

Biographie als Weltliteratur
Eine Bestandsaufnahme
der biographischen Literatur
im 10. Jahrhundert

herausgegeben von
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Mattes Verlag Heidelberg

Die Deutsche Bibliothek verzeichnet diese Publikation
in der Deutschen Nationalbibliographie; detaillierte
bibliographische Daten sind im Internet über
<http://dnb.ddb.de> abrufbar.

ISBN 978-3-86809-019-2
Mattes Verlag Heidelberg 2009

Umschlagabbildung unter Verwendung einer Buchillustration
Bagdad 1287 n.Chr. aus »Arabische Malerei«, Skira, Genf 1962

Hergestellt in Deutschland

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VIII

Biographical Writing in Tenth-Century China

JOHANNES L. KURZ (Brunei)

List of Dynasties

Qin 221–206
Former Han 206–8
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Jin 281–420
Southern and Northern Dynasties 420–589
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Southern Song 1127–1279
Yuan 1279–1368
Ming 1368–1644
Qing 1644–1911

Introduction

Chinese biographies both in officially and unofficially compiled works follow a pattern that was established as a norm by the *Records of the Historian* (*Shiji*), the first dynastic history compiled by Sima Qian (ca. 145–86 BCE).¹ In these biographies information is provided first on the names the person had, such as family name, given name and the name given when coming of age (*zi*). They included furthermore the name of the father and if possible grandfather, and the positions they held, as well as the geographical origin of the family. The geographical identification was important because in China prominent families were addressed by their locality in order to distinguish them from less important families of the same surname, a feature for which the term choronym has been coined. Thus there were for instance the Li of Zhaojun, a family so eminent

¹ On the development of biographical history-writing in China see BRIAN MOLOUGHNEY: «From Biographical History to Historical Biography. A Transformation in Chinese Historical Writing», *East Asian History* 4 (1992), p. 1–30. On the development of biographical writing until the Tang dynasty see WILLIAM H. NIENHAUSER, JR.: «Early Biography». In: VICTOR H. MAIR (ed.): *The Columbia History of Chinese Literature*. New York 2001, p. 511–526.

that the Li of the imperial family of the Tang tried to forge a genealogical link to them, in order to «upgrade» their own less lofty origins.²

Following familial and geographical information are descriptions of attitudes, character, and talents of the person described, and in some cases the examinations he took to receive his first official appointments. The next passages could be either very detailed or rather short, depending on the importance of the official concerned – and that is the subject of the majority of biographies found in the dynastic histories –, extraordinary actions he may have taken during his career, that were deemed sufficiently exemplary by the historiographers to be written down. The end of an ideal biography usually consisted in information on the time of death, the age of the deceased, the posthumous honors he was given such as a promotion to higher post and the conferral of a posthumous name. In some cases sons and grandsons with their positions were also listed.

It is quite evident that until the tenth century over a period of roughly 1.200 years there had been thousands of officials whose families strove to have their sons included in the dynastic histories, and that, because of the sheer number of potential candidates and the restrictions in the scope of the histories, only a minority of biographies were included there.

To give exact numbers of biographies and biographical works extant during the tenth century in China presents several difficulties, because of the large body of literature lost since. In the following, I therefore will not attempt to conclusively list biographies but rather describe the various kinds of biographical writing that were prevalent at the time with the exception of Buddhist hagiographical works which are the subject of another essay in this volume. Occasionally numbers will appear, but only where I can either rely on the Chinese written records or specialized secondary works. In regard to translations of biographies contained in the dynastic histories and privately compiled works into Western languages, it is similarly difficult to satisfy the reader's curiosity. In the 1950s Hans H. Frankel compiled a list of all available translations³; however, since then numerous biographies have been worked on, only a few of which have seen the light of day in published form.⁴

² For an explanation of the term choronym and the Li of Zhaojun see the seminal article by DAVID J. JOHNSON: «The Last Years of a Great Clan: The Li Family of Chao-chün in Late T'ang and Early Sung». *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies* 37.1 (1977), p. 5–102. For more information on aristocratic families see PATRICIA B. EBREY: *The Aristocratic Families of Early Imperial China: A Case Study of the Po-ling Ts'ui Family*. Cambridge 1978.

³ HANS H. FRANKEL: *Catalogue of Translations from the Chinese Dynastic Histories for the Period 220–960*. Cambridge 1957.

⁴ See for example ROBERT DES ROTOURS: *Les inscriptions funéraires de Ts'ouei Mien (673–739), de sa femme née Wang (685–734) et de Ts'ouei Yeou-fu (721–780)*. Paris 1975.

Forms of Biographical Writings

Interred tomb inscriptions (*muzhiming*) in general followed the same pattern as a standard biography. The texts were either written by close friends or by people who were hired by the family to compose them. The family background of the deceased was described in detail, and if the person was important, the genealogy would be stretched to very early times. It furthermore included the official career of the deceased, and anecdotes that portrayed him as a bureaucrat and a colleague. The text usually was followed by a sacrificial text (*jiwen*) that again referred to the deceased. The tomb inscription did not only honour the dead but also gave the author a chance to display his writing style and his knowledge; tomb inscriptions hence are very often found as part of literary collections (*wenji* or *ji*).

It should be noted that these texts also entered the official biography of a person once he was chosen for inclusion in the national history (*guoshi*) of the dynasty as well as the later official dynastic history. The text itself was carved in stone and buried with the deceased.⁵ This practice was introduced around the third century CE. The precursor to the interred tomb inscription was the inscription on a tomb stone (*mubei*, *mubiao*) that was placed on top of the tomb. Sometimes commemorative texts were inscribed on stelae which were found at the beginning of the path leading to the tomb, the «ghost path» (*shendao*), and were hence known as *shendaobei*.⁶

Of special importance for the ancestral cult that was one of the core features of traditional Chinese society, was the memory of the ancestors. To help remember them, genealogies were compiled since the earliest times. Strictly reserved first for the royal houses (*pudie*, *xipu*) in the periods leading up to the Tang, genealogies starting from the Song were also kept by rich and influential families as clan (*zupu*) and family genealogies (*jiapu*).⁷ During the reign of the second Tang emperor Taizong for example a new social order was introduced by placing the emperor and the families of his closest advisors in the highest category of the *Treatise of Families and Clans* (*Zhenguan shizu zhi*, 638), for in actual fact older aristocratic families had ranked higher previously. Since Empress Wu's (624–705, r. 690–705) family was not included in this work she convinced emperor Gaozong (r. 650–683) to order the compilation of a new

⁵ For a study of tomb inscriptions of the Tang see RAINER VON FRANZ: *Die chinesische Innengrabinschrift für Beamte und Privatiers des 7. Jahrhunderts*. Stuttgart 1996. For a translation of a tomb inscription of the Tang by Ina Asim see HELGA STAHL: «Der Aristokrat der Tang-Zeit in seinen Grabinschriften». *Chinas Goldenes Zeitalter. Die Tang-Dynastie (618–907 n. Chr.) und das kulturelle Erbe der Seidenstraße*. Heidelberg 1993, p. 201–204.

⁶ See ENDYMION WILKINSON: *Chinese History. A Manual*. Cambridge, Mass. 2000, p. 120–122.

⁷ On Song genealogies see HUGH R. CLARK: «Reinventing the Genealogy: Innovation in Kinship Practice in the Tenth to Eleventh Centuries». In: THOMAS H. C. LEE (ed.): *The New and the Multiple: Sung Senses of the Past*, Hong Kong 2004, p. 237–286. On genealogies in general see Wilkinson: *Chinese History. A Manual*, p. 113–116.

genealogy, *Record of Names and Families (Xingshilu, 659)* in which her family ranked in the first category.⁸

Other forms of biographical writing included biographies in historical works (*shizhuan*), biographies attached to genealogies (*jiazhuan*), less formal biographies (*biezhuan* or *waizhuan*)⁹, brief lives (*xiaozhuan*), and grouped biographies (*liezhuan*) among others.¹⁰ Since grouped biographies form the largest part of the standard dynastic histories I will deal with them in more detail below.

Dynastic histories set up categories in which biographies could be grouped. Generally officials who were contemporaries were treated in grouped biographies, or officials who shared negative or positive characteristics.

In the *Old History of the Tang (Jiu Tangshu)*, compiled by Liu Xu (887–946) in 945, the biographies of imperial consorts, princes and princesses are arranged after the basic annals (*benji*) and various treatises (*zhi*) on rites, music, calendar, and so forth.¹¹ They are followed by biographies of officials working at the start of the dynasty. The next chapters are chronologically arranged, so that biographies of the sons of each emperor are followed by biographies of officials serving under the respective emperors. In-laws of the imperial family are listed before the biographies which are grouped according to these topics: eunuchs (*huangguan*); good officials (*liangli*); oppressive officials (*kuli*); the loyal and righteous (*zhongyi*); the filial and brotherly (*xiaoyou*); «Confucian» scholars (*ruxue*); literati (*wenyuan*); practitioners (*fangji*); recluses (*yinyi*); exemplary women (*lienti*).¹²

The categories indicate what the biographies are concentrating upon, namely affiliation with the imperial clan, occupation, profession and moral characteristics. No longer do intimate friends of emperors constitute a separate category as they did in the early standard histories, as a stricter moral code gained influence in the relevant social circles.¹³

Even though biographies follow a set pattern, they nevertheless cover the whole range of human attitudes, failures, achievements and experiences. In or-

⁸ See DIETER KUHN: *Status und Ritus. Das China der Aristokraten von den Anfängen bis zum 10. Jahrhundert nach Christus*. Heidelberg 1991, p. 525–526, 542.

⁹ Separate biographies (*biezhuan*) as well as esoteric biographies (*waizhuan*) emerged outside the official and more or less factual biographies. On features of these distinct biographical forms and their influence on the development of fictional writing in the Tang dynasty, see Nienhauser: «T'ang Tales». In: VICTOR H. MAIR: *The Columbia History of Chinese Literature*, p. 579–595.

¹⁰ See Wilkinson: *Chinese History. A Manual*, p. 123.

¹¹ On the compilation of the *Old History of the Tang* see DENIS TWITCHETT: *The Writing of Official History under the T'ang*. Cambridge 1992, p. 191–23.

¹² For a study of some of these categories in the *New History of the Tang (Xin Tangshu)* which was compiled in the eleventh century, see LIU JEN-KAI: *Die boshafte, unbotmässigen und rebellischen Beamten in der Neuen offiziellen Dynastiegeschichte der T'ang: Untersuchung der Prinzipien der konfuzianischen Verurteilung in der Geschichtsschreibung*. Hamburg 1976.

¹³ On this see BRETT HINSCH: *Passions of the Cut Sleeve: The Male Homosexual Tradition in China*. Berkeley 1990.

der to get an overall impression of these, it is necessary to read through a set of several biographies and not just a sample of a few. Furthermore, as some officials and others have biographies in two or even three standard histories, it is often helpful to read all the accounts on one person. Even then, information that appears to be factual in one biography may be contradicted in another. On the surface historiographers were given «free rein» to display either a person's shortcomings or his – most biographies deal with males¹⁴ – merits. Ideally the historiographer was at will in composing a biography, but more often than not, he was to depict a person in a way that was agreed upon by his relatives, superiors and his colleagues. Thus the life depicted in a biography is more a reflection of the prevalent attitude towards it than a factual account of events. The career path described in an official's biography, the part that for many modern readers is a feature of the alleged stereotypical nature of traditional Chinese biographies, for the contemporary reader definitely was important, because it set any official in a specific bureaucratic context. The readers were familiar with the context because they either were officials themselves, or were striving to become officials as candidates in the official examination system, or were members of the classes that carried the whole system, namely the aristocracy and the scholar-official classes.

Biographies in Official Histories

The kind of history-writing that involves biographies is called annalistic-biographical style (*jizhuan ti*), because of the arrangement of these in the first dynastic history of China, the *Records of the Historian*. The other form of historical writing that was practiced was the annals style writing (*biannian ti*) which arranged its material chronologically. The annalistic-biographical style was used for all twenty-five dynastic histories that covered the period from the pre-Qin down to the Qing dynasty (1644–1911). All in all close to 30.000 biographies are found in these histories.¹⁵

Typically biographies form a part of every standard dynastic history, and are described as such in most relevant reference works; however, none of these deal with the form that biographical writing takes in detail, assuming that there is shared common knowledge about them. The Western term «standard» implies that the biographies adhere to fixed conventions, and they do that in a way that is dependent on their contents. Therefore we find various categories of biographies. Imperial biographies are not regarded as such, as the actions and words – the most important part in any traditional biography – of the emperor

¹⁴ Exceptions to this general rule are works dealing with exemplary women (*lienu*). The creation of this genre is usually attributed to Liu Xiang (79–8 B.C.E.). For a discussion see ANNE BIRRELL: «Women in Literature». In: Mair (ed.): *The Columbia History of Chinese Literature*, p. 195–220. For an example of a work dedicated to Buddhist nuns see KATHRYN ANN TSAI (Übers.): *Lives of the Nuns: Biographies of Chinese Buddhist Nuns from the Fourth to Sixth Centuries*. Honolulu 1994.

¹⁵ Wilkinson: *Chinese History. A Manual*, p. 510.

are subsumed in so-called basic annals (*benji*), the more or less precise day to day account of an emperor's reign. These must therefore be considered as the most detailed biographical accounts found in any dynastic history. The basic annals in turn are based on a variety of officially compiled sources namely the court diaries (*qijuzhu*), the inner palace diaries (*nei qijuzhu*), the records of administrative affairs and the daily calendar (*rili*), all of which recorded activities at court as well as within the imperial palace. Altogether they formed the basis for the history of the reign of an emperor, the veritable records (*shilu*). The veritable records once compiled were used to write the national history (*guoshi*).¹⁶

Until the middle of the tenth century fifteen dynastic histories had been compiled starting with the *Records of the Historian* by Sima Qian of the Han dynasty, who was the creator of the genre. His history covered the years from the times of the legendary Yellow Emperor up until 95 BCE describing the reign of emperors in basic annals which are composed of personal information on the emperor as well as his actions and words in government. This history was then followed by works that either described the reign of a single dynasty or gathered information on several dynasties while maintaining the basic annals and grouped biographies' sections which were reserved for the life descriptions of officials and others, such as foreign people. As a matter of fact, basic annals and biographical sections are found in all dynastic histories, while only a few complement this pattern with monographs dealing for instance with official dress, rites, and bureaucracy, and with chronological and other tables (*biao*).

In some of the older works biographies were duplicated, for instance in the *History of the Southern Dynasties* (*Nanshi*) that includes life descriptions of people that are also described in the official histories of the southern dynasties of Song, Southern Qi, Liang and Chen (*Songshu*, *Nan Qishu*, *Liangshu*, *Chenshu*) so that the total amount of biographies counted includes a small but fair number of duplicate biographies.

The interest in biographies was founded in the practical purpose they might serve in dealing with administrative matters,¹⁷ since they clearly projected normative patterns of behaviour, be that in the form of biographies grouped under scholars, literati, and recluses, or under good officials, bad officials, treacherous officials and so forth. Biographies thus were used to put forth ideas of ideal official and imperial behaviour, and simultaneously give lessons of how not to behave. It is largely because of this specific characteristic that Chinese biographical writing has been regarded as stereotypical if not to say monotonous, from the point of view of what information was provided in officially as well as privately compiled biographies.

¹⁶ On the various forms of recording history under the Tang see Twitchett: *The Writing of Official History*, p. 35–38 (court diary), p. 43–49 (inner palace diary), p. 51–56 (record of administrative affairs), p. 57f. (daily calendar), p. 119–123 (veritable records), and p. 160–163 (national history).

¹⁷ On this aspect of Chinese history writing see ÉTIENNE BALAZS: «Chinesische Geschichtswerke als Wegweiser zur Praxis der Bürokratie: Die Monographien, Enzyklopädien und Urkundensammlungen», *Saeculum* 8 (1957) p. 210–223.

In the tenth century two more dynastic histories were compiled, namely the *History of the Tang* (*Tangshu*) and the *History of the Five Dynasties* (*Wudaishi*). To distinguish them from two works of the same title compiled in the eleventh century, they are also known as the *Jiu Tangshu* (*Old History of the Tang*) and the *Jiu Wudaishi* (*Old History of the Five Dynasties*). Like the preceding dynastic histories they were compiled after the fall of the dynasties they deal with, and typically they were – at least in theory – based on original material and information from the vanished dynasties.

The beginning of the tenth century was marked by the fall of the Tang dynasty which was followed by a period of more than fifty years, in which regional regimes all over China replaced the central government. This political fragmentation was only ended with the founding of the Song in 960 and the surrender of the last of the autonomous states in 978. Throughout the period states in the north were in an almost constant state of war that proved to be very harmful for history writing as well. When the first Song emperor Taizu (r. 960–975) decided to have an official history written of the period in which five northern states were declared legitimate successors to the Tang – the reason being that he himself had served the last of these – the historiographers could take recourse to a variety of sources, the majority of which are no longer extant today. These ranged from private anecdotal works to full fledged officially compiled veritable records.¹⁸ The work itself was written in a very short period of time (973–974) and bears testimony to the ambition of the Song founder to officially end the Five Dynasties' period. At this point, however, the empire was not completely unified neither geographically nor politically as some states in Southern China were still existing as semi-autonomous entities. After the military successes Taizu had enjoyed which had convinced the military of his possessing the «Mandate of Heaven» he used a literary work to convince the civil officials as well. Deviating from the example of the *Old Tang History*, the biographies are generally not arranged topically. The emperors of the Five Dynasties in the north and their families were elevated to the status of legitimate rulers by giving them biographies, while officials who had served under the various dynasties and states were treated under no specific headings. The rulers of the so-called Ten States which were predominantly located in the South however, as far as they had declined previously to surrender or pledge loyalty to the Song, were not given annals. They were listed under usurpers (*jianwei*), a label that was used for them and their states until the twentieth century.

The *History of the Five Dynasties* was compiled by scholars who personally knew at least some of the people whose biographies they compiled. The *History of the Five Dynasties* on account of its poor style was replaced by the *Historical Records of the Five Dynasties* (*Wudai shiji*), a work that had been privately

¹⁸ Note that the majority of surviving texts compiled during the Five Dynasties and Ten States are private works while most of the official works have disappeared. See JOHANNES L. KURZ: «A Survey of the Historical Sources for the Five Dynasties and Ten States in Song Times», *Journal of Sung-Yuan Studies* 33 (2003), p. 187–224.

compiled by the great scholar Ouyang Xiu (1007–1072) upon whose death the emperor ordered to publish the work. Since then the original *History of the Five Dynasties* (from then on known as the *Old History of the Five Dynasties*) gradually went out of circulation while Ouyang Xiu's work which was now called *New History of the Five Dynasties* (*Xin Wudaishi*) replaced it. During the Yuan dynasty (1279–1368) the *Old History* was lost and its existence today is only due to scholarly efforts in the eighteenth century.¹⁹ The reconstruction of the work including annals and biographies was based on entries in the *Yongle dadian* (*Great Encyclopaedia of the Yongle Reign*), an imperially commissioned encyclopaedia which was completed in 1408.

Several years after the *History of the Five Dynasties* was written, two major revisions of the first standard histories, namely the *Records of the Historian*, the *History of the Han* (*Hanshu*), and the *History of the Later Han* (*Hou Hanshu*) took place between 994 and 1005. The modern editions of these standard histories go back to the early Song period, while the editions that had been in use until the early Song were apparently destroyed as soon as the new editions were available. How much this revision affected the biographical sections is difficult to assess, but again it is quite evident that even standard histories were subject to eventual changes.²⁰

The State of Biography in the Tenth Century

The majority of histories of the short-lived dynasties between the early fifth and early seventh centuries were compiled under the Tang dynasty which continued the unification of China that had begun under the Sui dynasty (589–617), and had ended a period of disunion that had started with the fall of the Later Han (25–220).²¹ In the following list the number of biographical chapters in each history – beginning with the *Records of the Historian* – is given. Some histories also include authorial biographical introductions (*zixu*) at the end of the grouped biographies' section.²² These are marked with an asterisk*.

¹⁹ See R. KENT GUY: *The Emperor's Four Treasuries. Scholars and the State in the Late Ch'ien-lung Era*. Cambridge, Mass. 1987, p. 117f.

²⁰ Starting in 1000 the *History of the Three Kingdoms* (*Sanguozhi*), the *History of the Jin* (*Jinshu*) and the *History of the Tang* (*Tangshu*, i.e. *Jiu Tangshu*) were similarly revised. See CHENG JU (1078–1144): *Lintai gushi jiaozheng*. Beijing 2000. Vol. 2, p. 282.

²¹ The histories are the *History of the Liang* (*Liangshu*, presented 636), *History of the Chen* (*Chenshu*, pres. 636), *History of the Northern Qi* (*Bei Qishu*, pres. 636), *History of the Zhou* (*Zhoushu*, pres. 636), *History of the Sui* (*Suishu*, pres. 636), *History of the Jin* (pres. 646), *History of the Southern Dynasties* (pres. 659), and the *History of the Northern Dynasties* (*Beishu*, pres. 659).

²² Wolfgang Bauer addresses *zixu* as autobiography. For a translation of an example of such a text by Feng Dao (882–954), see WOLFGANG BAUER: *Das Antlitz Chinas. Die autobiographische Selbstdarstellung in der chinesischen Literatur von ihren Anfängen bis heute*. München 1990, p. 318–322. On Feng Dao see furthermore WANG GUNGWU: «Feng Tao: An Essay on Confucian Loyalty». In: ARTHUR F. WRIGHT and DENIS TWITCHETT (eds.): *Confucian Personalities*. Stanford 1962, p. 123–145.

Records of the Historian 65*; *History of the Han* 66; *History of the Later Han* 74²³; *History of the Three Kingdoms* 64²⁴; *History of the Jin* 66 and records (*zaiji*) 30²⁵; *History of the (Liu) Song (Songshu)* 55; *History of the Southern Qi (Nan Qishu)* 37; *History of the Liang* 50; *History of the Chen* 30; *History of the Wei (Weishu)* 88*; *History of the Northern Qi* 42; *History of the Zhou* 40; *History of the Sui* 46; *History of the Southern Dynasties* 37; *History of the Northern Dynasties* 81*; *Old History of the Tang* 143; *Old History of the Five Dynasties* 75.

These seventeen works cover Chinese history from the age of the legendary Yellow Emperor down to the year 960, containing close to 1.100 chapters of grouped biographies (*liezhuan*) and equalling a total of about 9.000 biographies. The numbers do not seem high given the long period covered, but these are the official accounts only. To estimate the total number of biographies privately compiled during the same period is beyond the scope of the present essay.

The difficulty to assess the number of biographies found in privately compiled works may be highlighted by the example of the Southern Tang (Nan Tang, 937–975), about whose history a number of works were written during the Northern Song dynasty (960–1126) and which therefore is rather well documented. While there are only two biographies of Southern Tang officials found in the *Old History of the Five Dynasties*,²⁶ until the beginning of the twelfth century more than 160 biographies from this «illegitimate dynasty» are found in private histories of the annalistic-biographical style.²⁷ This example is definitely not representative of the preceding centuries, but it underlines the fact that privately compiled histories do not at all have to correspond to the official histories and that they may indeed establish their own set of biographies.

In counting biographies in the dynastic histories I have disregarded short snippets of biographical material on people which are included in the grouped biographies sections. Two random examples for this kind of biographical entry

²³ In the *History of the Later Han* imperial consorts are listed in annals and do not figure in the grouped biographies.

²⁴ The *History of the Three Kingdoms* does not reserve annals for the rulers of the Three States, but deals with them in biographies as well.

²⁵ The *History of the Jin* is the only standard history that includes records dealing with persons from other ethnic groups who ruled over parts of northern Chinese territory from 304 to 439.

²⁶ One of them is Sun Cheng whose biography is translated below. The other official is Liu Renshan. Many of their colleagues entered the service of the Song in the late 970s and are treated in the *History of the Song (Songshi)*, pres. 1345).

²⁷ I have included only extant biographies of officials and others and excluded entries on the rulers and the imperial family. The works consulted are LONG GUN (fl. early 11th century): *Jiangnan yeshi (Unofficial History of Jiangnan)*, early 11th century), which yields thirty-one biographies, and MA LING (fl. early 12th century): *Nan Tangshu (History of the Southern Tang)*, 1105) which includes 132 biographies. Privately compiled historical works of the anecdotal kind provide further biographical material; however, for the most this material is not arranged in «proper» biographies.

are the following taken from the *History of the Wei Dynasty*. The first entry is found in the chapter on imperial consorts:

The secondary consort neé Lan bore two sons. The oldest, named Lan, died early. The second one was emperor Si (Sidi).²⁸

The second example for a rather short biographical entry is found at the end of the biography of Li Xin (?–477):

[Li] Xin had three sons.

His oldest son was [Li] Sui. He was conferred the positions of Courtier-attendant and Grand master of the Gates of the Eastern Palace (of the heir apparent). He was transferred to the position of Cavalier Attendant-in-ordinary, and was additionally made General for the Pacification of the East. He died before Xin died.²⁹

The first short text is dedicated to a consort that gave birth to an emperor who was later to rule for one year. That was reason enough to include her in the section on imperial consorts, even though she was not an empress. Li Sui is added to his father's biography since he held good positions at court.

In Chinese biographies the focus is on actions and words for these describe the behaviour of the individual against the social or administrative background. In biographies of officials routinely the career posts are mentioned, but as these are written by officials for officials, no explanation as to the importance of promotions are given. Hence the career path description is using a highly exclusive jargon.

The idea that only officially compiled works give access to factual biographical material has changed in the last years. In 1992 for instance the *Tang Wudai wu shi er zhong biji xiaoshuo renming suoyin* was published which is an index to names of people in mostly privately compiled literary works from the Tang and Five Dynasties period.

Apart from biographies in grouped biographies as part of a dynastic history there are also independent biographies of individuals such as for example the *Literary Biography of Song Qiqiu* (*Song Qiqiu wenzhuan*) in thirteen chapters (*juan*)³⁰ by Yue Shi (930–1007). This text is listed in the bibliographical monograph³¹ of the Song dynastic history as well as in Yue Shi's biography³²; unfortunately, it is no longer extant. Nevertheless it shows that individual biographies could be rather voluminous works, even if we assume that in a literary

²⁸ WEI SHOU (506–572): *Weishu*. Beijing 1974, 24.322.

²⁹ Wei Shou: *Weishu*, 64.1042.

³⁰ In pre-modern China the size of books was not indicated by the number of pages, but the number of chapters they contained.

³¹ Bibliographical monographs form part of most dynastic histories and since the Tang dynasty list the contents of the imperial libraries according to the four categories of the Classics, History, Philosophers, and Belles-lettres.

³² TUOTUO (1313–1355) et al: *Songshi*. Beijing 1977, 306.10112 and 208.5358.

biography works by the individual would be quoted very frequently and in much detail.

A definitive answer as to the total number of biographies accessible in the tenth century is hard to give. One may take for instance the bibliographical monograph of the *Old History of the Tang* which was compiled in the 940s. At the time of compilation probably many of the titles listed there no longer existed in the imperial libraries of the Later Jin (940–946) because of rebellions and violent dynastic changes. Nevertheless the monograph gives a good impression of which historical writings should and could have been included in the libraries.³³ It lists 81 titles of standard dynastic histories (*zhengshi*) and other official historical works with a total of 4.443 chapters. The standard dynastic histories' section is followed by seventy-five annalistic historical works and histories of illegitimate states consisting of 1.410 chapters; one hundred and two works with 2.559 chapters under miscellaneous history (*zashi*) among which are chronologies of successive reigns, but also works dealing with specific regions; one hundred and four works with 2.233 chapters of records of current government (*qijuzhu*), veritable records (*shilu*), historical precedents (*gushi*), and bureaucracy (*zhiguan*); one hundred ninety-four works and a total of 1.978 chapters of miscellaneous biographies (*zazhuan*).

The latter category consists of works in the following subcategories and topics: 39 titles on praising ancient sages and respected old persons (*bao xianxian qijiu*); 10 titles on the filial and brotherly (*xiaoyou*); 3 titles on the loyal and virtuous (*zhongjie*); 3 titles on vassals (*liefan*); 2 titles on good officials (*liangli*); 18 titles on recluses (*gaoyi*); 1 title on examinees (*kelu*); 5 titles on miscellaneous biographies (*zazhuan*); 3 titles on scholars (*wenshi*); 26 titles on immortals (*xianling*); 10 titles on eminent monks (*gaoseng*); 26 titles on ghosts and spirits (*guishen*); 16 titles on exemplary women (*lienü*).

It is evident that private writing produced quite enormous amounts of biographical works. Access to the standard histories, however, is easiest as they survived in their entirety, and thus we turn to them again.

The biographical sections in the dynastic histories cover persons with exemplary good and bad behaviour. While they thus served didactic means,³⁴ they did not satisfy the curiosities of contemporary readers. The biographical works listed in the *Old History of the Tang* suggest a trend towards an interest in people of old age, wise people, recluses, immortals and spirits. Furthermore the anecdotal history genre of historical precedents (*gushi*) in the *Old History of the Tang* forms part of the category on general historical material such as works on the bureaucracy, the veritable records, and the records of current government. Biographies of exemplary women are also listed, and again these may have had more practical purposes such as the propagation of acceptable norms of female behaviour. More generally, the biographies in the dynastic

³³ LIU XU (887–946): *Jiu Tangshu*. Beijing 1991, 46. 1987–2006.

³⁴ On the «educational» function of historical works see RICHARD L. DAVIS: «Sung Historiography: Empirical Ideals and Didactic Realities», *Chinese Culture* 29.4 (1988), p. 67–80.

histories fulfilled the task of describing the full scope of human behaviour and bureaucratic careers, while privately compiled works might focus on very different topics, even touching on supernatural and metaphysical aspects of lives, which catered to readers' curiosity about what was all possible under heaven. Much of these works unfortunately have perished.

Some of those surviving deal in anecdotal form with the reign of emperors, such as the *Miscellaneous Records of Emperor Minghuang* (*Minghuang zalu*) by Zheng Chuhui (fl. 850) or with events during certain reigns such as the *Records of Accounts What Really Happened in the Kai[yuan] and Tian[bao] Eras* (*Kai Tian chuanxin ji*) by Zheng Qi (d. 899).³⁵

Anecdotal works might also treat topics such as the chief ministers of the Tang, scholars, or other such persons, whose biographies could be either grouped together because of their profession, or their relationship with each other or the emperor.³⁶

Besides officially and privately compiled historical works there are still other sources that provide biographical information. The biographical sections of the dynastic histories indeed only represent an exclusive part of all biographical material compiled, a fact that is evident, for instance, in the *Qian Tang zhizhai* collection of interred tomb inscriptions that was made accessible in 1983. In this collection the majority of texts – 1.209 out of a total of 1.360 covering the period from the Western Jin (3rd century) to the Republic (20th century) – date from the Tang.³⁷ Only very few of the persons with biographical texts preserved there have been granted an official biography in the Tang dynastic history.

A further group of texts apart from the standard histories allows us to get an insight into the various forms of commemorative and historical writings that were en vogue up until the end of the tenth century. Three large compendia which were compiled under the auspices of Taizong (r. 976–997), the second emperor of the Song, include a large number of biographies and other biographical material.³⁸ Two of the works, the *Imperial Digest of the Reign of Great Tranquility* (*Taiping yulan*) and the *Extensive Records of the Reign of Great Tranquility* (*Taiping guangji*), at that time were categorized as encyclopaedias (*leishu*), while the third, the *Finest Flowers of the Preserve of Letters* (*Wenyuan yinghua*), was conceived as a literary anthology.

The biographical material in the *Imperial Digest of the Reign of Great Tranquility* and the *Extensive Records of the Reign of Great Tranquility* is abundant due to the nature of the two works as encyclopaedias. Already at the time of

³⁵ *The Columbia History of Chinese Literature*, p. 581.

³⁶ Twitchett: *Official History*, p. 66.

³⁷ On the *Qian Tang zhizhai* and its relation with official history-writing in Tang China see the very informative article by DAVID L. McMULLEN: «The Death of Chou Li-chen: Imperially Ordered Suicide or Natural Causes», *Asia Major* 2.2 (1989), p. 23–82. The work McMullen refers to is entitled *Qian Tang zhizhai cangzhi* (Beijing: Wenwu chubanshe, 1983).

³⁸ For a study of the works compiled under Taizong see JOHANNES L. KURZ: *Das Kompilationsprojekt Song Taizongs (reg. 976–997)*. Bern 2003.

the compilation it was felt that certain works that included supernatural phenomena or strange occurrences should not be part of the *Imperial Digest of the Reign of Great Tranquility* (1.000 chapters), which was reserved for «factual» and «reliable» sources.³⁹ Hence this material which is of great interest to the modern reader for its insights into the mentality of the tenth century was included in the *Extensive Records of the Reign of Great Tranquility* in 500 chapters.

The *Finest Flowers of the Preserve of Letters* commissioned in 982 and presented to the throne in 987, consists of a variety of original texts in 1.000 chapters that are different from the usual biographical texts found in historical works. Texts useful for our observation are found towards the end of the work from chapters 780–1.000. I am listing below the categories and the number of entries:

Appreciations *zan* (74); inscriptions *ming* (78); admonitions *zhen* (24); biographies *zhuan* (45); accounts *ji* (310); documents conferring posthumous titles and obituaries *shi ai cewen* (37); recommendations for the granting of a posthumous designation *shiyi* (30); dirges *lei* (9); epitaphs *bei* (284); interred tomb inscriptions *zhi* (223); inscriptions on tomb stones *mubiao* (7); accounts of conduct *xingzhuang* (23); funeral orations *jiwen* (168).

By the far largest numbers of texts found here which definitely are of a biographical nature are epitaphs and interred tomb inscriptions. Accounts, dirges and funeral orations are less «biographical», but may be potentially so.

Two Exemplary Biographies

The biography of Sun Cheng in the *Old History of the Five Dynasties* provides an example for writing of such texts in the tenth century, as it includes many of the features that we have mentioned above. Sun Cheng's biography is found under biographies of officials of the Later Zhou dynasty (951–959), even though he was an official of the Southern Tang (937–975). The reason for this is that Sun served as envoy of the Southern Tang to the Later Zhou and was killed in the capital of the Later Zhou. Throughout the text the attribute «illegitimate» (*wei*) is used to denote that the Southern Tang were not recognized as legitimate successors to the Song. The decision as to which dynasties were legitimate had already been taken by emperor Taizu when he ordered the compilation of the *History of the Five Dynasties* in 972.

The translation of the text reads:⁴⁰

Sun Cheng's original given name (*ming*) was Feng. He had a sinister and deceitful character, and was fond of treacherous schemes. In his youth he became a Daoist priest and he composed poetry. In the Jianji temple at Mt.

³⁹ More information on the two works is found in JOHANNES L. KURZ: «The Compilation and Publication of the *Taiping yulan* and the *Cefu yuangui*». In: *Qu'était-ce qu'écrire une encyclopédie en Chine? (Étrême-orient Étrême-occident hors série)* Paris 2007, p. 39–73.

⁴⁰ For the better readability of the following couple of texts I have inserted paragraphs which the originals do not possess.

Lu he sketched a portrait of the Tang poet Jia Dao (779–843) and, hanging it on the wall in his room, worshipped it. The head of the temple thought that this was strange and absurd. He grasped a stick and drove him away with it. The people at the time found that hilarious. He changed [his Daoist robe] for the robe of a scholar and paid emperor Zhuangzong (r. 923–926) of the [Later] Tang a visit, and he received an appointment as Editorial Director in the Palace Library.

At the start of the Tiancheng era (926–930) Zhu Shouyin seized the Barbarian Gate (Yimen) [of the city of Bianliang] and rebelled. At that time Cheng was one of his advisors and he had helped [Zhu] in this matter (i.e. the rebellion). Cheng used to wear armor and carry a sword, and with several tens of mounted troops who followed him, he patrolled the city. Many people were slaughtered by them and the people of Bian gnashed their teeth in anger. When the city fell [to the Later Tang] and Zhu and his family had been executed, Cheng consequently hid his tracks by changing his given name. He abandoned his wife and children, and ran away to the region of Chenzhou and Songzhou (southwest of Bianliang).

He joined other similarly evil men and they crossed the river Huai (southwards), where the people of Wu were just receiving escaped rebels, and they immediately gave him an illegitimate post. Cheng possessed some minor literary skills and when Li Bian in an official document illegitimately conferred the title of Yielding Emperor (*ranghuang*) upon Yang Pu (r. 920–937), its wording was formulated by Cheng.⁴¹ For this reason he was very much respected in Jiangnan.

During twenty years he was successively illegitimately entrusted with official positions and the wealth and residences [these brought him] were very much congruous with his ambitions.

Cheng had many prostitutes in his household. For meals no table was set, but the prostitutes were ordered to each carry one utensil for serving food, and to serve him surrounding him on all sides. He called this «meat dish» (*routaipan*). That was the way he provided pleasure for himself.

In the spring of the third year of the Xiande era (956), when the imperial armies had conquered Guangling (modern day Yangzhou in Jiangsu), and Jiangzuo (i.e. Southern Tang) was alarmed and disconcerted, Li Jing (r. 943–961) illegitimately appointed Cheng Minister of Works, and commanded him to submit tribute to the imperial headquarters. Emperor Shizong [of the Later Zhou, r. 954–959] dispatched Liu Yue, the Right Attendant-in-ordinary, to accompany him, he conferred lavish presents on him. He followed the emperor to the capital (Bianliang), was given lodgings at the Dut-ing Relay station and was treated very generously. Every time he was called

⁴¹ Li Bian (?–943) had been one of the most influential ministers in the state of Wu (919–936) in southern China. In 936 he «accepted» the resignation of the last emperor of Wu, Yang Pu, and took over power as the first emperor of another Tang dynasty in 937. To distinguish this dynasty from the preceding Tang that had ruled from 618–907 and the Later Tang (923–936) it was given the attribute «southern» by historians.

to meet the emperor, he was given fine tasting rice wine, but when he was asked about matters related to Jiangnan, Cheng would only answer: «Wu [i.e. Southern Tang] is in awe of Your Majesty's divine military abilities. It only prostrates towards the north and does not harbour any doubtful intentions.»

Earlier, Zhang Yongde (928–1000) had guarded Xiacai, and he never got along with Li Zhongjin (?–960). Every time he gave a banquet for his officers, he exaggerated Li's deficiencies. One day, when Yongde was inebriated, he consequently in a loud voice said that Zhongjin was secretly plotting rebellion. At that time there was none among the officers who was not startled, and for this reason people's minds were very troubled. Later on [Zhang Yongde] sent a confidential letter by courier to the emperor, in which he made the same allegations, but the emperor did not listen and ignored the letter.

One day Zhongjin left his retinue and went straight from Shouyang to Yongde's tent. He feasted there [with Li] the whole day and then he left, and because of this the minds of the people gradually were at peace. At that time Li Jing had learnt through spies about this affair, and consequently he ordered someone to secretly convey a letter hidden in a wax ball⁴² to Zhongjin, that encouraged him to rebel [against the Later Zhou]. Zhongjin forwarded the letter in the wax ball to the emperor. Shizong inspected it and its terminology was very insulting and rebellious. Shizong became angry for what Cheng had said earlier lacked truth. Thereupon he immediately commanded Han Tong (908–960), Inspector-in-chief of the Metropolitan Command, to issue an order for Cheng's transfer to prison, and that he be executed together with the more than hundred members of his retinue. The following day the high ministers [of the Zhou] visited the emperor and Shizong explained personally [the matter], and thus they heard for the first time about the true circumstances of the affair.

The people discussing this matter thought that because Cheng once had brought misery to the people of Liang, and now had been punished in the prison of Liang, was that not really what the principle of retribution consisted of!

Cheng had a passionate character, and having been moved by Li Jing's generous treatment, he swore an oath to repay him with his death. When he was about to be brought to prison, Shizong ordered one of his close officials to inquire from Cheng how it was possible to conquer Jiangnan, but Cheng remained silent and did not reply. When the time approached for his execution, he adjusted his robe and his cap, and facing southward to

⁴² The original reads «wax letter» (*lashu*). However from parallel readings in other sources such as SIMA GUANG (1019–1086): *Zizhi tongjian* (*Comprehensive Mirror for Aid in Government*), it is clear that the letter was hidden inside a wax ball. See Sima Guang: *Zizhi tongjian*. Beijing 1992, 293.9560.

Jinling to bow, declared: «I can only thank you with my death.» Then he was executed.⁴³

This biography gives a quite lively picture of a man in peculiar circumstances, namely his involvement in a rebellion and his service to an illegitimate state. Throughout the biography details are found that help to characterize Sun as a negative person, such as his attraction to prostitutes. In this respect Sun's biography follows a plot that is even nowadays interesting to reiterate. As the official of an illegitimate state, there was certainly no interest to depict him in a better light, but his loyalty towards the Southern Tang in Ouyang Xiu's history of the Five Dynasties earned him inclusion in the category of «dying in service» (*sishi*). His moral deficiencies there are by no means balanced by his facing certain death with dignity, but this attitude could at least serve as an example that unscrupulous people might also have something good in them. Contrast Sun Cheng's vivid portrait with the biography of a typical career official who served under the Later Liang dynasty (907–923):

Zhang Shensi hailed from Qinghe. Originally serving in the army of Huang Chao⁴⁴ he entered the service [of the Tang] in military positions and reached the position of Commander-in-chief of all Armies (i.e. infantry and cavalry). He participated in the pacification of [the districts of] Chao, Cai, Yan and Yun, which added to his merits. After he had submitted a memorial reporting about [his merits], he was conferred the positions of Acting Minister of Works and concurrent Administrator of Songzhou. During the Guanghua era (898–900) he was given the post of Acting Vice Director (of the Department of State Affairs) and Provisional Magistrate of Bozhou. When emperor Zhaozong (of the Tang, r. 889–904) had returned to Chang'an in the third year of the Tianfu era (903), [Zhang] accompanied Taizu⁴⁵ to receive honours awarded by the [Tang] emperor, and was conferred the title of «meritorious official, loyal and courageous, welcoming the emperor». Consequently he was appointed Defense Commissioner of Ruzhou.

In the first year of the Tianyou era (904) he was conferred the position of Commander-general of the Left Militant as Dragons Army. In the winter of the same year he additionally was conferred the post of Military Commissioner of Kuanguo military prefecture in Xuzhou. In the eleventh month of the next year (905) he was appointed Provisional Magistrate of Xuzhou, Commissioner of Defense and Military Training Commissioner of Wuning military prefecture as well as Capital Liaison Representative.

When [Liang] Taizu took over power (907) [Zhang] went to the capital to become General-in-chief of the Left Imperial Insignia Guard. In the second

⁴³ XUE JUZHENG (912–981) et al: *Jiu Wudaishi*. Beijing 1976, 131.1732–1734.

⁴⁴ Huang Chao, a rebel leader, had taken the capital of the Tang dynasty in 881 but was driven from it in 883.

⁴⁵ This is Zhu Wen (852–912) who had also served Huang Chao before he submitted to the Tang. In 907 he removed the last Tang emperor from the throne to install himself as the first emperor of the Later Liang dynasty.

year of the Kaiping era (908) he was made Prefect of Songzhou. Shortly afterwards he was reinstated as General-in-chief of the Left Imperial Insignia Guard. In the winter of the third year (909) he was made Prefect of Caizhou, but since he was greedy he very much lost the affection of the people there and was recalled to the capital by imperial decree. Shortly afterwards, when he had returned from the northern campaign in which he had participated, he fell ill and stayed in his private residence in Luoyang. Since he treated his family irreverentially, he was murdered by his son.⁴⁶

As is evident, this biography is a mere list of positions Zhang held on account of his relationship with the future emperor of the Liang. The style and contents of his biography are basic, and the text lacks direct speech as well as more intimate descriptions of character and attitudes which abound in Sun Cheng's biography. His importance in the Liang bureaucracy might also be questioned because he did not contribute anything bureaucratically or militarily relevant to the new dynasty, except his loyalty. In his case this is overshadowed by his handling of his household and his being murdered by his son. As different as Sun and Zhang are depicted in the respective biographies, they appear both in the same standard history, and this is quite illustrative of the various forms of biography that were included in such official histories.

Conclusion

The alleged stereotypical nature of biographies especially in the official histories has to do with form, and does not refer so much to contents. Chinese traditional biographies imitate life's invariables – birth, life and death –, by providing in the ideal case names, place of origin, career, offspring, literary production and death. Contents of biography are much dependent on the individual life, even though biographies may take a life of their own, outgrowing the actual person. Changing attitudes towards bureaucratic, official and other behaviour were taken care of by the biographical sections within the dynastic histories. The great interest biographies as «exemplary» lives held for the Chinese during the imperial period is evident in the numbers that were produced.

⁴⁶ *Jiu Wudaishi*, 15.214–215.