wenzong, in trusting the wrong ministers, failed miserably in his effort against the eunuchs to restore the authority of the imperial house. Though Li Deyu contributed greatly to the considerable revival of Tang power under Wuzong, his efforts at reform came to nothing after the cautious Xuānzong 宣宗 took the throne and sent all Wuzong's ministers out of the capital. Afterwards, Yizong's 懿宗 (833–873, r. 859–873) extremely irrational rule resulted in corrupt officials at court and in the regional governments. The next emperor, Xizong, allowed the eunuch Tian Lingzi full control of the appointment of court officials. While his court struggled against regional disturbances such as bandits and revolts, Xizong indulged himself in extravagance and irresponsibility, at one point even letting officials compete at polo for positions as military commissioners in Sanchuan 三川.⁹⁸ The *Songchuang zalu* could have been compiled anytime from after Li Deyu's death in 850 during Xuānzong's reign to the reigns of Yizong and Xizong, or perhaps even later if Li Jun lived long enough. Suppose the collection was indeed compiled quite late, to the memory of the fleeing Tang emperors, Li Jun would be able to add Xizong, forced out of Chang'an in 880 by the armies of Huang Chao and taking refuge again in Sichuan, just three years after Li Jun first started to serve at the Bureau of State History. Huang Chao soon declared his own regime and history certainly repeated itself as the Tang was once again threatened with its end. Though Xizong was eventually able to return to Chang'an briefly before his death, his reign marked the point when the gradual decline of the Tang turned into a plummeting fall to which little effective resistance could be offered.⁹⁹ The next emperor, Zhaozong 昭宗 (867–904, r. 888–904) sat on the precarious throne under the control first of the eunuchs and then of the military commander Zhu Wen 朱溫 (852–912). Then the long-threatened end of the Tang finally came when Aidi 哀帝 (892–908, r. 904–907)'s nominal court was replaced by Zhu's Later Liang 後梁 (907–923) dynasty, never to be restored again. If the *Songchuang zalu* was compiled after 880, then Xizong's flight from the capital could very well have triggered the collection's interest in Xuánzong and its concern with the imminent end of the Tang. If it was compiled before the Huang Chao rebellion broke out, then the signs, prophecies, and warnings hidden in the collection certainly came true.

98 The Jiannan 劍南 circuits. See *Zizhi tongjian* 253, 8222.

99 For the troubles of Xizong's reign, including the Wang Xianzhi and Huang Chao rebellions, see Somers 1979, 714–773.

6 Concluding Remarks

Unlike many of the late Tang miscellanies, the *Songchuang zalu* is a collection with hidden concerns for the end of the dynasty and the unusual signs and warnings that foreshadowed it. Though affirming its accounts are “definitely true,” the collection does not claim the purpose of amending the histories. Nor does its preface mention any of the common functions of miscellanies, such as “facilitating discussions and laughter” 助談笑, or “enhancing what is heard and seen” 資聞見. Furthermore, in guaranteeing his anecdotes are “particularly unusual,” Li Jun does not focus on the kind of strange, religious, or supernatural occurrences frequently found in other collections. The “particularly unusual” and “definitely true” accounts in the *Songchuang zalu* serve as subtle political criticism when read within the collection’s own interpretive framework, which is constructed with discursive layers and semantic units of parallel and contrasting accounts.

The outer layer of the interpretive framework firmly grounds the collection’s definition of and attitude toward “the unusual” within the boundaries of truthfulness and propriety. It can be read as a “discourse of the unusual” that advocates an overriding concern for the importance of validation and argues that “the unusual” be treated according to its intrinsic nature, placed squarely within its appropriate category and given no more attention than its category justifies. An interior framing layer that brackets the core of the collection on each side consists of two anecdotes about recognizing the hidden “unusualness” of predictions and prophecies not initially taken as anything special. It reveals the collection’s ultimate concern about “the end” and adds a further interpretive perspective to the discourse of the unusual. These two layers form the collection’s interpretive framework, which guides the readings of the core anecdotes toward two crucial factors that affected the fate of the dynasty: the Tang rulers’ inability to maintain propriety in the inner palace and their inability to appoint good ministers and follow their advice.

The collection’s core consists of the anecdotes about Xuánzong, Wenzong and Dezong, and their consorts and ministers that at first reading seem nothing more than good gossip stories aiming to produce marvel and amazement. However, when taken together and read within the two discursive layers of the interpretive framework, these anecdotes reveal a particular type of “unusualness” in the rulers’ problematic attitude toward “the unusual” itself, be it their favored consort or princess or an unfortunate empress. Among the core anecdotes, “the unusual” takes tangible form in the women of the imperial house who have trespassed or strayed beyond their appropriate categories. Female political power and its inappropriate, harmful influence on the irresponsible ruler signal the dreadful end, not only of one ruler’s reign, but perhaps, in the long run, of the rule of the Tang as well. While these unusual women function as recurring but neglected signs of the decadence and decline of the Tang, the direct cause of the dynasty’s end lies in the ruler’s inability to appoint the right ministers. With its parallel accounts, the collection constructs a coherent semantic

unit comparing and contrasting Wenzong and Xuánzong. Here Li Jun appears to voice rather unsympathetic criticism of Wenzong from a stance that is both political and personal. At the center is the anecdote explicitly evaluating Xuánzong and his reign. In the many parallels and contrasts drawn between Xuánzong and later emperors, the collection effectively suggests that the recurring signs warning of the end of the Tang were overlooked not by one but by generations of irresponsible and indecisive rulers. In the end, Li Jun's unspoken concern with and political criticism of these particular forms of "unusualness" in the conduct of the Tang rulers turn out to be the principles governing the compilation of the *Songchuang zalu*.

In employing a rhetoric that positions unusual women of the Tang imperial house as recurring signs of decline, of things out of order and beyond the bounds of propriety, and as devices for constructing parallels and contrasts, the collection shows a particular interest in the inner palace. A second look at the collection's opening account confirms that this interest is born not only of a historiographical concern for truthfulness and thoroughness, but also of a concern for the ruler's activities in the inner palace as unheeded signs of deep-rooted troubles. As mentioned earlier, the anecdote itself speaks of the need to set the emperor's behavior in the inner palace as a moral example for all under heaven. Ironically, however, the rest of the collection's accounts pertaining to the inner palace supply ample negative examples. The collection clearly suggests that, first, many troubles of the late Tang dynasty originated from the inner palace, be it caused by eunuchs or by imperial consorts, and second, these troubles were recurring issues with partially concealed early warning signs even during the pinnacle of Tang's rule.

Read the collection again with the hidden patterns and ironic parallels this article has identified in mind and the opening account appears to reveal the concealed priority of political control over the historiographical quest for truthfulness and virtue at the beginning of Xuánzong's reign. First of all, the peaceful context suggested by the anecdote does not stand the test of historical scrutiny. The early years of Xuánzong's reign were in fact a period characterized by potential instability within the imperial house. To secure the new power structure, Xuánzong actively sought the cooperation and support of his senior family members.¹⁰⁰ Similarly, in order to avoid suspicion of any undue political ambition, his brothers, especially Prince Ning who still had a legitimate right to the throne, would eagerly demonstrate their cooperation and submission to Xuánzong's authority. The compilation of the Inner Palace Diaries, therefore, would have been a product of the political negotiation and public performance of harmony and stability within the newly established power structure. The "particularly unusual" aspect of the anecdote betrays these intentions, as Prince Ning

100 See Twitchett 1986, 9.

declares, “We will all follow the example of the records from the outer court, with everything submitted to the Sovereign [for review]” 皆依外史例, 悉上聞. Unlike the publicly circulated *Veritable Records* and *State Histories*, conventional practice had kept court diaries out of the view and control of rulers since ancient times. However, rulers sensitive to the historiographical representations of their activities had often demanded access to the court diaries and requested revisions and rewritings of official historical records.¹⁰¹ In the account here, that the imperial brothers followed the practice of scribes of the outer court diaries and yielded control over the content of the Inner Palace Diaries to Xuánzong was clearly a gesture of political submission. At the same time, it betrays Xuánzong’s firm control over the contents of both the outer court and the inner palace records. The pity expressed over the loss of Xuánzong’s Inner Palace Diaries thus appears rather ironic and hints at a quizzical interest in the emperor’s inner palace activities that goes beyond pure historiographical concern. Perhaps, on the surface, the opening account purports to set a tone for the whole collection by lauding the quest for veracity, when on a deeper level of significance, the story in fact works surreptitiously to invite questions about the definition of “truthfulness.” In this way, it may function to encourage closer scrutiny of these accounts that are claimed as “definitely true,” in order to find hidden meanings in their “particular unusualness.”

The *Songchuang zalu* accounts are “unusual” (*yi* 異) on several levels. First, the things and occurrences recorded are indeed beyond the everyday and thus can invoke marvel and amazement. These include the staff that becomes soft at midday, the ancient mirror, Xuánzong’s white parrot, the neglected prediction that comes true, the unusually favored consort, the deposed empress, the twists and turns in the political intrigue among court officials, and so on. On a second level, the attitude and behavior of the rulers toward the unusual are also depicted as themselves quite unusual, or else the unusualness of the rulers even causes or enhances the unusualness of the unusual things. Xuánzong, in pampering his smart parrot and, of course, his favorite consort, makes them even more “particularly unusual.” In pleasing his favored consort, he also allows the unusual situation to arise of a talented scholar being blocked from officialdom. Forgetting the loyal services of his ministers and allowing favored consorts to act beyond the norms of propriety, he indirectly causes a virtuous empress (at least depicted here as virtuous) to be demoted and an upright minister to be framed. On these two levels, the argument of the collection is made clear: however unusual, things should conform to their proper categories and be treated as no more than is justified by those categories. On the third level, the accounts themselves are unusual in

101 The compilations of *Veritable Records* and *State Histories* were often public political acts of legitimation, power consolidation, and judgment of the past, with historical records subjected to repeated revisions during transitions between regimes. For attempts to access the court diaries, see examples of Taizong, Wenzong, and even Li Deyu in Twitchett 1992, 124–127. See also Dalby 1979, 658, 662.

that they are employed as the building blocks of discursive structures that secretly guide the interpretation of the collection. They form resonances and contrasts that direct their reader toward subtle criticisms of female political power and influence over the ruler, of the irresponsibility of the ruler, and of his inability to use the right ministers. On the fourth level, the whole collection is unusual in its strong concern with the end of things and the recurring signs and prophecies that foreshadow decline and ruin. In this collection, the true unusualness of women in the imperial house is that they, though not necessarily identified as the cause of decline and ruin, are put forward as signs and warnings of the end that ought to be heeded. The narrative trope of the unusual woman and the irresponsible ruler is thus an implicit expression of the collection's concern for, and hushed prophecy of, the end of the Tang. Thus the idea of *yi* in the *Songchuang zalu*, when all sixteen anecdotes are considered, is rather translated into "unusual" instead of "strange"; though the latter works better for the accounts in the "records of the strange" (*zhiguai* 志怪) which, when embedded with hidden discourses, were sometimes interpreted and justified by claims to truthfulness on cosmo-political levels.¹⁰²

The *Songchuang zalu* finds its own parallel in the *Zhiyi ji*, a collection largely similar but notably different in its understanding and representation of the idea of "the unusual." As mentioned at the beginning of this paper, the *Zhiyi ji*, also attributed to Li Jun, omits two *Songchuang zalu* accounts, adds one new anecdote, and keeps the rest of the text the same. The two accounts omitted are Wenzong's inquiry about peony poems and the political intrigue between Yao Chong and Zhang Yue. The omission of the former breaks the parallel between Wenzong and Xuánzong, renders the comparison and contrast between the two emperors less obvious, and weakens the political criticism of Wenzong's reign. But the omission is perfectly understandable from one point of view because the accounts of two emperors in very similar settings both seeking poetry about peonies and indulging their favorite consorts do indeed appear redundant; that is, if the collection has no agenda beyond telling juicy stories for the effect of amazement and marvel. Thus, the omission betrays an understanding of the "particularly unusual" that stops at the first level discussed above. Likewise, the omission of the anecdote about court intrigue breaks the parallel with the account about Empress Wang, and the emphasis on Xuánzong's forgetfulness about the past services of loyal ministers is much weakened. In addition, without this account there is no longer an implicit echo of the court intrigues suffered by Li Jun's father Li Shen.

The argument here, however, is not about which text might be Li Jun's original, but rather that the two texts represent remarkably different definitions of *yi* 異, "the unusual." This is further clarified by the new account the *Zhiyi ji* brings in, concerning an official's

102 Company 1996, 101–159.

dog that is well trained and obedient, “unusual compared to other [dogs]” 有異於他。¹⁰³ One day, all of a sudden, the dog does not let his owner go out of the gate. As duty calls, the official nonetheless goes, thinking no harm could come to him with the many attendants following all the time. At the gate, the dog rushes out and bites the throat of one attendant. It turns out that the attendant, who had been severely punished before, was carrying a sharp knife and intended to kill the official with it on that particular day. With the addition of this account, the idea of “the unusual” in the *Zhiyi ji* clearly leans toward the sensationalistic, remaining only on the first level discussed above. With the meticulously built patterns of parallels and contrasts, and the repeated emphasis broken by the removal of seemingly unnecessary accounts, the already subtle political criticism embedded in the *Songchuang zalu* can hardly be discerned in the *Zhiyi ji*. The existence of such a parallel text, with its more obvious, sensationalistic, and matter-of-fact understanding of “the unusual,” further sets off the intricate design in the *Songchuang zalu*’s presentation of “unusualness.” It makes sense to understand the *Zhiyi ji* as a later redaction that omits the hidden discourse in the *Songchuang zalu*, though the reverse would also support this paper’s reading. If the *Songchuang zalu* comes as a later revision of the *Zhiyi ji*, then removing the story about the dog signals a concept of “the unusual” not necessarily focused on the first, sensationalistic level. The addition of an account about Wenzong that is quite similar to an already existing account, too, would suggest a deliberate choice premised on deeper levels of “unusualness,” even at the cost of appearing redundant. On a different note, the two parallel texts testify to the order and stability of the many accounts they share. By offering a contrasting alternative, the *Zhiyi ji* in fact strengthens the case for the existence of hidden discourses and political criticisms in the *Songchuang zalu*.

While many anecdote collections appear to be, and indeed are, quite random compilations without a specific argument or voice, the *Songchuang zalu* suggests a voice that, though subtle and hidden, is unusually focused and coherent. This voice hints at an intentional design to the text, or at least expresses subconsciously a coherent mentality behind its compilation. It is a quiet voice consisting of subtle textual gestures guiding the interpretation of the collection to identify warning signs in times of prosperity, to locate primary responsibility squarely with the ruler, and, to some extent, to prophesy the end of the Tang. This subtle voice of political criticism, however, was lost in the reuse of the *Songchuang zalu* anecdotes in later historical writings and miscellaneous compilations. For example, the Northern Song collection, *Tang yulin*, selected nine of the sixteen *Songchuang zalu* accounts, nearly 60 percent of the collection, and inserted them under different categories within its own interpretive framework, which structured over eleven hundred anecdotes

103 *Zhiyi ji*, 31a.

about the Tang. While individual anecdotes were preserved, the original discursive patterns of the *Songchuang zalu* were lost.¹⁰⁴ Therefore, the selective recycling of Tang anecdotal material in Five Dynasties and Song brush jottings constantly broke down the original frameworks of Tang collections and replaced the intentions of the Tang compilers with new purposes. This calls for a return to the original contexts of the compilation of these miscellaneous records, for careful readings of not only individual anecdotes but also of the interrelations among them, of the selection and arrangement of these accounts, and sometimes even of what was left out of these collections. This process may very well reveal that, despite the apparent intentions they claimed in their prefaces, Tang compilers might have had hidden agendas for their collections, and their perspectives on their anecdotal past were distinctly different from the views of those who received and reconstructed these anecdotal memories in later times.

References

- Allen, Sarah M. 2014. *Shifting Stories: History, Gossip, and Lore in Narratives from Tang Dynasty China*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Asia Center.
- Bei Meng suoyan* 北夢瑣言. 2002. By Sun Guangxian 孫光憲. Beijing: Zhonghua.
- Bian, Xiaoxuan 卞孝萱. 2002. “Wan Tang xiaoshuo yu zhengzhi: cong Duyang zhibian deng kan ganlu zhibian hou de Tang Wenzong” 晚唐小說與政治：從杜陽雜編等看甘露之變後的唐文宗, *Ningbo daxue xuebao renwen kexue ban* 寧波大學學報人文科學版 15.2, 2–4, 57.
- Bol, Peter K. 1995. “A Literary Miscellany and Sung Intellectual History: The Case of Chang Lei’s *Ming-tao tsa-chih*,” *Journal of Sung-Yuan Studies* 25, 121–151.
- Bryant, Daniel. 1989. “On the Authenticity of the *Tz’u* Attributed to Li Po,” *T’ang Studies* 7, 105–136.
- Company, Robert Ford. 1996. *Strange Writing: Anomaly Accounts in Early Medieval China*. Albany: State University of New York.
- Chen, Jack W., and David Schaberg (eds.). 2014. *Idle Talk: Gossip and Anecdote in Traditional China*. Berkeley: University of California.
- Chen Jue. 2004a. “History and Fiction in the *Gujing ji* (Record of an Ancient Mirror),” *Monumenta Serica* 52, 161–197.
- Chen Jue. 2004b. “The Mystery of an ‘Ancient Mirror’: An Interpretation of *Gujing ji* in the Context of Medieval Chinese Cultural History,” *East Asian History* 27, 33–50.

104 I will discuss in a separate study the *Tang yulin*’s use of material selected from the *Songchuang zalu* and other source texts.

- Chen, Jue. 2010. *Record of an Ancient Mirror: An Interdisciplinary Reading*. Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz Verlag.
- Chiang, Sing-chen Lydia. 2007. "Daoist Transcendence and Tang Literati Identities in 'Records of Mysterious Anomalies' by Niu Sengru (780–848)," *Chinese Literature: Essays, Articles, Reviews* 29, 1–21.
- Ci Liu shi jiuwen* 次柳氏舊聞. 2012. By Li Deyu 李德裕, in *WSZ*, 37–68.
- CSJC: Congshu jicheng chubian* 叢書集成初編. 1991. Edited by Wang Yunwu 王雲五. Beijing: Zhonghua.
- Da Tang xinyu* 大唐新語. 1984. By Liu Su 劉肅. Beijing: Zhonghua.
- Dalby, Michael T. 1979. "Court politics in late T'ang times," in Twitchett and Fairbank, 561–681.
- De Weerd, Hilde G. D. G. 2016. "Continuities between Scribal and Print Publishing in Twelfth-Century Song China: The Case of Wang Mingqing's Serialized Notebooks," *East Asian Publishing and Society* 6.1, 54–83.
- Dudbridge, Glen. 2013. *A Portrait of Five Dynasties China: From the Memoirs of Wang Renyu (880–956)*. Oxford: Oxford University.
- Dudbridge, Glen. 2016. "How Verses on Walls Found a Universal Voice in Notebook Literature," *East Asian Publishing and Society*, 6.1, 5–21.
- Feng, Linda Rui. 2010. "Unmasking *Fengliu* in Urban Chang'an: Rereading *Beili zhi* (Anecdotes from the Northern Ward)," *Chinese Literature: Essays, Articles, Reviews* 32, 1–21.
- Fu, Daiwie. 2007. "A Flourishing of *Biji* or Pen-notes Texts and Its Relations to History of Knowledge in Song China (960–1279)," *Extrême-Orient, Extrême-Occident* 1, 103–130.
- Fu, Xuancong 傅璇琮 (ann.). 1999. *Li Deyu wenji jiaojian* 李德裕文集校箋. Shijiazhuang: Hebei jiaoyu.
- Han shu* 漢書. 1962. Beijing: Zhonghua.
- Hong, Yue. 2008. "A Structural Study of Ninth Century Anecdotes on Original Events," *Tang Studies* 26, 65–83.
- Hou Han shu* 後漢書. 1965. Beijing: Zhonghua.
- Huntington, Rania. 2005. "Chaos, Memory, and Genre: Anecdotal Recollections of the Taiping Rebellion," *Chinese Literature: Essays, Articles, Reviews* 27, 59–91.
- Hymes, Robert P. 2011. "Gossip as History: Hong Mai's *Yijian zhi* and the Place of Oral Anecdotes in Song Historical Knowledge," *Chūgoku shikagu* 中國史學 21, 1–28.
- Inglis, Alister David. 2006. *Hong Mai's Record of the Listener And Its Song Dynasty Context*. Albany: State University of New York.
- Inglis, Alister David. 2013. "Luo Ye's 'Zuiweng tanlu' and the Culture of Romance," *Chinese Literature: Essays, Articles, Reviews* 35, 97–122.
- Jiu Tang shu* 舊唐書. 1975. Beijing: Zhonghua.

- Kaitian chuanxin ji* 開天傳信記. 2012. By Zheng Qi 鄭繁, in *WSZ*, 69–104.
- Kroll, Paul W. 2003. “Nostalgia and History in Mid-Ninth-Century Verse: Cheng Yü’s Poem on ‘The Chin-yang Gate,’” *T’oung Pao* 89.4, 286–366.
- Kubo, Teruyuki. 2009. “The Problem of Identifying Mudan 牡丹 and the Tree Peony in Early China,” *Asian Medicine* 5, 108–145.
- Legge, James. 1970. *The Chinese Classics: Vol. III The Book of Historical Documents*. Hong Kong: Hong Kong University. Reprint. First published 1960.
- Liji zhengyi* 禮記正義. Used edition: *Shisanjing* 2009.
- Li, Wai-ye. 2007. *The Readability of the Past in Early Chinese Historiography*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Asia Center.
- Luo, Manling. 2011. “Remembering Kaiyuan and Tianbao: The Construction of Mosaic Memory in Medieval Historical Miscellanies,” *T’oung Pao* 97, 263–300.
- Luo, Manling. 2012. “What One Has Heard and Seen: Intellectual Discourse in a Late Eighth-Century Miscellany,” *Tang Studies* 30, 23–44.
- Luo, Manling. 2015. *Literati Storytelling in Late Medieval China*. Seattle: University of Washington.
- Nienhauser, William H. Jr. 2002. “A Reading of Li Bo’s Biography in the Old History of the Tang,” *Oriens Extremus* 43, 175–188.
- Protopappas, Frederic Peter. 1982. “The Life and Times of Li Po: 701–762 A.D.: An Annotated Translation and Analysis of the Chronology of His Life Taken from His Collected Works.” PhD diss., Georgetown University.
- Quan Tang wen* 全唐文. 1983. Beijing: Zhonghua.
- Reed, Carrie E. 2003. “Motivation and Meaning of a Hodge-podge: Duan Chengshi’s *Youyang zazu*,” *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 123.1, 121–145.
- Reed, Carrie E. 2007. “The Lecherous Holy Man and the Maiden in the Box,” *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 127.1, 41–55.
- Schaberg, David. 2001. *A Patterned Past: Form and Thought in Early Chinese Historiography*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Asia Center.
- Schneewind, Sarah. 2009. “Reduce, Re-use, Recycle: Imperial Autocracy and Scholar-Official Autonomy in the Background to the Ming History Biography of Early Ming Scholar-Official Fang Keqin (1326–1376),” *Oriens Extremus* 48, 103–152.
- Shangshu zhengyi* 尚書正義. Used edition: *Shisanjing* 2009.
- Shields, Anna M. 2017. “The ‘Supplementary’ Historian? Li Zhao’s *Guo shi bu* as Mid-Tang Political and Social Critique,” *T’oung Pao* 103, 407–447.
- Shisanjing: Shisanjing zhushu* 十三經注疏. 2009. Annotated by Ruan Yuan 阮元. Beijing: Zhonghua.
- Siku quanshu zongmu* 四庫全書總目. 1965. By Yongrong 永瑢. Beijing: Zhonghua.
- SKQS: Jingyin Wenyuange Siku quanshu* 景印文淵閣四庫全書. 1983. Taipei: Shangwu.
- Somers, Robert M. 1979. “The End of the T’ang,” in Twitchett and Fairbank, 682–789.

- Songchuang zalu* 松牕雜錄, by Li Jun 李濬. Used editions: *CSJC* 1991 and *SKQS* 1983.
- Tang dai congshu* 唐代叢書. 1921. Edited by Chen Liantang 陳蓮塘. Shanghai: Jinzhang tushuju.
- Tang guoshi bu* 唐國史補. 1968. By Li Zhao 李肇, in *Xinjiao Tang guoshi bu* 新校唐國史補. Taipei: Shijie shuju.
- Tang queshi* 唐闕史. 2000. By Gao Yanxiu 高彥休, in *Tang Wudai biji xiaoshuo daguan*, 1323–1366.
- Tang Wudai biji xiaoshuo daguan* 唐五代筆記小說大觀. 2000. Edited by Ding Ruming 丁如明 et al. Shanghai: Shanghai guji.
- Tang yulin* 唐語林, by Wang Dang 王彥. Used edition: Zhou, Xunchu 1987.
- Twitchett, Denis. 1986. "The Inner Palace Diary (Nei ch'i-chü chu)," *T'ang Studies* 4, 1–9.
- Twitchett, Denis. 1992. *The Writing of Official History under the T'ang*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.
- Twitchett, Denis, and John K. Fairbank (eds.). 1979. *The Cambridge History of China, Vol. 3, Part One: Sui and T'ang China, 589–906*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.
- Vogelsang, Kai. 2011. "From Anecdote to History: Observations on the Composition of the *Zuozhuan*," *Oriens Extremus* 50, 99–124.
- WSZ: Jiaofang ji wai sanzong* 教坊記(外三種). 2012. Beijing: Zhonghua.
- Wu, Qiming 吳企明. 1980. "Li Bo qingpingdiao ci sanshou bianwei" 李白清平調詞三首辨偽, *Wenxue yichan* 文學遺產 3, 26–31.
- Xin Tang shu* 新唐書. 1975. Beijing: Zhonghua.
- Xiong, Victor Cunrui. 2011. "The Miscellaneous Record of The Reign of the Great Enterprise And Sui Luoyang," *T'ang Studies* 29, 6–26.
- Yu, Pingbo 俞平伯. 1983. "Li Bo qingpingdiao sanzhang de jieshi" 李白清平調三章的解釋, in Pingbo Yu, *Lun shi ci qu zazhu* 論詩詞曲雜著. Shanghai: Shanghai guji, 343–357.
- Zhang, Cong Ellen. 2016. "Things Heard in the Past, Material for Future Use: A Study of Song (960–1279) *biji* Prefaces," *East Asian Publishing and Society*, 6.1, 22–53.
- Zhang, Cong Ellen. 2012. "'To Be Erudite in Miscellaneous Knowledge': A Study of Song (960–1279) *Biji* Writing," *Asia Major Third Series* 25.2, 43–77.
- Zhiyi ji* 撫[摭]異記. 1921. By Li Jun 李濬, in *Tang dai congshu*, vol. 10, 129, 29b–31a.
- Zhou, Shaoliang 周紹良. 2002. "Tang caizi zhuan Wang Wei zhuan jianzheng" 《唐才子傳：王維傳》箋證, *Wenxian* 文獻 3, 48–64.
- Zhou, Xunchu 周勛初 (ann.). 1987. *Tang yulin jiaozheng* 唐語林校證. Beijing: Zhonghua.
- Zhou, Xunchu 周勳初 (ann.). 1996. *Tang ren biji xiaoshuo kaosuo* 唐人筆記小說考索. Nanjing: Jiangsu guji.

- Zhou, Xunchu 周勛初 (ann.). 2008. *Tang dai biji xiaoshuo xulu* 唐代筆記小說敘錄. Nanjing: Fenghuang.
- Zhou, Xunchu 周勳初 (ann.) et al., (eds.). 2015. *Tang ren yishi huibian* 唐人軼事彙編. Shanghai: Shanghai guji.
- Zizhi tongjian* 資治通鑑. 1956. Beijing: Zhonghua.